

## Austere surroundings, lavish fare at Kagura in El Segundo



Katsu Hashiguchi serves Gindara Gozen at his restaurant in El Segundo. Photo by Brad Jacobson

by **Richard Foss**

A few years ago I took a trip through Germany and overdosed on baroque art. At first I was enchanted with finding details within details in paintings that sprawled across walls, but after a few days the blizzard of intricacy became fatiguing. I tried to imagine the mind of the craftsman who labored over the drapery in the robe of one figure among hundreds in a vast canvas, exerting all their talents to gild the fabric in the exact imitation of life.

Meanwhile in Japan, an artist was creating a masterpiece with a few lines of ink on a white panel, and then displaying it in a room whose only other decoration was a few exquisitely arranged flowers. Deprived of other things to focus on, the viewer's eye lingers over the form and savors the perfection of each element.

European classical art is mirrored in the elaborate dishes of French classical cuisine, Japanese aesthetics in the elegant presentations of sushi and kaiseki meals. Bento boxes are a particularly good example, a utilitarian sectioned lunchbox designed for travelers that has evolved into literal framed art. Simple versions are available at almost every Japanese restaurant, but a version called *Gozen Bento* is a specialty at El Segundo's Kagura. Gozen is a term meaning "young aristocrat," that is also a formal title for a female warrior samurai, and it signifies a particularly lavish and elaborate version of bento.

The restaurant is decorated in classic minimalist style with just a few small drawings on the mustard-colored walls, and immediately after we were seated we got down to the business of ordering. This restaurant is an offshoot of a chain based in Little Tokyo that is best known for their fried pork cutlets, and when I heard that they were opening here I expected more of the same. Those cutlets are available here, but usually as one of the side dishes on beautifully arranged trays with as many as ten items. With a few exceptions, most of the other items on that tray are the same, an array of fresh and pickled vegetable dishes, tempura, rice, and noodles. You're picking only the main courses, which include sushi and sashimi, chicken, steak, and grilled eel.

Most entrees come with a small salad and soup, but on a recent evening we decided to also order grilled squid that arrived with a dab of freshly grated ginger. The meat had been dusted with some mild seasoning before hitting the grill, perhaps briefly moistened with soy sauce to add caramelized flavor and saltiness, but nothing more. It was tender and smoky, and though it didn't really need the pungent ginger we all had a bit just to see how it worked together. It was a subtle flavor modified simply and powerfully, and a good prequel to the meal.

With our starters, miso soup, and salad we tried a pair of sakes and a bottle of "Chu-hi Jpop," a mildly alcoholic peach flavored drink we had never sampled before. Most of us found this too sweet – the flavor reminded me of fruit flavored candy. The cloudy, slightly spicy Ohyama Nigori sake and Riesling-like Himezen were much more to my taste, and the portions of each that ran less than nine dollars provided tastes of each for five people.

As our gozen trays arrived, I thought about the mechanics of running a restaurant like this – since every diner gets most of the same items, the kitchen can be very efficient about getting orders out quick. We all got the noodles in soy sauce, small shrimp and vegetable tempura, burdock and turnip pickles, boiled seaweed, and edamame beans. Most of us also got the fried pork cutlet over shredded daikon. In all cases the fried items arrived hot and crisp from the fryer, meaning someone back in that kitchen has to be timing every tray that goes out. Everything was very well executed, but the pork cutlet was particularly interesting because it was thick rather than the usual thin slice. I'm not sure how you flash-fry pork so that it comes out this tender and meaty with a crisp breadcrumb coating, but I want to learn.

My companions chose main items of sushi, sashimi, and mushroom soup, while I picked grilled eel brushed with sweet soybean sauce. Some people recoil from eel because the creature looks so odd when alive, like an underwater snake, and I have heard it assumed that eel must be slimy or strongly flavored. It isn't – the delicate, flaky meat is mild and a perfect vehicle for the sweet, tangy sauce. I was offered a choice of white or brown rice and chose brown; it's not only healthier, but a better match for the flavor. My gozen also included

sashimi, while my fellow diners got sushi rolls or tofu topped with shredded scallion. I don't know if you can request substitutions, but I wouldn't have made any, since all the flavors were in harmony.

Though I enjoyed my eel very much, I envied the person who got the mushroom soup, since it had a deep, musky flavor that made it a standout. The broth tasted like it had boiled down for hours, perhaps days, to achieve this intensity, and there were occasional bursts of sharpness from the shredded ginger. I think of mushroom soup as a cold weather item, but it still hit the spot on a summer evening.

The style of our meal was aristocratic, the bill less so. We spent just over \$40 per person with modest tastes of sake and a pair of appetizers. Kagura is an embassy of Japanese art and culture, an expression of an aesthetic that makes that country simultaneously mysterious and alluring.

*KAGURA is at 403 Main Street in El Segundo. Open daily 11:30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m. and 5 p.m.-9:30 p.m., street parking only, beer and wine served. Wheelchair access OK, some vegetarian items. Menu at [littletokyorestaurant.com](http://littletokyorestaurant.com), phone 310-333-0689.*

[Click here for full article](#)