

SUSHI SUPERSTAR

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French, any restaurant—if I have a good dish, I always think, ‘how can I change that to Japanese?’” he says. Uechi constantly experiments with new ideas and flavors in the kitchens of his restaurants. “It has to be done there,” he laughs. “I never have a day off!”

The traditional promise of the *omakase* menu at a sushi restaurant means “trust me.” At Katsu-Ya, this chef seems to take the challenge of the *omakase* tradition one step further, as if to say, “Trust me, I’ll blow your mind.” Katsu-Ya’s traditional sushi is first rate, but where he really triumphs is with his daily specials. Among the most popular signatures: seared spicy albacore sashimi topped with crispy onions; tuna crusted in panko and served with a Japanese mustard sauce; a terrine of miso marinated eggplant and albacore cooked and topped with shelled edamame and tuna “lollipops” (tuna sashimi, avocado and cucumber wound tightly in the shape of old-

fashioned lollipops with a bamboo skewer and served artfully on a spiral of miso dressing and chili sauce).

Incredibly, Katsuya Uechi has managed to maintain the creativity, consistency and quality of his food, despite the fact that his restaurants have been known to “turn” seven times a night—an incredible feat by industry standards.

And while his first two restaurants are not exactly feasts for the eyes, decor is a definite priority at the new Katsuya in Brentwood—a space he describes simply as “beautiful.” The new venue, which also features a soundtrack crafted by L.A. deejay Michael Smith, is the prototype for more Katsuya restaurants to be opened by the SBE Restaurant Group, and Starck has composed a bold visual identity to help propel the plans.

Starck is no stranger to Los Angeles, having designed the Mondrian Hotel with Ian Schrager. Armed with a California state of mind, Starck focused his efforts on developing space that would

not overshadow Uechi’s creations.

“It’s good to sometimes disappear and just serve,” says Starck. “I have tried to make the architecture the essence of Japan, the spirit of Japan, the square root of Japan. A lot of Japanese restaurants are very gimmicky—like a Japanese Disneyland.”

With the opening just days away, Katsuya seems pleased with his new venture and excited about the future. Plans are already in the works to open locations in Hollywood, Downtown Los Angeles, New York and Miami’s South Beach. “If we have success here, then why not?” says Uechi.

And though spanning the globe seems a likely part of Uechi’s future, he will always return to the place and people that have nurtured his creativity. “When I go to Japan, or anywhere, and then I come back to California, I feel at home,” Uechi sighs contentedly. “I’ve been here too long. I have so much history here. I see my chefs and the people in both my restaurants, and it always feels like home.” ●

NAPA NIRVANA

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own porches or terraces, dispense with high-minded concerns of cutting edge design in favor of unabashed coziness, albeit chic and restrained in a 1960s New England mode. Beds sprawl, sofas squish, and you don’t need a degree in engineering to work the TV.

No matter where one stays on a Napa visit, the big question hanging in the air most of the time seems to be, “Are you going to the **French Laundry**?” Thomas Keller’s culinary temple has influenced kitchens and dining rooms around the world, but its impact in

and around its Yountville seat is absolutely palpable. From tasting rooms to hotel lobbies, chatter buzzes about who’s going, when, what they’ll love the most, and, most crucially, how they got their reservation. The good news, for everyone who can in fact secure one of the restaurant’s 16 tables, is that the myth of the French Laundry is very much a reality. The truly exceptional food, the uniquely professional but unfussy service, the magically urbane country setting—the restaurant delivers on every count.

Despite the French Laundry’s long shadow, it’s far from the only culinary show in town. One noteworthy newcomer to the scene, also in Yountville,

is **Redd**, perhaps the most modern restaurant in the area. Chef and owner Richard Reddington, while hardly a radical in the Ferran Adrià school of garlic ice cream and frozen powdered Parmesan, is unconcerned with cooking conventions and prefers to offer an inspired mix of what he calls, “Napa Valley food.” This can mean anything from hamachi sashimi to monkfish “saltimbocca,” and as far-reaching as the menu’s references may be, each item is so well-prepared that it all hangs together beautifully.

It would be a shame to glide between restaurants and resorts throughout Napa without enjoying the fruits of what makes this

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