





Shiso: sushi outside the box

Ed Metcalf carves
omakase with very
sharp knives

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If you want a window into Ed Metcalf, a good place to look is his hands.

The fingers are strong and blunt and he wields his knife like a surgeon. Sure quick strokes, no hesitation, no wasted motion.

Ed's not a medical man but you could call him a doctor of sushi, a surgical specialist who can transfigure raw fish into intricate combinations of flavor and fine art.

His restaurant is called Shiso, after the popular Eastern herb (also known as perilla). The elegant green leaf adorns the interior wall and appears in many of the restaurant's dishes, which start at the edge of conventional sushi and move rapidly outward in ripples of culinary creativity.

If you come for a California roll and a few pieces of maguro, you can get them at Shiso, but why bother? You can get those things everywhere, even at Safeway.

I mean, if you rented a Ferrari for the weekend, would you just drive it slowly around the block?

At Shiso, you come to explore. You want to rev the engine and see where it takes you. So, for starters, you may want to try the miso-glazed cod with caramelized

The knife looks like something from the set of Sweeney Todd and is sharp enough to shave with.



apples and seared foie gras. Or, if they still have it, the seared Hokkaido sea scallops.

But that's still not traveling outside the box, that's just peeking over the lid. Outside the box is *omakase*, a Japanese word that variously means "to entrust" or "protect" and translates into a succession of gastronomic revelations your mouth and stomach have never experienced before. And that's a good thing.

With *omakase* you sit at the sushi counter and entrust your meal to the chef, with no control over the outcome or sometimes even the price. *Omakase* gives the chef the freedom and authority to create at will and on the spot. Think of it as the culinary equivalent of your first visit to a new masseuse. You hope this person is skilled, that it will feel good and the price won't kill you. In the end you have to surrender, knowing it's a roll of the dice. At Shiso, such jeopardy is actually a safe bet, because Ed—unlike more traditional sushi chefs who like to stay inside that comfortable box—is great at improv and

you're going to like what he comes up with. At least, I did.

Here's an *omakase* sampler based on personal experience: Halibut rolled in lemon, shiso and daikon with Japanese guacamole and pickled white ginger wasabe. Seared hamachi belly with ponzu sauce. Shisito peppers pan-fried in olive oil with dancing bonito flakes. Salmon sashimi with lavender salt. Kumamoto oysters with truffled ponzu. Whole langoustines sautéed in the shell with Ed's own Szechuan sauce. A sashimi platter of tuna, hamachi, salmon and...I don't even remember the rest. You get the picture. It goes on and on, each dish seeming to fall out of Ed's sleeve just as you finish the last one, each dish original, intriguing and entirely new.

Usually Ed doesn't even taste his own creations before they're served.

"I've been around food since I was 15," he says. "I know what diverse foods go together without tasting it. In a hot kitchen you're constantly tasting your food. Behind

"I know what diverse foods go together without tasting it."



Ed carves a cucumber into a perfect "paper cut."



Assembling the appropriate mix of textures and taste. “A lot of sushi is technique,” says Ed.

into convention. And it seems to work. His first sushi restaurant—Sushi Moto (no relation to your cell phone)—was in Oregon, but after discovering Sonoma, he decided the historic city was ready for something completely new.

At one time, Ed observes, “the restaurants here were all French, Mediterranean and Italian. I thought, what a great place to do sushi, especially with all the good white wine.”

He now feels the mix has reached an exciting equilibrium. “There are a lot of talented new chefs, places like Harvest Moon, EDK, LaSalette, La Haye...I think Sonoma attracts good chefs because of the availability of good local food. It’s a good thing; it needed to be a little more diverse.”

It also, some people under 50 have complained, needs to be a little more hip. For that, Ed has another answer: theme nights.

Every Saturday there is “Late Night” from 9 to 11 p.m. At a time when much of Sonoma is nodding off, Shiso starts to jump with live music and happy-hour specials.

But if you’re too old or encumbered with children, there is also Family Night on Sundays from 5 to 7 with a gourmet kids’ menu. Wednesday night features “All you can eat” from 6 to 9 (with a one-hour limit), and Thursday is Ladies Night for which females who accept the title get 25 percent off. Happy hours run Wednesday to Sunday from 4:30 to 6.

Tethered half a block down Broadway, Shiso has to contend with the off-the-Plaza and out-of-sight curse. Nevertheless, Ed’s built a passionate following and, with a new baby boy (Maiko), he and his wife, Jennifer, are, he says, “here to stay” and happily outside the box. **S**

Shiso is located at 522 Broadway in Sonoma. It can be reached by phone at 707.933.9331 or online at shisorestaurant.com.

a sushi bar it’s a little different. You don’t have that option.”

Ed says he has “maybe 20 customers who come in once a month who have never seen the menu. I never feed them the same thing twice. You have to be a big foodie to understand and appreciate what we do.”

Metcalf, who grew up in Lake Tahoe and attended culinary school in San Francisco, has an eclectic background in food. He worked in French restaurants, did Pacific Rim, and finally, at the age of 34 and still working a “hot kitchen,” Ed met his muse in Copenhagen and, as he puts it, “followed around” the man who would become his “sushi sensei.”

Ed wasn’t allowed to touch the food until the chef knew he was serious. “In Japan,” he explains, “you basically never touch fish until you’re in year five.”

It didn’t take Ed that long. Clearly, he was a serious student, of both the food and the art of making it. “A lot of sushi is technique,” he says, taking a section of cucumber in one hand and a razor-sharp, foot-long knife in the other. The knife looks like something from the set of *Sweeney Todd* and it’s got an edge you could shave with, if you were psychotic. Deftly and quickly Ed turns the cucumber against

the blade and peels a perfect “paper cut,” leaving a roll of skin as thin as parchment to coil on the countertop.

Keeping the knives sharp is a daily ritual when you’re a sushi chef, and the process is both elaborate and precise. The whetstone must first be leveled flat, or else the sharpened blade will be uneven. For this Ed uses an ordinary brick, rubbing it back and forth across the stone, following with the blade.

He then trims a slab of ahi with cold precision, the knife so sharp it slides through the fish as smoothly as the fish once slid through water. He cuts away everything that isn’t perfect, and when he wraps the fish and returns it to the case, it looks too pristine to be real.

“Pristine” is not a word you’d apply to Ed. He has the tousled, almost spiky hair of, say, an electric guitar player or a late-night ER doc. There’s some edge there, until you get to the hesitant smile. But when Ed starts talking about food—about how a white, classically trained French chef ended up carving fish and slicing slivers of scallop into miniature sculptures that look almost as enchanting as they taste, you begin to understand what makes him tick.

He’s totally into food and not so much