

Food

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Yoshimatsu has made Tucson "Best of" lists for more than 18 years. Owner Yoshimi Tashima has created an extensive menu of healthy options including ramens, sushi, poke, and more. Shannon Christine Photos. See story on page 110.



Food DINE OUT

Bringing Beauty to the Table

This local Japanese restaurant is focused on creating dishes that appeal to all the senses.

By Elizabeth Hunter | Photos by Shannon Christine Photo



Named as one of the best in Tucson for more than 18 years, Yoshimatsu is a little Japanese restaurant that's long on accolades, long on menu offerings, and long on serving healthy dishes for *longevity*. Grab your chopsticks or fork — no shame there — as we take a big bite.

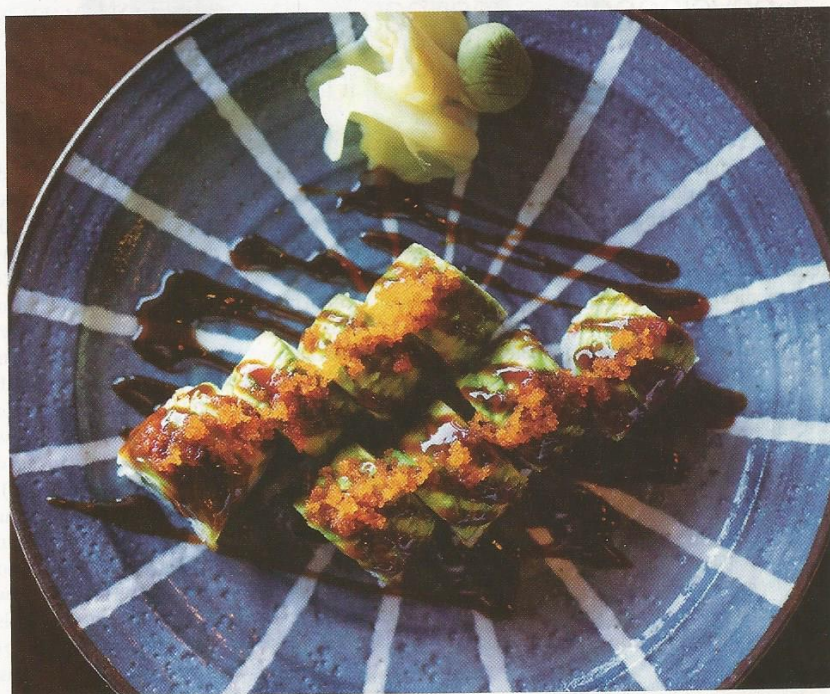
Proprietress Yoshimi Tashima remembers being delighted by food as a child — savoring a soft-serve yogurt cone until drips decorated her wrist — and spending pocket money on cookbooks. “I started to cook when I was eight or nine years old,” she explains. At first Yoshimi mastered cookies, cakes, ice cream and pies. “When I succeeded, they were delicious and I felt so moved and touched. After a few years I became the home chef for my family,” she adds. And although Yoshimi admits her mother wasn’t a great cook, her wontons — a traditional Chinese dumpling — were delicious. “I use her wonton recipe for Yoshimatsu. People love it.”

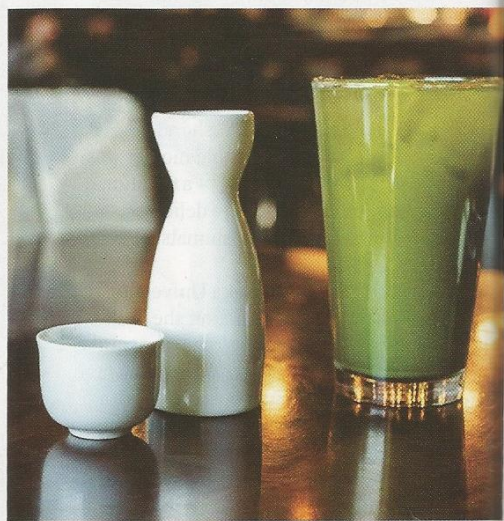
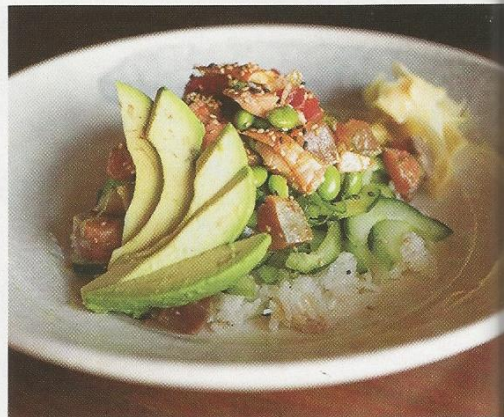
Yoshimi attended Osaka University of Arts as a textile design major; she finds that designing food and clothes are similar disciplines. The university also was where Yoshimi met her future husband Hiro, a ceramics major. The pair would cruise on their motorcycles in their free time acquiring vintage Japanese antiques, as well as posters and art that now adorn the wall of Yoshimatsu.

The opportunity for internships and advanced degrees at renowned American colleges convinced Hiro that living in the U.S. was the way to go, and after a bit of persuasion and a wedding ring, Yoshimi agreed to move to the U.S. after enjoying major success as part of a creative design team, and earning praise for her keen eye and passionate work at a 200-store-strong fashion chain.

Hiro became an in-demand ceramics artist and professor at Pima Community College [see the *Tucson Lifestyle* cover story from October 2022], and he and Yoshimi reveled in the ease in acquiring iced coffee in December. The couple also loved that “We could ride motorcycles year-round, as well as the mountains, blue sky and lots of great restaurants,” according to Yoshimi.

Opposite: Yoshimatsu Owner Yoshimi Tashima and Chef Roberto Ortiz display some of their delicious fare.
Top right: TanTan-men
Right: The Caterpillar Roll





“Encyclopedic” describes Yoshimatsu offerings, but servers are astute at asking questions and directing guests to gratifying choices.

The abundant sun and dry heat were a temporary balm, as Yoshimi discovered on a doctor visit that she had cancer. “My brain became totally white and empty,” she says. “I cried for several weeks and then started to research what food I should eat. I ate brown rice, tofu, natto [fermented soybeans], seaweed, vegetables, good oils and green tea.” After medical treatment and a healthy diet, it became clear to her that she wanted to share her recipes with Tucson.

Opened in 2002 and named in honor of her beloved grandfather, Yoshimatsu Shokudo [café] specialized in simple, healthy homestyle Japanese food and occupied the space on Campbell inhabited now by Brushfire BBQ.

The food proved popular — so delicious that patrons asked Yoshimi to expand the menu to include sushi and sashimi. In 2003, Chef Yoshimi moved the restaurant to the 4,000-square-foot, stand-alone building across the street now occupied by Prep & Pastry. Business burgeoned, but the intimacy Yoshimi finds essential in a restaurant was missing. From her vantage point behind the sushi bar, she “could not see all my customers,” she reflects. Years later, the move was made back to the westside of Campbell in the same sleek mall just one door down.

A cozy feel pervades as patrons are embraced by walls, floors and a ceiling of dark chocolate, while muted bulbs dangle and illuminate like benevolent fireflies. Japanese figurines and manga posters decorate the space, a pair of glass cases are filled with reproductions of menu items, and the sushi bar — accommodating eight or so guests — is bathed in paper lantern light. Bespoke lacquered two-tops — designed and hewn by Hiro — can be pushed together accommodate parties of four, six or eight. Faux-leather cushioned seats are supremely comfortable.

“Encyclopedic” describes Yoshimatsu offerings, but servers are astute at asking questions and directing guests to gratifying choices. With more than 100 choices of sushi, nigiri, poke bowls, bento, Kushiyaki (skewers) and noodle dishes, menu pics also are helpful. Most dishes are organically sourced when possible and packed with nutrient-dense immune enhancers, such as ginger, garlic, seaweed and maitake mushrooms. Fresh fish from Hawaii, Tokyo and from all over the world is flown in.

Donburi rice bowls feature luscious, chewy steamed white rice topped with a choice of grilled chicken, beef, pork, barbecued eel and veggies, all to be seasoned with soy sauce and unabashedly gobbled.

Opposite far left: Sesame Crusted Shrimp Roll
Opposite left: Deluxe Poke Bowl
Opposite left bottom: Sake and other beverages are available.

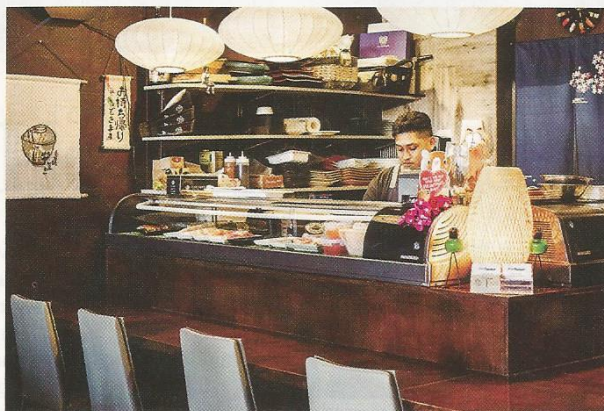
Chef Yoshimi's right-hand man is 46-year-old chef Roberto Ortiz, a native New Yorker of Puerto Rican decent. A graduate of cooking school at Star Career Academy who interned at the famed Spice Market restaurant in Brooklyn, Ortiz came to Tucson to visit a friend and found work with legendary Tucson Chef Issa Moussa at Skyline Country Club. After executive chef stints at the JW Marriott Starr Pass Resort and The Lodge at Ventana Canyon, Ortiz was looking for a change and felt an instant connection in an interview with Chef Yoshimi, who indicates, "I wasn't concerned about chefs having experience with Japanese cuisine. I was interested in their dedication and passion." Ortiz certainly had that.

There is no standard fare at Yoshimatsu as the choices, augmented by specials, are so abundant. Ramen noodle dishes are very popular, with highlights such as the Katsu ramen: breaded chicken or pork cutlet over noodles and savory broth; and duck ramen, a Chef Rob creation composed of apple confit reduced in duck fat, cranberries, orange juice and zest, shiitake mushrooms sautéed in garlic, with carrot and spinach atop a tangle of noodles.

Equally popular curry dishes present a smokey rich curry sauce over short-grain rice, either vegan with veggies, tofu and mushrooms, or Katsu with a choice of breaded crispy pork or chicken. Udon noodles also make an appearance on the menu; they vary from Ramen in that they are thicker, wheat flour noodles served in mild broth — a traditional Japanese comfort food.

Yoshimatsu was the first in Tucson to offer vegan sushi, notes Chef Yoshimi, "I have so many vegetarian and vegan customers." Choices include asparagus, shiitake mushroom, spinach, avocado and ginger tofu Nigiri, all served atop a pressed block of vinegared sushi rice).

A first timer at Yoshimatsu, writer Frankie was happy to convey the delight of her meal. "I started with a special of three different spicy inari sushi, each one with a different fish and blend of veggies. These little tofu pockets were flavorful with just the right amount of spice and diversity among the three. I love sushi, and I especially love eel sushi, but am usually restricted by small portions or limits on these delicious fish, so when I saw the Una-Jyu, or barbecued eel over rice with veggies and omelet, I knew it was for me. The plate reminds me of a deconstructed eel nigiri, with the eel



Above: Duck Ramen
Left: Yoshimatsu's sushi bar

filet sitting over the tender rice, served with pickled veggies and sweet egg. The fish was firm and flavorful with just the right amount of sauce. The pickled radishes, one sweet, one vinegary, made each bite with the eel taste different from the last, and the last dish was the sweet egg omelet, which had a buttery finish, and added just the right amount of savory sweetness."

Chef Yoshimi sums up the restaurant's philosophy this way: "Japanese food has a lot to do with beauty. We see the meal first with our eyes, then imagine how it tastes

even before we put it in our mouths. The combination of raw, grilled, sour, crispy, spicy, sweet and hot give joyfulness to our nose, mouth and mind. I want to keep bringing fresh Japanese food and the culture to Tucson. That's my mission — to give back to this welcoming town." **TL**

Yoshimatsu, 2741 N. Campbell Ave.; (520) 320-1574; Hours: Sun.-Thurs. 11 a.m.-9 p.m.; Fri. and Sat. 11 a.m.-10 p.m.