

SHOGUN



HIBACHI STEAK, SUSHI & COCKTAILS

by Nicole Sheets
photos Hamilton Studios

I made a reservation at Shogun on a Wednesday night, more to feel fancy than out of an expectation that the place would be packed. There were several grills going, and a festive air to the place, by the time we tucked into our meal.

We were seated with another party of four around a grill. In many parts of the world, this would not be weird, but in the U.S., especially in a city the size of Spokane, it goes against our grain to share space with people we don't know. I liked imagining that we were on a cruise ship, assigned to eat with adventurous strangers to fill out the table.

The guests at the opposite end of the grill said they come to Shogun all the time. Get the fried rice, they said. It's extra (\$3.00), but worth it. I wanted to ask them more questions but I've found that once you start nursing a baby in a public place, many people will go to great lengths to avoid eye contact. Fair enough. The frequent diners were also busy with their daughter's birthday presents and her report about her college classes.

My companions and I split an egg roll appetizer (\$3.50 for two) served with day-glow orange sauce. It was slightly oily and fishy, not particularly flavorful. I'd skip it and opt for a

food court version if that's really what you're in the mood for.

The night really picked up once our chef wheeled out his cart of raw ingredients. One of my companions had eaten at Shogun as a child and remembered when the chef flipped a shrimp into her granddad's pocket. We had high expectations.

Our chef established his dominance of the grill by setting it on fire, a flashy gesture that got our attention. Though I knew everything was under control, the fireball prompted me to push my chair back to protect myself and my offspring. The chef switched on a strobe light (which more kitchen setups should use) and flipped and clanged his spatulas, preparing for battle with bean sprouts.

The diners at the other end of the grill, for whom hibachi is less of a novelty, barely looked up, but we applauded the chef's dexterous showmanship. He cracked eggs in midair! He flipped eggshells onto his hat! He made that volcano thing out of sliced onions!

We tried to draw out more information from our chef. "How long does your training take?" asked the birthday girl. Six to eight weeks, the chef said, adding that he watches YouTube videos to work on his grillside manner.

When we asked what's going on with gender, here? All of the servers are women in tasteful kimonos, and all of the chefs are men. He said he's heard about a female hibachi chef, but she doesn't work at Shogun.

I asked if there is a competition among hibachi chefs, like the way baristas try to one-up each other with designs in latte foam? No, he said. It's not a competition.

Our chef sliced and arranged the various meats in piles.

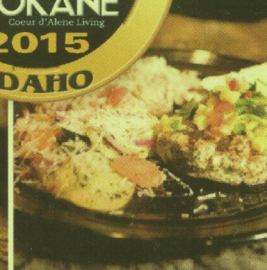
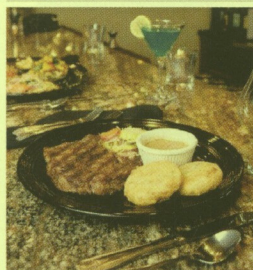
On his cart sat an impressive hillock of butter, the size of a big grapefruit, in a bowl. The hillock whittled down as he serviced more tables.

One of my dining companions tried the peach sake special. I had a taste:

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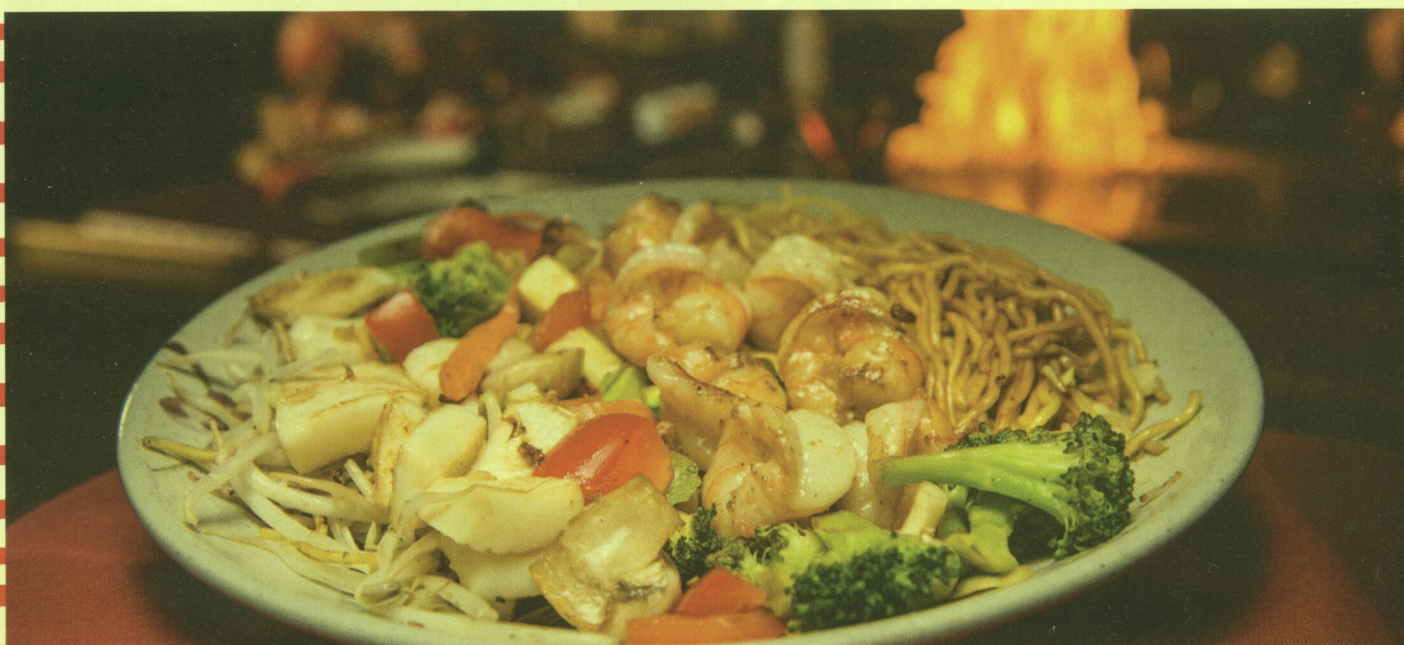
smooth, not too sweet, though the sake aftertaste, as expected, hits you pretty hard.

We tried various creatures of land and sea, including the Hibachi Steak (\$25.95), which had a pleasing peppery flavor. The Hibachi Teriyaki Chicken (\$20.95) was covered in sauce and sesame seeds. Though salty, it played well with the vegetables and rice.

Hands down, though, the winner was the Calamari Steak (\$21.95). It was tender and buttery, mild but not at all bland, and nothing like the breaded rubber bands that I assumed were calamari's only form. I fancy myself as

adventurous toward food, but you can call my bluff when it comes to seafood. Mine was a landlocked childhood. The fish of my youth came in stick form, served with a lagoon of ketchup.

At Shogun, one dining companion skipped the hibachi entrees and went straight for the extensive sushi menu. He reported that the Hamachi (Yellowtail) nigiri (\$4.50 for two



WILD IDEA #108:

Go ahead.

Take a photo of your dish when it arrives.

You'll want this moment to last.

pieces) was a standout. I stuck mostly to the California roll (\$5.00). Some of the rolls, like the Caterpillar (\$8.50)—eel, cucumber, crabmeat, and avocado—and the deep-fried Las Vegas roll (\$8.50)—spicy tuna, crabmeat, eel, avocado, cream cheese—were, as one of my companions put it, “covered and smothered” in sauce. My companions were initially wary of this, even so, we had no problem polishing off the platter.

Sated by my plate of food and staring at the empty grill, I thought of Councilman Jamm from the TV show *Parks & Rec*, who uses his hibachi grill to cook scrambled eggs. My companions and I daydreamed about hibachi breakfast food. A strobe light routine might be a bit much with an early cup of coffee, but a vegetable volcano and a sake mimosa with brunch could be just the thing.

What sets Shogun apart is its atmosphere. It's not everywhere in Spokane that you might bang a gong. Or cross a pond on a wooden bridge, a bridge that, I read, is referred to as a “moonbridge” in a Japanese garden and is supposed to “reflect artistic feelings.” Were there koi in the pond? I asked the hostess. No, she said, there are too many coins in the water.

Behind the bridge and pond, all along the south wall, stretches a giant water feature that blurs projected photos of people who are celebrating birthdays at Shogun. Near the hostess stand, the dark ceiling winks with tiny lights. A stroll underneath them is, truth be told, a little bit magical. It's clear that this place is really trying to help you make some memories.

As we left, I noticed one diner sitting alone at a grill. The chef had the tray, the butter mound, the flashy work with his utensils. Maybe the man was sad not to be invited to anyone's birthday party, but he seemed content to watch as a man in a many-pleated hat made his dinner sizzle, just the way he liked it. **S**

Shogun is located at 821 E. Third Ave., Spokane, and is open daily, 5 to 9:30 p.m., (509) 534-7777, www.shogunspokane.com



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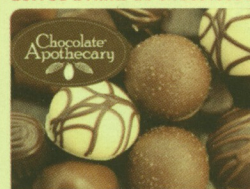
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