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# The Atlanta Journal Constitution

## Fish wish fulfilled: Expert sushi, sashimi

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Would it be overreacting to drop to my knees on Ponce, kiss the asphalt and shout to the heavens, "Thank God, a real sushi bar at last?"

Maybe, yet it seems that Atlanta has waited long enough for a place like MF Sushibar. I know we have sushi bars. Even a few good ones. Even the oft-brilliant Soto, where the chef is a kind of wackball auteur who sneaks pears and truffles into his highly personal cooking.

But we've never had a place that's all sushi all the time. No lame, greasy tempura for the sushophobic. No chicken teriyaki. Instead, there are two kinds of yellowtail, several grades of fatty tuna, bonito and other sparkling fresh varieties served with more skill than invention. Sushi that could make a Japanese person long for home. It's just the fish, ma'am, at MF Sushibar. MF? Is that short for, um . . . ?

"Magic Fingers," the nickname that chef Chris Kinjo acquired for his dextrous digits while working sushi bars around the country. He claims a decade of experience but still looks young enough to be carded should he order plum wine at Benihana. Kinjo opened MF a couple of months ago in partnership with his brother, Alex, who manages the front of the house and is responsible for the interior design. It's an eye-popping Asian fusion look that goes heavy on blond wood, stark asymmetries, beaded steel light fixtures and pounding techno music. All very L.A.

Walk into MF on a Saturday night and you'll, in fact, get that out-of-Atlanta experience. Alex Kinjo pokes up from behind his Mac laptop to greet you, his thin frame engulfed in a black zoot suit, with a kind of mullet thing happening up top. There's a long, curved sushi bar manned by four chefs and more than a dozen tables filled with a young, energized crowd.

But what redeems the tragically techno design is the current of Japanese tradition that runs beneath. The menus are printed on textured washi paper and the soy sauce dispensers are glazed crocks rather than glass bottles with red plastic lids. And while the trend now in Japanese places is to use Western dishware -- porcelain soup bowls and teacups -- the Kinjos have wisely invested in lacquer and earthenware.

And nowhere is the tradition more apparent than on the menu -- the most extensive selection of sashimi and sushi in Atlanta. The trick here is to grab a seat at the sushi bar -- preferably in Chris Kinjo's section -- when the restaurant isn't too, too busy (I recommend lunch) and order Japanese-style, piece by piece, tidbit by tidbit.

You may want to start with sashimi. Try the different kinds of fatty tuna belly called "toro." The otoro is buttery soft, the chutoro streaked with white fat but perhaps also a little chewy connective tissue. Aji -- a regular on sushi bars in Japan and a stranger here -- is the small, mild "horse mackerel" sliced from its sardine-length frame into bite-size pieces and arranged with dots of grated ginger and green onions.



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by - John Kessler

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You may also want to make the \$4 investment in freshly grated wasabi. The server comes to your table and rubs the green root against a bumpy paddle to collect a tablespoon or so of its pale but lethally strong gratings. Use with caution: This wasabi not only clears your sinuses, it erases your short-term memory and slightly alters your brain-wave pattern.

The sushi itself is lovely -- cut with a generous hand but presented with an understanding of the right proportion of fish and rice. I love both the yellowtail and the young yellowtail called kampachi. The mackerel is buttery, with an oily flavor that blooms on the tongue, and the sea urchin roe has that lush, sea-deep flavor that signals its perfect freshness. The eel is hot and sweet, creamy-soft in the center and crisp on the edges. You won't find better.

And Kinjo could convert me to the cause of sushi rolls filled with deep-fried things and mayonnaise. His Tony Roll with shrimp tempura, real crab and avocado is -- believe it or not -- a delicate thing with clean flavors and soft rice that still separates into grains in your mouth.

There are a few areas I'd like to see improve. The tuna has always been perfectly crimson in color but also mealy in texture. Having lived in Japan, I was excited to see seared bonito on the sashimi list. But it was just plain wrong -- cut far too thick and not served with the citrus-soy ponzu sauce that I think is needed to complement this dark, gamy variety of tuna. (It's the fish that's dried and shaved to make fish stock in Japan.)

And a meal can be slow going at MF Sushibar -- seriously slow in the thick of that Saturday night rush and moderately slow when the place is half empty. Those magic fingers, alas, can't just snap and make the sushi materialize. Good thing it's worth waiting for.



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