

Sushi comes to Durango:

Four Corners Business Journal 7/26/02
Indiana Reed/Journal Correspondent

East by Southwest introduces latest in great Asian dining

DURANGO - The town has "arrived." Great sushi has finally come to Durango.

Literally for years, locals have lamented that, in spite of the abundance of terrific restaurants, the one thing Durango lacked was an authentic sushi bar.

It was a niche waiting to be filled, and an opportunity that Sergio and Hydi Verduzco seized when opening East by Southwest four months ago at the corner of East Second Avenue and College Drive - the address many may recognize as the long-defunct Caper's.

Though the exterior has not changed appreciably (yes, there's a new sign), inside, the bright colors and gourmet pizza parlor ambiance has been transformed into the cool - but not stuffy - sophistication of a high quality, contemporary Asian bistro.

"It's a Pan Asian bistro AND a sushi bar," emphasized Hydi Verduzco, noting that she and her husband wanted to incorporate both to appeal to a broader segment of the dining public. "We're not just sushi, or as other people call us, 'a bait shop.' Half of our menu is cooked items, and the other half is our sushi bar, our raw bar."

Not exclusively Japanese as the sushi bar label might connote, the overall menu actually features a fusion of Eastern influences, incorporating Japanese, Chinese, Thai, Indonesian and Vietnamese. And, going a step further, as insinuated by the restaurant's name, many of the offerings have a "southwestern" flare - creative dishes that include jalapenos and other regional ingredients, making them unique to Durango.

"When I put the menu together, I didn't want to just do sushi," said Sergio Verduzco, a classically trained graduate of the Culinary Institute of America who also mastered the art of sushi at the California Sushi Academy in

Venice, Calif. "My focus here is to have something for everyone, so that people can come and dine here with friends who don't like sushi and still get a nice experience."

Intrigued by Asian cuisine chiefly because of the emphasis on unusual flavorings not based on fat, Sergio prides himself on offering healthy, low fat, high protein dishes to complement the active Durango lifestyle. Vegetarian items abound - built around organic vegetables and grains whenever possible - but meat eaters can also enjoy beef or chicken, all fresh and hormone-free.

Fresh fish, of course, is key, for the raw Nigiri (fish with rice) and Sashimi (fish only) and in the diverse and intriguing selection of Makimono (hand and cut) rolls. Having the hot kitchen allows for better economics with the fresh fish, for, as Sergio points out, if the sushi fish doesn't sell within a day it moves to the kitchen and is incorporated into the cooked dishes.

To ensure the freshest and highest quality fish and seafood products, Sergio contracts from a fish broker who supplies other mountain towns like Aspen, Telluride and Crested Butte.

"He's pricey, but he gets the best," said Sergio, pointing to a recent East by Southwest specialty item, the "Oh Toro," a premium blue fin tuna flown in from Spain and currently the most expensive fish in the world. "Our cost is \$50 a pound... But you get what you pay for. In this business, if you start out with quality, it follows through. So, we don't skimp at all, and we always try to buy the best product money can buy."

The Toro is the top of the line - with Nigiri priced at \$15 and Sashimi at \$30 - but in general, East by Southwest's prices are much more reasonable and a meal can be tailored as desired. Portions are small, encouraging guests to order a variety.

Individuals are welcome to dine at the sushi or cocktail bar, perhaps ordering only one item for a light, healthy lunch. Or a group may be inclined to spend hours leisurely sampling Sergio's cuisine.

"We usually say this is 'social dining,'" said Hydi, explaining that it's not a typical appetizer, salad, entrée and dessert type restaurant. "It's more a

flowing of food across the table. It comes in waves... continual, if they've ordered several items. They come out slowly... and you enjoy yourself. If it's not enough, you just order something else."

Also intended for enjoyment is the unique and large selection of herbal teas, tonics and elixirs (some apparently aphrodisiacs) provided by Hummingbird Herbals, as well as the sakes (traditional rice wines) and Asian beers. East by Southwest does have a full bar and traditional wine list, but the Verduzcós have found their guests intrigued by the more exotic sakes or "fun" sake cocktails.

Hot sake is a common request, but Hydi attests that when heated, the wine's flavor is masked. Served chilled the finer qualities and floral nuances emerge.

"Most of our staff is well-trained," she said of the servers' knowledge of the different sakes. "They (the wines) all have different personalities, characteristics."

And the staff's knowledge isn't restricted to the beverages. Intent on building a quality staff, the Verduzcós required potential employees - if they passed muster for loyalty, longevity and quality at previous jobs - to take a test.

"We gave everybody information on sushi and we told them they had to have that memorized by the second interview," said Sergio. "Those who didn't, didn't make the cut."

"It told us who really wanted the job and who didn't," said Hydi, adding that it also revealed a person's ability and willingness to follow direction.

As a result of the exacting hiring process, 20 quality individuals were selected from an applicant field of 200. Since opening in March, the restaurant has experienced relatively no turnover, which is quite a contrast to Eagle's Bar & Grille and Euphoria in Telluride, the restaurants run by the Verduzcós prior to their relocation to Durango. With the transient labor pool in Telluride, Hydi found herself perpetually training new employees.

Sergio feels "blessed" with the East by Southwest staff, and has instituted an Eastern team-building program to maintain the cohesiveness and positive environment - one he "ventures" to say he'd utilize in any future enterprise.

"Everyday here, before we open, we take 10 minutes and we do some Tai Chi exercises and we'll do one minute of meditation," he said, explaining the techniques he learned while at the Sushi Academy. "It works great. It creates a good atmosphere for the employees."

The restaurant's physical environment also lends itself to what some might call an Eastern tranquility. According to Hydi, the cocktail bar top is the only visible remnant of Caper's.

"We did put a lot more into it in the beginning than we expected to," she said, figuring it was "either first class or no class... People kept telling us that in Durango you better make sure you do it right the first time because they don't give you a second chance."

Though the restaurant's physical location seems prime, with good visibility, access and street parking, one of the difficulties, and perhaps the reason the restaurant sat empty for so many years, is that it shared "back of the house" operations with neighboring Arianio's. Working with the building's owners, the kitchens were divided and new equipment purchased. Now, the two restaurants share only the restrooms.

Hydi credits much of the innovative structural and design transformation to the general contractor, Bryan Brinley of fini construction. For example, the immaculate sushi bar - replete with refrigerated glass display cases (you can see the fish is fresh) - fits along the back wall as if it were designed for the space, but it miraculously disguises the giant Caper's pizza oven.

In addition to the regular dining area, East by Southwest also includes a Tatami Room. Seating is on the floor, on tatami mats, for traditional Japanese style dining. Because the room, which seats about 20, can be separated from the main dining area, it's proven popular for private parties and meetings.

"We're going to be doing Shabu Shabu (Japanese fondue) and Sukiaki in there. More of the communal, one pot meals. It will be a lot of fun," said Sergio.

Open for lunch and dinner, East by Southwest can accommodate 85 at one time, including seating at the bars and in the Tatami Room. From the outset, the restaurant has been well patronized, with the wait for a seat initially stretching to more than 90 minutes, as general reservations aren't accepted. Now, the fervor has waned, but the standard wait remains about 20 minutes.

"We weren't expecting to be this busy," said Hydi. "Our budget was that maybe we'd fill it up one and a half times for the first six months, but we keep getting the lines."

"We've had a great reception. We're very happy to be here," said Sergio. And, in turn, they are already giving back to the community. Sergio is offering an apprentice program to train young sushi chefs, and the entire restaurant recently pulled together for a fundraiser to support those impacted by the wildfires. Some \$2,500 was raised for local victims.