

Small Space, Big Flavor

This time, in my quest to find the most enticing food Portland has to offer, I didn't have to look far, but I did have to look through a magnifying glass. You see, five blocks from my apartment in Northwest Portland, on the ground floor of a four-story, bay-windowed apartment building, resides the tiniest bar in Portland. By my calculations, that would make the eatery in the space opposite the smallest restaurant in Portland. Or is it?

Tanuki opened just about a year ago, with four tables and a row of counter spots, none available for children. I've heard many people who enter wonder why they could not bring their youngsters, but Janis Martin, the owner, explains that her spot is first a drinking establishment, and second a restaurant. It's true that on a visit to Tanuki, one is likely to consume some of the most interesting and unusual foods—sea urchin roe, lotus root, chilled monkfish foie gras—but the purpose of an izakaya, as they are known in Japan, is to consume alcohol and food together.

Inspired by “Japanese, Korean, and Okinawan drinking foods,” the menu is inexpensive and ever changing. While contemplating the offerings on one particular visit, a friend and I started with a bowl of kimchi and a large bottle of Orion, a lager-style beer that is light in color, taste, and body. I know it sounds as weak as drinking water, but the effervescent brew was the perfect refreshment to soothe the palate after a few bites of the fiery fermented cabbage. From then on, the plates came out of the kitchen one by one. We tried to keep up, rinsing with chilled sake between bites, each a smorgasbord of texture.

Renkon Nikuzume, is a toothsome, yielding crunch of lotus root segmented by mini patties of Pinoy-style pork sausage displayed as a colorful caterpillar-like creature; it is eaten as one would a sushi roll. Ahiru Kokkoro, skewered spiced duck hearts, is paired with pickled cucumber and daikon radish to acidulate the concentrated duck flavor. Shaped like little elongated mushroom tops, I found the chewy texture incredibly addictive. Next, a flight of Chinese greens—bok choy, yu choy, and gailan—arranged over rice, were wading in an inky pool of Cantonese shoyu sauce. With our chopsticks we fished out every last bit of rice swimming in the black lagoon of soy, ginger, shellfish essence, and sesame oil that had been buried beneath the greens' tender stalks. After eating another savory bite I pondered, “What's for dessert?” Surely the sweet endings would be as alien to me as the rest of the meal, but nothing was offered. There were no desserts, just more sake—this is an izakaya, not a restaurant.

Dinner for two on a Saturday evening out came to \$45. This seemed like the ultimate bargain for what turned out to be an entertaining exploration of flavor and texture. Eating Japanese bar food is new to me—tasting simply cooked yet complexly flavored meats, unusual vegetables, and a myriad of uses for soy. I'm happy to know that culinary adventures can be had just a stones throw from home, in a neighborhood known for American bar food, not Japanese. It's tiny, I just hope I won't have to wait for a seat.

Tanuki
413 NW 21st Avenue
Portland, OR 97209
tanukipdx.com
503-241-7667