

SELECT

BARBADOS

September 2006

JUST WHO IS BOO?

Multi-faceted
Adrian "Boo"
Husbands

Swamped?

Come to Graeme Hall

Flowering Pride

Our National Flower

THE MONTHLY MAGAZINE FOR BARBADOS

clean plate

From the moment we were escorted to an entrance reminiscent of a Japanese Pagoda and led over a wooden bridge bordered by lily ponds and bamboo, I knew this was going to be a special night. We had arrived at the new location of Zen, The Crane's magnificent Japanese/Thai restaurant, which moved from the main building in January 2006.

Greeted by hostesses in traditional Japanese kimonos, we soon found ourselves wending through an expanse of sight and sound. With soft classical Japanese Gagaku music as our background, we encountered stunning pieces of art, including a Samurai Warrior costume, and found ourselves in an endless rectangular room. With floor to ceiling glass windows offering grand views of the Crane Beach 100 feet below to our left, we were seated at one of the private 'Tatami' rooms that hugged the right side of the restaurant.

Each small enclosure offers an intimate dining experience that is never claustrophobic – the 'wall' that faces the restaurant side is either slatted wood or incorporated with rice paper, allowing you to see the sweeping views but giving you the feeling of privacy at the same time. For those who want to be in the centre of activity, you have your choice of tables in the open with a direct sea view, or a seat at the many stools facing the ocean at the Sushi Bar, where you can watch native chefs from Japan create masterpieces with the freshest of ingredients. A large private dining room offers seating for twelve, with zabuton, or floor cushion, seating.

The total serenity of this restaurant is difficult to capture in words. As we sat down on the silk embroidered banquette seats, we saw we had an additional dinner guest: A Japanese mask smiled at us from the wall, floating on a black silk 'frame'. With low lighting and hushed colours, there is a certain calmness about Zen that almost encourages one to whisper. For those that have difficulty hearing or relaxing in noisy restaurants, have we found a place for you.

Zen's menu has two themes: Thai - with noodles, soups, fried rice, and curries, and Japanese – featuring tempura and sushi. For those unfamiliar with these two cuisines, the menu thoughtfully contains little 'chile peppers' that indicate if a dish is mild, medium, or extra spicy, along with markings for vegetarian dishes and items to avoid for those with nut allergies.

We decided to try things from different countries per course – I would start with

Japanese and Dave with Thai, and then for the mains, we'd swap countries. My Gyoza, or Japanese pan-grilled pork dumplings, were absolutely heavenly. The dough-covered parcels of minced pork, ginger, sesame oil and vinegar were so tender they literally melted in my mouth, and reminded me of my 'salad days' back in Los Angeles. My roommate and I would go to an authentic hangout for the Japanese community we called 'Thank you very much' – because it had no name, and that was about all they could say in English! The food was cheap, authentic, and delicious, and the Gyoza was ALMOST as wonderful as Zen's.

Totally ZEN



Foreground: Traditional Thai curry
Background: 'Caribbean Sails' Bento Box



Holly and Lindon in Zen's entrance

ZEN is located in The Crane, St. Phillip
Reservations: 423-6220

Dave's Goong Tad Kaiew Waan, or breaded tiger prawns stuffed with crabmeat, combined textures and flavours for a seafood delight. Deep-fried coating revealed tender but firm tiger prawns surrounding a smooth blend of crabmeat and spices. The accompanying sweet and sour dipping sauce added yet another dimension.

For my main, I went traditional: A chef's special described as a 'famous dish of Thailand', stir fry chicken and cashew nuts.

Tender juicy bites of chicken were wok-seared with red, green, and yellow peppers, baby corn, and sprinkled with sweet basil. The sauce was sweet with a piquant chile 'bite' that snuck up on me in the gentlest of ways.

Dave's 'Caribbean Sails' was a masterpiece of to behold, almost too pretty to eat – Nah. On the menu it was billed as a 'Bento Box', which traditionally is a compartmented, lacquered wooden tray for a single take-out meal. The Bento I'm familiar with is usually square, with about four or five compartments that include rice, fish, meat, and vegetables. What arrived at our table was a spectacular lacquered and decorated Dragon Boat! The contents were as pleasing to the palate as the presentation was to the eye: Tempura of individually deep-fried prawns and green pepper slices, tender chicken in a sticky soy/miso sauce and sprinkled with sesame seeds, and sushi.

Zen's sushi dishes range from the exotic, like flying fish roe or eel, to the very tame, like the California Roll in Dave's Bento Box. (Our waitress, Giselle, pronounced the Spicy Tuna as the staff's favourite). With no raw fish ingredients, the California Roll will appeal to first-timers, consisting of crab stick, avocado, and cucumber, combined with rice and wrapped in seaweed 'nori' or thin skin, then rolled in rice and sesame seeds. For an extra kick, sushi is always accompanied with very potent green 'wasabi' mustard, which can be mixed with soy to cool the heat and add flavour, or taken as is for those that like to play with fire.

On to dessert, and I flipped back to Japan, for the unbelievable experience of Tempura Cheesecake with chocolate sauce. Creamy baked cheesecake with biscuit crust is coated in tempura batter and deep fried, for a 'surprise package' of warm, just-baked dessert with a crispy coating – amazing. Dave's Sang Ka Ya, or coconut custard drizzled with caramel sauce, was a smooth pudding reminiscent of flan, and disappeared instantly. Accompanied by inventive flavoured coffees, we could barely move – but sadly, it was time to go.

The Zen experience is not one to be missed: Unique atmosphere, superior attention to detail in décor, presentation, ingredients, and food preparation, and unobtrusive but excellent service. As we crossed the wooden foot bridge over pond, where the lily pads had exploded into bright white flowers during our meal, I knew I was right – this was a very special night.