

# Brushstroke New York Times Online Dining & Wine Hidden in a Nook, Mystery in Plain Sight 9 25 12

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## Hidden in a Nook, Mastery in Plain Sight

Restaurant Review: Ichimura at Brushstroke in TriBeCa

By PETE WELLS

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MANY people who love restaurants dream about discovering an extraordinary one that nobody else knows about and keeping it secret. I'd always thought I was one of them until the Friday night not long ago when I ate with a guest in an empty sushi bar in TriBeCa. During the two hours we sat there, no customers arrived to claim the six other counter seats or the four chairs at a nearby table.

Our meal, a \$150 omakase, began with a traditional zensai, or appetizer plate, several cold bites laid out on an oblong ceramic dish: sweet grilled Asian eggplant beside three manifestations of herring. One piece of the rich and chewy fish was marinated in vinegar, another was fried and then marinated, and finally there was a brick of pressed herring roe with a dark vein of kelp running down the center. The roe popped loudly between our teeth as the eggs gave up their brine.

Three more small dishes followed, including a crunchy slice of sea cucumber in a nearly translucent shade of seaweed green. Its maritime taste was elusive and haunting, and had a finish as long as that of any single-malt Scotch.

In the meantime, the chef, an extremely soft-spoken Japanese-born man, had been grating a stump of wasabi, muscling it down hard against a sharkskin paddle. The green paste went onto a black plate with strands of cucumber and myoga ginger bulbs and softly folded lengths of sashimi: goosduck, amazingly sweet and nearly orange; a slab of tuna belly run through with fatty streaks that melted moments after touching the tongue; a glittering bit of sardine; and chewy squares of engawa, the powerful muscle that sends a fluke undulating along the ocean floor.

When we moved on to nigiri, and had our first taste of the rice, warm, fragrant and assertive, we understood that this was some of the most remarkable sashimi and sushi either of us had ever tasted. We also understood that the emptiness of the room wasn't just odd, it was plain wrong. And with that realization, away went my resolve to keep the secret sushi restaurant inside Brushstroke to myself.

Although the restaurant was never as quiet on my return visits, it certainly wasn't going out of its way to advertise itself. It has no sign on the street, and no door of its own; you enter through Brushstroke. Nor did it have a name when I ate there. Late last week, after the restaurant's operators learned that I was writing a review, they decided it was time to christen the place, which opened quietly in April. Now it is called Ichimura at Brushstroke.

The chef is Eiji Ichimura, who used to make sushi at a cultish place on Second Avenue in Midtown called Ichimura. After it closed in 2008, he worked as a consultant, and came to the attention of David Bouley, who owns Brushstroke with a Japanese partner, Yoshiki Tsuji. Mr. Bouley does things his way, which helps explain why the new sushi bar has kept a lower profile than a father skipping out on child support.

There is another explanation, too. Tiny, hard-to-spot restaurants are a longstanding tradition in Japan, and Ichimura at Brushstroke is steeped in tradition. Mr. Ichimura, 58, practices the Edo-mae style of sushi that he learned decades ago in Tokyo. Developed in street stalls in the era before refrigeration, Edo-mae sushi was made with fish that had often been cured in salt or vinegar, or stored in soy sauce to keep it from spoiling. Mr. Ichimura's sushi is a direct descendant of this style, and while he has toned down his use of salt over the years his fish still offers stronger flavors than are encountered in most New York sushi restaurants. Even the rice, seasoned with a blend of three vinegars, is unusually assertive; it may ruin other sushi for you.

In a phone interview translated by Jamie Graves, Brushstroke's manager, Mr. Ichimura said he first went to work in a sushi restaurant 42 years ago as a dishwasher. Only after a few years was he permitted, under close supervision, to cut the heads off some fish.

"Nobody actually tells you how to press sushi," Mr. Graves translated, "so he would do it at night based on watching the chefs do it during the day." Mr. Ichimura kept a vial of paper in his pocket and when nobody was looking he would copy the motions he had seen: index finger laid over the paper, elbows flexed, he would extend his arms slightly to project a quick, even, gentle pressure. Eventually, still in secrecy, he began to practice after hours with actual fish instead of paper.

He learned the kobo-jime technique, layering fish with kelp, which pulls water from the flesh and leaves behind a umami flavor and a green color. One night, Mr. Ichimura served me fluke that had been prepared that way several days earlier, then carved off a slice of pure white fluke that had arrived just that morning. It was a concise refutation of those who say that sushi chefs don't do any cooking.

That charge is especially untrue in Mr. Ichimura's case. He makes the zensai and other cooked dishes that begin each meal. These may include salty fermented tuna, octopus suckers dabbled with wasabi and plum paste, or soy-marinated trout roe on top of *anago* skins, so soft they barely hold together during the trip from bowl to mouth.

Mr. Ichimura does relinquish control of the cooking at two points, though. Between the sashimi and sushi courses, he will ask if you want something from the Brushstroke kitchen — some grilled fish, or the chawan mushi with crab and black truffles, one of the city's great dishes. And at the end of the night, a server will offer the Brushstroke dessert menu, for those who don't fall in with the Japanese belief that the flavor of fish and rice should still be in your mouth when you walk away from a sushi meal.

Mr. Ichimura also makes a compelling case against the common belief that the finest sushi is the freshest. Like a steakhouse, Ichimura at Brushstroke dry-ages some of its best ingredients to concentrate their flavors and accentuate their sugars. A slab of tuna belly sashimi, chilled for several days, was unusually sweet and rich, though it still called out for a swipe of wasabi and a few drops of Mr. Ichimura's excellent soy dipping sauce.

Mr. Bouley seems captivated by the potential of aged fish, and is already using the techniques at his flagship, Bouley, across Duane Street. He is also captivated by his new sushi chef, and wants to build him a better home.



In a phone interview, Mr. Bouley talked about a coming redesign, with a full wall that will replace the partition that divides Ichimura at Brushstroke from some lounge tables which, when occupied, can disrupt the tranquility of Mr. Ichimura's realm. (One night, I listened as a man who had evidently been sampling Brushstroke's elegant, Asian-informed cocktails loudly imagined how cool it would be to remake "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory" as a porn film.)

As ever, Mr. Bouley was brimming with ideas. He wants to recruit New England fishing captains to kill fish instantly in the Japanese fashion, plunging them into icy water to purge the blood. He wants to build tanks where Mr. Ichimura could keep live squid, clams, lobster, sea snails, Maine shrimp and maybe octopus. "I don't know if we can resurrect an octopus, but sometimes when they come in they're still alive," he said, tantalizingly.

The redesign, which Mr. Bouley hopes to start next year, would even give Ichimura at Brushstroke its own door inside the restaurant. But it still won't have a separate street entrance, or a sign of its own. You'll just have to know it's there. And now you do.

Ichimura at Brushstroke

★ ★ ★

30 Hudson Street (Duane Street); (212) 513-7141; [davidbouley.com](http://davidbouley.com).

**ATMOSPHERE** A secluded nook with only 12 seats, just off the entrance to Brushstroke.

**SERVICE** Exceedingly gracious.

**SOUND LEVEL** Utterly serene.

**RECOMMENDED** All meals are chef's choice, but will be tailored to personal preferences. Don't be afraid to speak up.

**DRINKS AND WINE** Brushstroke's Japanese-inflected cocktails, along with its excellent list of sakes and wines, are available.

**PRICES** \$150 sashimi and sushi omakase.

**HOURS** Monday to Saturday, 6 to 10 p.m.

**RESERVATIONS** Essential.

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS** Two steps lead from the sidewalk to the main entrance, but another door a few yards away has its own ramp.

**WHAT THE STARS MEAN** Ratings range from zero to four stars and reflect the reviewer's reaction primarily to food, with ambience, service and price taken into consideration.



Hiroko Masuhara/The New York Times

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