



*Reviewed by
Derek Taylor*

The International Wine and Food Society at

Daruma Japanese Restaurant

*Holiday Inn Elangeni, 63 Snell Parade,
031 362 1300*

The IWFS members are usually a daring lot at the table. So I was a little surprised to hear an anguished cry through the chat when the sashimi and sushi course was served:

“Raaaw fish! You expect me to eat raw fish!”

This from a hardened trencherman friend who would normally relish a taste of anything not actually on the World Wildlife list of endangered species. But he was among a lonely minority of three and the others tucked in with pleasure. Besides, there was a lot more than fish to enjoy.

It was an especially great occasion because Daruma had deteriorated badly in quality and value over recent years. Now it is under real Japanese management and the quality is back, greater than ever before in my experience.

First came tendon tempura – crisply thin-battered and deep-fried sections of marinated aubergine, butternut, tofu, a delicious piece of white fish, pork and huge prawns. With this treat came shaved daikon – a huge white radish -- a bowl of miso soup for dipping and drinking. The tempura batter seemed impossibly thin and its crunch held after cooling. You could almost hear appetites revving.

The accompanying wines for this and the sashimi were a 2008 De Grendel sauvignon blanc - a fresh youngster with plenty of crisp acid fruit and good stone – and a 2007 Overgaauw sauvignon blanc, similar to the De Grendel

but with more youthful force: appropriate partners for these vigorous flavours. Kirin beer and warm sake were also available.

To allow two before-your-very-eyes demonstrations of preparation half of us took the teppan-yaki course first while the others took the sashimi and sushi course – then we swapped seats.

The teppan-yaki of beef fillet with stir-fried vegetables and shitaki mushrooms was handled by two extremely deft and efficient cooks on an enormous hibachi grill. (About three to four metres long, I guessed.) Orders were taken for rare or medium cooking of the beef cubes which were then dexterously sizzled. Their juices were scooped and lifted hot from the grill and served next to the beef in little bowls.

The vegetables – with bean sprouts deliciously plentiful – were also cooked accurately. The only minor criticism I could find was that some of the cubes were obstinately still attached to each other and difficult to separate with chopsticks. The thin slicings normal to teppan-yaki would have been better. On the other hand, they would have been more demanding in delivering them rare or medium. Altogether, this was a much appreciated course.

It was supported by an excellent 2006 Hartenberg merlot. Still young and vigorous for this cultivar, it gave a big mouthful of flavours with good tannins which stood up deliciously to the beef.

The Japanese like their sashimi and sushi at the end of the meal – excepting fruit and dessert. Sashimi means raw fish. And when we think in those words it is hard to convey how very good the, um, uncooked version is. It has is no fish smell or taste as we know them.

When I worked in Tokyo for a few months, my very considerate Japanese colleague introduced me to the genre with what you might call rare rather than raw fish. This was scalded for a few seconds in boiling water and whipped out. Combined with sushi rice and a vinegar sauce it was nice, but I preferred the raw version's flavours and textures when I finally found it.

Sushi is basically a rice sandwich with fish or other goodies in the middle or above the rice. Then there is maki-nori-sushi: fish in the middle surrounded by rice and wrapped in an edible seaweed which comes to the kitchen in

dried sheets. Soak it, cut to size and wrap round the outer rice. Nigiri-sushi is the simplest: a chunk of sashimi fused on top of a roll of sticky rice.

A Californian roll – new stuff, this, invented in San Francisco in the 1970s -- is a sandwich with the inside on the outside: examples avocado slices wrapping rice and fish or other vegetable treats or raw fish wrapped round rice.

With sushi comes the addictive Japanese version of horseradish. The pungent, mustardy taste is a delightful variation on that excellent yellow stuff we enjoy with beef. And it's green, praise the Lord, his wonders to behold.

Daruma gave us ample servings of tuna and salmon sashimi, nigiri, maki and California rolls and most of us enjoyed them very much indeed. The refuseniks controlled themselves well with upper lips as stiff as those of a Grenadier Guardsman frozen to death on sentry duty outside Buckingham Palace. Well done chaps.

I chose a fresh-lemon sorbet for dessert. (Green tea ice cream was also available, with green tea or filtered coffee.) And I thoroughly enjoyed the glass of the 2001 Nuy Muscadet from the 2008 Nederberg Auction.

The service was excellent and Daruma's revamp makes it a very attractive room: an outstanding evening out with excellent company.

If you are interested in good high dining and interesting regional dining in very friendly company, contact Chair Katherine Reardon at kreardon@iafrica.com or Special Events Co-ordinator Val McGreal on 083 679 9529.