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At East by Southwest, sushi just the start

By Karen Brucoli Anesi

Special to the Herald

"A taste of the Far East in the heart of the Southwest," promises the new menu at East by Southwest, located on the southwest corner of College Drive and East Second Avenue.

If you have been either confused or intimidated by this restaurant's offerings, it's time to get over it.

Yes, it has earned a reputation for those wanting to venture "off the beaten path." Indeed, it is a pan-Asian bistro and grill, offering a sushi bar, but if you can't find something on this menu to rave about, then you may need to clip this review and carry it in your wallet as a primer.

Restaurant owners and hosts Sergio and Hydi Verduzco have a gold mine of food offerings in this toney, corner restaurant, stylishly Japanese eclectic in décor, but cosmopolitan in offerings. But getting through the menu is like getting through *War and Peace*, especially if you're not tuned in to sushi lingo.

Quick Bite

East by Southwest

A wide range of dining choices, specializing in Pacific Rim fusion with an emphasis on fresh, high-quality ingredients.

Address: 160 E. College, Durango

Hours: Open every day; lunch Monday through Friday. Credit cards; no smoking; reservations taken for large parties.

The new menu, being introduced this week, is still an epic saga, but it's more user-friendly. Take the plunge from the teriyaki, California rolls and tempura. These are all good entrées, but oh, what you are missing if you don't look beyond the obvious.

Let's start by debunking a myth or two about eating sushi and sashimi. It's not all raw fish, and you don't need to struggle with chopsticks.

You can use your fingers. You can even ask for a fork. The only thing that matters here is that you enjoy it.

Start with the High Roller, a snow crab, avocado, cucumber and sesame seed California roll that is wrapped in seared salmon and topped with macadamia, scallions, Japanese aioli and sweet soy. It's not an appetizer, but the five to eight pieces is just perfect for introducing a menu full of treats, whether you're into beef, seafood, chicken, duckling or fish.

The NY NY, as in "New York, New York" is equally impressive, but instead combines rice with spicy snow crab and tart apple. Jalapeño firecrackers, hand-stuffed with snow crab and cream cheese, then battered in tempura and deep fried, are yummy, but messy to eat.

I've made more than a half-dozen trips to this restaurant since it opened in 2002, but it was a lunch I shared with a partner that brought into focus the "isn't it all sushi?" thinking.

I ordered a scaled-down version of the "omakase" sushi, pretty much the chef's choice of the nigiri (hand-formed) rice and fish. It was served with a bowl of miso soup and the typical condiments one expects: wasabe, a spicy horseradish, and pickled ginger. It was fresh, beautifully presented and featured a tasting of toro, hamachi, salmon, yellow fin, albacore, shrimp and octopus. No complaints from me.

My dining partner was not quite so venturesome, opting for the Chicken Katsudon selection in the Bento Box Lunch, a good-value choice that offers miso soup, steamed rice, edamame, California roll and a choice of nine popular entree items. He was happy with the chicken selection, a sautéed, lightly breaded chicken breast. I thought it was dry.

The popcorn calamari, served with dynamite aioli, will convince you that calamari with marinara simply misses the mark.

Here are the real winners: Butter Fish Miso-Yaki, broiled with a sweet miso glaze, and New Style Sashimi, offering a choice of seared hamachi or salmon with ginger/chive and green tea oil flavoring. These are excellent choices, especially for anyone wanting all the flavor and outstanding freshness of fine fish, but not yet ready for raw. The Seafood Poke, a Hawaiian-influenced assortment of seafood with cucumber, onion, seaweed and poke sauce, is also a winner. The Tiradito is a Peruvian style blend of either white fish, red snapper, halibut or scallops seasoned with a lime, Yuzu citrus and chile garlic paste. Like ceviche? You'll love this.

Beef eaters, there's plenty for you on the menu in the way of teriyaki selections, beef tenderloin and seared Kobe beef. There's even a market-priced Kobe beef New York steak. East by Southwest serves organic poultry and meats. Plans are to offer a Kobe burger on the lunch menu, arguably the most expensive, but likely to be a gourmet offering for those hell-bent on burgers at noon.

Dessert picks are the mildly sweet tempura cheesecake and the triple chocolate mousse. One dessert is enough to share among two or even three. We recommend both desserts, but there are green tea ice cream fans in Durango who swear the green tea ice cream rivals gelato.

What can be improved upon? The food is top-notch, but the service, especially for the uninitiated, could be more consistent. It's tough for waiters to guess how much diners expect in the way of encouragement to venture beyond the specials. There are friendly waiters who can gauge the level of familiarity first-timers have with this daunting menu. But there are waiters, too, who stand back as folks struggle with chopsticks. It's a tough call for a waiter to know how much assistance to offer, so speak up and ask for help, whether it's with the menu, or a desire to crawl up behind the curtains and dine in the intimate tatami matted area.

If your party prefers passing entrees around the table, Chinese food family-style, consider kicking it up a notch with the packaged, multi-course sushi feasts, the Sea Kayak, The Love Boat, The Queen Mary and The Titanic. Served in decorative boats, these graduated "food packages" allow choice within categories and make it easy to order for large groups.

Sergio Venduzco, a Mexico City native and Culinary Institute of America trained chef, attained resort level food and beverage experience before opening his first sushi bar in Telluride, immediately before coming to Durango. He describes his food as fusion that balances sweet, sour, salty and spicy, a creative layering of flavors and textures. It's all that, and it is consistently fresh and imaginative.

Karen Brucoli Anesi is a 25-year resident of Durango who has worked in the food industry and attended classes at a Le Cordon Bleu culinary school.