

This is London



SO – CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE COOKING WITH HINTS OF EUROPEAN

Friends from Singapore moved to London recently. They called to say they liked a flat they had seen on Portland Place, but that other friends living in the capital had filled them with dire forebodings. Imagine, they said, the danger of giving their 15-year old daughter 'free access to Soho'.

This caused a few wry smiles in our house. How different Soho is now from twenty years ago – that is a subject which both delights and disappoints visitors. The sex shops, the nightclubs,

the sheer sleaze of Soho from the 60s to the 80s has all but gone. There is still a little frisson of naughtiness; stroll along Brewer Street towards Wardour Street and you can see the odd doorway barred to under-18s. But for the most part this sector of W1, to the west of Regent Street as far as Charing Cross Road, has a new sort of lively nightlife.

Young people drinking beer on the pavements outside the pubs. Delis, grocery stores, Italian cafes and Japanese sushi bars all intermingle. The sushi places are clustered in a tiny corner, mostly, along Brewer Street and

Warwick Street, and the one we enjoyed most lately has been So.

The owners call their style of cooking 'contemporary Japanese with hints of European cuisine'. I suppose they mean such novelties as foie gras on sushi rice but I have never tried it nor seen anyone else eating it there. Who cares about that? What they do brilliantly well is sushi on a big platter to share – all your favourites from tuna through salmon to octopus and California rolls creamy with avocado. Real shiso leaves too and lots of wasabi and pickled ginger. Some diners come just for this, but we feasted

on through mixed tempura. Large prawns and lots of vegetables in that crunchy, gossamer-fine batter. Miso soup with its cloudy treasures of seaweed and cubed tofu.

Highlight of our last visit, however, was black cod in saikyo miso, its divine silkiness offset by rice and, on the side, a special salad of edamame (fresh green soy) beans, and Hijiki seaweed, a frilly green concoction as zesty and pleasing to the eye as a ballerina's tutu.

The restaurant itself is not gimmicky. It is rather plain, with a central low table designed for traditional Japanese dining

and a sushi bar along one side favoured by lone guests. But the wafts of warm sake, gentle chinking of green tea pots and murmur of oriental voices is very relaxing.

Staff are efficient and friendly in a quiet way. This is not a new venture; everyone has earned his place and is quietly confident. We drank plenty of Japanese beer and sake – one must, it's part of the Soho experience! So it didn't seem too bad when the bill turned out to be £154 for four quite greedy people.

We then walked through the quarter to see what, if any, nefarious things were going on. We discovered a new Italian

ice cream parlour on Brewer Street with such exotic flavours as green tea and tiramisu and treated the children, though it hardly seemed possible to eat anything more. They were quite engrossed with the ice cream and shop windows full of smart little gadgets and somehow missed the sex shops. Or, perhaps, good food is more important than sex? Now there's a thought.

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