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Uni: You Never Forget Your First Time

New York's Saikai Dining Bar has perfected the art of uni



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Saikai Dining Bar

I was very fortunate to have been recently invited to the New Year's Eve preview dinner at **Saikai Dining Bar** ^[1] on Greenwich Avenue not far from my home. The owners were incredibly gracious as they poured glass after glass of One Leaf California wine. The soft gurgling sound of the One Leaf wine hitting the glasses reminded me of the Zen Buddhist aphorism: Two hands clap and there is a sound. What is the sound of one hand clapping? (隻手声あり、その声を聞け) The Zen-like atmosphere of the restaurant was further enhanced by the entrance bar resting on an antique Japanese tansu, or chest of drawers.

The revered honorees of the evening were then placed on the bar on a bed of ice. The Maine sea urchins were small with a greenish tint, like tennis balls with small prickly spikes. The

massive Santa Barbara California specimens were otherworldly with an alien deep purple hue.

We then sat near the open kitchen to start our "Uni 6 Ways" tasting menu. The two gentlemen in the kitchen, one native Chinese heavily tattooed, the other unmarked Japanese, were there to show us the Tao of Uni. Chef Xiao (formerly of Brushstroke) and Chef Wing (formerly of Zuma in Hong Kong) had met while both worked at Masa. Their former sensei didn't care about their résumés, but hired them as samurai, based more upon their knife-wielding skills rather than their appearance or prior experience.

More on Uni

- [Uni Sashimi Bar: Jumping on the Ramen Bandwagon](#) ^[2]
- ['Uni' Pizza Napoletana, Manhattan's \\$8 Slice](#) ^[3]
- [Risotto with Sea Urchin, Dill, and Smoked Caviar](#) ^[4]
- [Sea Urchin, a Staple of Sushi, is in Danger of Disappearing](#) ^[5]

Easing us into the menu, a Lincoln log stack of pure Snow White colored asparagus rested in a delicate uni miso sauce which I resisted the urge to slurp out of the dish after the asparagus were gone.

A small glass bell jar when removed bathed each diner in a light smoke, like incense burning outside the entrance to the Buddhist temples I visited in Japan, which had already infused the nori covered uni sashimi on the underlying plate.

A whole grilled wild shrimp followed, split precisely in half and coated with an uni egg sauce in place of the creature's shell. Foamed uni butter took the place of sea foam on the homemade uni udon pasta which twirled onto my chopsticks for a single glorious slurp.

Miyazaki raw beef was the perfect yin to the yang of the uni perched on top. The carapace of the uni served as the cauldron to a bubbling baked uni scallop Brussels sprout casserole. Saikai, designed as an upscale gourmet izakaya, is clearly a new force in the "uni-verse" of Japanese fine dining in Greenwich Village.

I asked my dining companions, all experienced members of the food media, if they remembered their first time eating uni. All immediately smiled as if recalling losing their virginity. Some pleasant, some scary. A dive sushi bar in a back alley in Tokyo. On a yacht scuba diving somewhere off the coast of Italy. For me, it was at the bar at the original Blue Ribbon on Sullivan Street when it first opened in the '80s. The oyster shucker, Alonso, who is sadly no longer with us but who is immortalized by the Bromberg brothers in their Blue Ribbon cookbook, put a raw Maine uni shell in front of me, its gonads exposed in full view. I still remember rolling my eyes up in the back of my head behind pleasure shut eyelids. You never forget your first uni experience.

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[3] <http://www.thedailymeal.com/uni-pizza-napoletana-manhattans-8-slice>

[4] <http://www.thedailymeal.com/risotto-sea-urchin-dill-smoked-caviar>

[5] <http://www.thedailymeal.com/news/sea-urchin-staple-sushi-danger-disappearing/42214>