

Name: Azuma,

Location: Level 1, Chiefly Plaza, Sydney

Date: 2<sup>nd</sup> Dec 2009

I like the restaurant instantly, not because it has the most pleasant ambiance; far from it, Azuma is the smallest “hatted” restaurant I have been to and only offers an almost ground-level view of Phillip Street, petty comparing to Forty One. What I like is the layout, which I think has a far better balance between comfort for customer and efficient use of space. The tables are arranged squarely and back-to-back, which may be lacking in style comparing to the sporadic or diagonal layout that is often seen in high-class restaurant, but maximizes seating while allowing ample space for moving about. Soft-tone, orange lightings and decorations are used to smooth out the edge of this squarely arrangement and add a soothing element.

We ordered the degustation:

**Seasonal Appetiser:**

**White Sesame Tofu with Citrus Dip in Agedashi Sauce**

I love tofu for its soft and squishy texture, but this one rocked my tofu experience. I never imagined tofu can be so ... crap. It is a lot firmer than what I am used and, while I appreciate the creativity, in my opinion it ruins all the beauty of tofu. The Agedashi sauce, which I understand is a special Japanese soy sauce, is the only thing I enjoyed in this dish: softer but with a longer lasting flavor.

**Azuma-Style, Japanese Amuse-Bouche:**

**Pacific Oyster and Salmon Roe with Citrus Soy Sauce**

**Prawn Marinated in Nanban Sauce**

**Grilled Saikyo Silver Cod Fillet**

**Blanched Spinach with Sesame Dressing**

The disappointment from the tofu is more than offset by this experience. There are not many things more pleasant to the eyes and tongue than fresh, fat oyster. The salmon roe adds to the colour and flavor.

The prawn is also good, but it's the cod fillet that really stood out. It is grilled through but remains tender. I tried it plain first, then with the Citrus soy sauce from the oyster, and with the sesame dressing from the spinach; each way has its unique taste to it and equally recommendable.

Spinach is the let down of this dish. While appreciating the desire for a good colour mix and for a bit of variety in the dish, in my opinion, spinach simply does not fit in with prawn, oyster and cod. The texture, the flavour are all vastly out of place. The moment I placed the first forkful in my mouth, I thought about seaweed; it would be so much better if they had seaweed instead, which would probably go better with the sesame dressing as well as the rest of the dish.

### **Assorted Sashimi**

Sashimi is probably the easy dish to make: all you need to do is to ensure that they are fresh. I personally can never tell the difference between top-end sashimi and just normal good ones.

This sashimi dish is quite ordinary for a Japanese restaurant: 3 pieces of tuna and two pieces of salmon, served on a bowl of ice and with lemon and mixed decorative vegetable. I like the salmon better, the tuna is a little by stringy, although still alright by my low standard (Lippo, on the other hand, is a lot more critical).

### **Azuma Unique Sushi**

It is a disappointment to see the theme being repeated in two consecutive dishes: it is tuna and salmon again, just served as sushi. There is nothing unique about the sushi either, both tuna and salmon are seared on the outside and raw inside, fairly common for fish sushi. Again, I enjoy the salmon more than the tuna.

### **Chawan-Mushi:**

#### **Steamed Savoury Egg Custard with Prawn, Scallop and Shiitake Mushroom**

I was surprised that egg custard could ever be a dish in degustation. It is a very ordinary Asian food and very easy to make; mom is great in making egg custard and myself have been cooking them since 14 years old. Thus, I did not have much expectation from this dish.

Served in a cup, the presentation is very simple (which is actually a plus for me), but the dish, overall does not seem any different to the ten thousand egg custards that I have tried before. That is, until I digged in.

Inside of the egg custard are prawn, scallop and mushroom. It is not unusual to use seafood, e.g. oysters and scallops, to add to the taste of egg custard, but the way it is done in this dish is quite, quite amazing. It is no longer clear whether the theme is actually the custard or these ingredients. The custard adds to the texture and the contrast, while the ingredients bestow on the custard a unique, mixed palate: a subtle but long-lasting sweetness to it.

The top of the custard has the jelly-like texture of any well-made egg custard. But as you get to the inside and with a bit of stir, it softens up to a thick soup-like texture, just as the flavor from the seafood and mushroom slowly dissolve in your mouth. This is the absolute star of the night.

**Assorted Tempura with Prawn and Vegetables:  
Prawn, Fish, Potato, Capsicum, Asparagus**

I generally dislike food being deep fried because I think it destroys the natural flavor of the food. This dish delivers no more than what you would usually expect from tempura. Perhaps the only thing worth mentioning is the tempura asparagus: crunchy on the outside and tender inside and goes surprisingly well with the soy sauce.

**Premium Wagyu Sirloin Steak:  
Served with Garlic Soy Sauce**

To be fair, this steak is not bad at all, both the quality of the meat and the cooking are top-shelf. The only thing wrong is the timing; by that, I mean the timing of our visit to Rockpool Bar & Grill less than a week ago. I only have one comment: if you want to try really good steak, try grain fed rib eye at Rockpool and be prepared to pay; but if you want to be able to enjoy steak and not overpay, don't ever go near Rockpool!!!

**Seared Tuna:  
Served with Daikon & Citrus Soy Sauce**

Tuna for the third time! The repeating theme is a true disappointment, but the dish by itself is truly commendable and by far the best out of the three. The tuna was lightly seared and served with sprout and in soy sauce, a lovely presentation and full of taste.

**Udon Noodle**

Despite being obviously the stomach filler of the night, I still like this dish. I love udon for its texture – in case you haven't figured out by now, I generally give more credit to texture than flavor. This bowl of udon is very simple for a degustation, but in a pleasant way. The broth is more tasty than any other udon I had, which is an added bonus.

**Seasonal Dessert Selection:  
Raspberry Sorbet  
Chocolate Mousse  
Crème brûlée**

I have a preference for subtlety and tend to dislike the strong sweetness of typical dessert dishes. If it's up to me, I would only ever choose sorbet for dessert. Unfortunately, this sorbet is of raspberry, which I detest. The mousses cake looks lovely but is, as expected, too sweet for me. Crème brulee is something that I have always had very positive experiences with in the past and this one is no different: crusty on the top, creamy inside, and most importantly, not too sweet. Lack of a better word, superb

In summary, my ratings are:

- Food Quality: 8.5
- Value: 7
- Ambiance: 9
- Cleanliness: 9
- Service: 9