

Azuma

Azuma – Chifley Plaza

02/12/09

Michael Lip

Our second degustation had an Asian flavour – Japanese to be precise. Once again, we had three core members and a discount coupon! The actual restaurant is located on the first floor of the Chifley Plaza, which is coincidentally the same building as our first degustation one week earlier – Forty One. The view from Azuma was not nearly as good as Forty One, only overlooking Phillip Street. The restaurant was a bit small. I'd seen it from the outside when in the food court at Chifley Plaza, but I didn't realise it would be so cramped on the inside.

Review

Seasonal Appetisers:

White Sesame Tofu with Citrus Dip in Agedashi Sauce

The first course – ugh. See Michael's dislikes on the first page and this is the item you will see first. Tofu. Friends who know me well know my feelings about this type of food. It is the only thing I give away during lunch. We were served one giant block of funny substance, funny taste tofu – not a great start if you want a good mark in Michael's review.

In the end, realising I was paying for the full degustation experience and in the interests of the Dinner Club, I grudgingly ate the tofu. The tofu was soft and squishy, exactly the way I remember it. To be fair, it has got to be one of the better pieces of tofu I've had – although that is not saying too much. The sauce and horseradish mixed well, combining flavours quite well. Moving on...

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

This was probably my second favourite dish of the degustation. There were just so many parts to this dish and all were great.

The Pacific oyster was juicy and delicious – the citrus soy sauce and salmon roe really mixed well with the oyster, enhancing its flavour. The size of the oyster was fair. I've seen bigger Pacific oysters, but those can be thought of as a meal in itself. This one was the perfect size for an oyster with 3 other parts to the dish (and another 8 courses to come).

The prawn was in some form of batter. Usually I'm not a big fan of batter as I believe it takes away from the actual base ingredient and this was the case with this dish as well. It was good, but not my favourite part of this amuse-bouche. The prawn itself was probably overcooked – something which is difficult to avoid when cooking it in batter.

The cod fillet was my favourite part. The fish was cooked longer than I usually like (I tend to prefer fish seared on the outside and left sashimi raw on the inside), however, I'll make an exception for this cod. The fish was tender despite being cooked through and its simplicity was what made it so good. There were no additional sauces or condiments – it was in its basic form and fantastic.

Spinach I hear you say! After the joys of the oyster, prawn and cod, the remaining element had a vegetable theme. Luckily for the participants, the spinach was up there with the other parts. The spinach was heavily sauced to take away from its natural bitterness. It was a nice side portion of the dish – I'd actually prefer a 4th seafood part for this course, but hey, can't have everything! Jeffrey "Connoisseur" Chen actually suggested seaweed instead of spinach and I have to agree. It would work much better with seaweed – it goes with the seafood type theme as well.

Assorted Sashimi Raw Fish:

Tuna and Salmon (Served with Soy Sauce & Wasabi)

How can you go wrong with sashimi – the answer is to make it so chewy that the consumer doesn't want to take another bite. That is what happened with me for this course. Usually a huge fan of sashimi, I was left very disappointed by the quality. However, as a member of the Dinner Club, it's all about making sacrifices and finishing off stuff even if you hate it – the three portions of tuna was finished (albeit one swapped with Jeff).

There were two types of sashimi in this dish – salmon and tuna. The salmon was fine; it is the type available in any Japanese restaurant that serves fresh salmon sashimi. It wasn't really the top end sashimi, which I expected from this one-hat restaurant, but it was still acceptable.

My big complaint with this sashimi was about my tuna pieces. Tough, stringy and close to inedible, this is probably the first sashimi I've actually disliked. It also appeared that I was the only one to receive Mr Chewy. Jeff and Mich got away with nice tuna pieces, while I was left with the fish that Azuma rejected.

Azuma Unique Sushi:

Tuna and Salmon

Tuna and salmon again! I am sensing a theme. Unlike the previous dish, I really liked the tuna sushi here. I wouldn't actually call the sushi unique as Azuma believes it is – it was served as a standard nigiri sushi with flamed exterior on both types of fish. Despite this, the fish was cooked just as I like (yes, seared on outside and raw on the inside).

Perhaps it was because of my bad experiences the dish before, but I particularly enjoyed the tuna sushi this time around. Overall, it was a typical nigiri sushi, with just that bit extra in terms of quality and taste.

Chawan-Mushi:

Steamed Savoury Egg Custard with Prawn, Scallop and Shiitake Mushroom

This dish looks pretty ordinary on the outside – just a crème caramel or egg pudding type of dish, but what lay in store for us once we broke the egg surface was amazing! This was my favourite dish of the night (only partly because it had scallops inside). The three key ingredients – prawn, scallop and shiitake mushroom all contributed to give the dish a sweet, tasty base.

I don't usually like egg custard, for a similar reason as why I don't like tofu, but this egg custard was more watery, almost soup-like once you gave it a stir. There is a trade-off here for the chef. In a dish like this, the prawn and scallop will either have to be overcooked making the custard itself sweeter and tastier. Alternatively, the chef could undercook the two and leave the custard as a more watery and less tasty base. I think they struck the right mix with this dish – overcooked, but not to the point where the two seafood types are inedible. This was a great dish with simple presentation.

Assorted Tempura with Prawn and Vegetables:

Prawn, Fish, Potato, Capsicum/Bell Peppers, Asparagus

As mentioned earlier, I don't like too much batter. However, it is hard to make tempura without batter! Thankfully, this dish was light on the batter, which made it much more palatable. Present in this dish were the standard tempura prawn and capsicum (they tasted just as you would expect) mixed in with some new styles I wasn't familiar with.

The first new element was asparagus tempura. It was surprisingly good, probably my favourite out of the lot. Ordinarily, I wouldn't have thought that it would mesh, but I was completely wrong. The asparagus was blanched first giving it a softer texture than raw asparagus. Overall, the asparagus was very refreshing and surprising.

The potato and fish tempura was pretty much as expected, albeit with a smaller amount of batter than I'm used to. The tempura fish was over-cooked, although it is hard to do a tempura fish with a sashimi-like consistency.

Premium Wagyu Sirloin Steak:

Served with Garlic Soy Sauce

The perils of Michael's post-Rockpool era became clearly evident today. Before that Rockpool steak, Azuma's wagyu rendition would have been ranked great. Unfortunately the bar has been raised by the restaurant we visited less than one week ago! The marbling score on the wagyu would have been about a 5. There was substantial marbling present, but it definitely would have been 15%/85% meat/fat ratio. The higher meat content adds a stringy/tough element to the dish.

The quality of the meat was alright, the cooking technique was a decent medium-rare (as ordered) but the garlic soy sauce was pretty terrible. The point of a sauce is to bring about the taste in the meat. Unfortunately, the sauce was way too weak – to the point where it actually took away from the steak itself. I didn't really enjoy this dish but I think Rockpool has to take a lot of the blame here.

Seared Tuna:

Served with Daikon & Citrus Soy Sauce

This was the final of three tuna servings for this degustation. Thankfully they saved the best for last. This dish came with two small slices of lightly seared tuna and, with the alfalfa sprouts, provided a lovely designed course. The tuna itself was full of taste – with the slight additional citrus soy sauce adding to the overall tuna flavour. A great, yet simple dish is sometimes the ones which stand out.

Udon Noodle:

In Broth Soup

This dish could easily be renamed "filler dish". During every degustation, there are dishes which are there to make people like me feel like they've had a great, filling meal. This is the one! Noodles, especially Japanese udon, are carbo-heavy and make you feel full quickly. I really didn't think this was appropriate here – at least they could have hidden what they were doing by adding something simple on the side or even inside (more tuna anyone?).

Onto the udon itself. The noodles were typical udon, but the broth was tasty and worked well without any additions. However, as mentioned before, at least try and hide the fact that it's a filler dish by putting something inside!

Seasonal Dessert Selection:

Raspberry Sorbet

Chocolate Mousse

Crème brûlée

The raspberry sorbet was your typical sorbet – icy and mild in taste. That is the way sorbet should be – slightly sweet and subtle. The course was appropriate as a pre-dessert as the subtle taste cleared up the palate after the previous more savoury courses.

The chocolate mousse was pretty disappointing. A typical mousse in terms of consistency, the taste was far too mild for a good mousse. Mousse tends to be very sweet, full of sugar. This one was lacking in that area. However, the actual raspberry sauce present was far too strong – the taste and sugar content was way too over the top.

A brilliant crème brûlée from a Japanese restaurant! I didn't think this would be possible here. Light and creamy, melting in the mouth, this crème brûlée was just perfect. Sometimes, the crème brûlée is overly sweet, baked for too long or baked too short (underdone). This one was done right, just the right sweetness and consistency.

The fine presentation added to the overall enjoyment of the dessert. The mousse in particular was presented wonderfully.

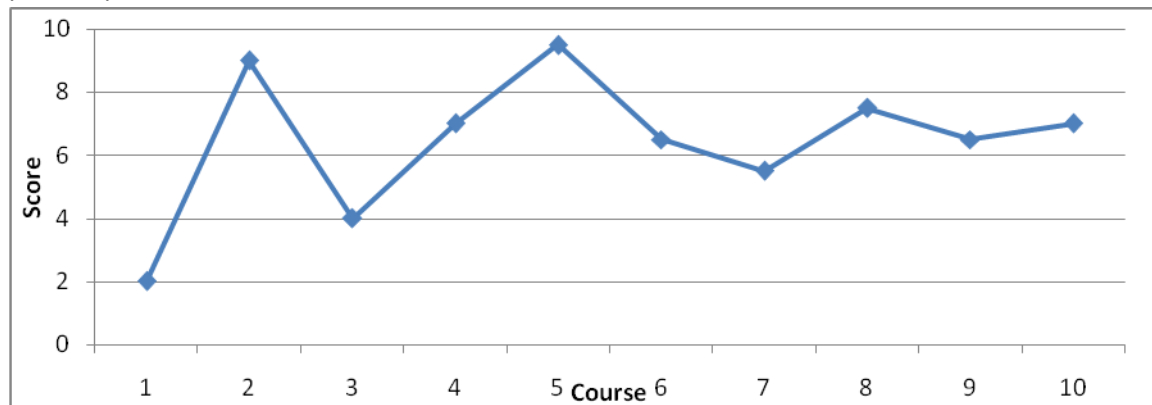
3 Good and 3 Bad

3 Good

- **The Chawan-Mushi**
This dish was phenomenal. I was impressed by the taste and simplicity of the whole dish. 9.5/10 as an individual score.
- **The Amuse-Bouche**
Initially I was angry that this amuse-bouche was considered a course. However, after seeing the effort and tasting the course, I know why they want to advertise this as a dish. This contained four great parts.
- **Crème brûlée**
I did not expect to have such a good crème brûlée at a Japanese restaurant. The dessert was just as I like it. Smooth, not overly sweet and just the right consistency.

3 Bad

- **Inconsistency**
Being a bit of a nerdy club as well, I thought it would be a good idea to plot a graph of course vs score to illustrate my major beef with the meal. Overall, the meal was pretty good. However, I'm disappointed at the inconsistency in the quality of dishes. Perhaps some of the dishes are just unsuited to my taste, but I thought there was too much of a down-up-down-up pattern prevalent.



- **The Restaurant Ambiance**
I felt very cramped throughout the meal. There were just too many tables in a confined area. The restaurant was also a bit loud for my liking.
- **Climax too Early**
I thought that the degustation 'peaked' too early. The two superb courses – the amuse-bouche and the chawan-mushi were courses 2 and 5 respectively. The climax was at those points, which left 5 more courses to get through hoping for something even close to the top 2. They were not forthcoming.

Ratings

Food Quality 8.5/10

In a degustation, there are dishes you will love and hate (eg. scallops vs tofu). The mark here – 8.5 is probably higher than the restaurant actually deserves. The dishes were far too inconsistent in quality to rank above an 8, however, due to the sheer volume of courses in this degustation and the quality of the amuse-bouche, chawan-mushi, seared tuna and crème brûlée was enough to bring it to an 8.5.

Value 5.75/10

With the discount, the degustation itself was under \$100. That is decent value, even though I didn't like the all courses as much as some other Dinner Club restaurants we've been to.

Ambiance 7/10

The actual location was alright, but the restaurant lost marks for the crowded placement of tables (due to the small area). The restaurant was a bit loud for my taste as well.

Cleanliness 9/10

The restaurant was pretty clean overall. No complaints from me.

Service 8/10

The service was alright. The waitresses were always very helpful, however, they didn't know the dishes as well as they should have.