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"I used to trust
 my heart
 in these matters,"




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RESTAURANTS

EATERS' DIGEST . T.C. READER SUMMER BOOKS
 ISSUE . VOL 21 #1018 . PUBLISHED 6/7/00

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Udon Utopia

by [Dara Moskowitz](#)

Tanpopo Noodle Shop
 367 Selby Ave., St. Paul;
 (651) 228-9967
Hours: Lunch: Tuesday-Friday 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m.; Saturday-Sunday noon-2:30 p.m.; Dinner: Tuesday-Thursday 5 p.m.-8:30 p.m.; Friday-Saturday 5 p.m.-9 p.m.; Sunday 5 p.m.-8:30 p.m. No credit cards, cash or check only.



Image by [TONY NELSON](#)

"I can't believe people are standing out in the rain waiting," I observed to my friend one hot and cold Saturday afternoon during a downpour, sitting near the window at the new Japanese noodle shop Tanpopo. My friend shot me a look: "They've got an awning." She waved dismissively at the damp outsiders, and I was taken aback by her sudden, uncharacteristic flair of Marie Antoinettish indifference. But then I realized she had seen what I hadn't: Our steaming bowls of noodles approaching from the kitchen. There are times a girl wants to think about the misfortunes of others, but that time is not when a bowl of hot, chewy noodles is landing.

Those noodles were excellent: The udon noodles, made from wheat flour and resembling familiar Italian pasta, as light and springy as could be; the soba noodles, made from heartier, dark brown, purple-tinged buckwheat flour, chewy and resilient. The noodles are most likely what the outsiders were waiting for, since Tanpopo is a noodle shop, and the majority of the very modest menu showcases udon or soba served with various toppings, such as vegetable



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or shrimp tempura, beef, mushrooms, chicken, or all of the above, for between \$5.50 and \$8. From the combinations I tried, I can particularly recommend the vegetable tempura with soba noodles (\$7.50) since the frothy, fried cap of sweet onions contrasted beautifully with the iron-tasting noodles and salty broth; and also the wild mushroom udon (\$7), as the mushrooms are the perfect foil for the tender udon noodles. I was less happy with the beef noodle dishes (\$7), since I found the soup--which bears a family resemblance to sweet and salty sukiyaki--to be too salty, though a liberal addition of shichimi, the seven-spice red-chili-based spice mixture served to every table, gave it a new dimension. The nabeyaki udon (\$8), the most deluxe offering, arrives in a covered tureen; lift the lid to reveal noodles adorned with shrimp tempura, slices of chicken, various mushrooms, fresh-cut vegetables, a few slices of tamago (the sweet Japanese omelet) and bright pink slices of fish-cake balls.

It's a beautiful sight, and an enormous meal, but perhaps not as refined as the purer preparations of noodle. In fact, partaking of the plainest meal at Tanpopo, such as an order of plain noodles with scallions (\$5.50) paired with a pot of green tea (\$1.50), feels like a cleansing feast, or a moment out of time--perhaps in some far-off spa. The soothing dusty-lemon walls and attractive crockery and serving dishes only add to this luxuriously spare aesthetic.

Perhaps this is why this little storefront across from W.A. Frost & Company is generating surprising crowds. The rush of popularity is troubling to owner and chef Koshiki Yonemura: A native of Kyushu, in southern Japan, she has worked at a number of restaurants in Japan and is also a veteran of local Japanese spots Kikugawa and Origami. Yonemura was hoping to have a quiet, unpublicized start to her restaurant when she opened her doors in March but instead was flooded with unwanted limelight, and waiting crowds, nearly from the moment she opened. "It's been sort of crazy," she says. "People are waiting and waiting, I feel bad, I feel terrible. I hate to have people waiting outside. Is there any way you could not write about us?"

What, and deny local vegetarians, vegans, and health-foodies the chance to dine at a new restaurant? No way. For that is one of the ways that Tanpopo most

distinguishes itself: Lax vegetarians, which is to say those willing to eat stock made with bonito (or dried tuna flakes) will find much to eat here, and there are quite a few options for vegans, including simply having the noodles and toppings without broth, or ordering the tofu-teishoku meal (\$7), a platter of fried tofu, rice, miso soup, a green salad, and little side of spinach salad. Of course, vegans will have to hand off their miso soup, made, again, with bonito, to a local omnivore--but no one ever said being a vegan was easy. To ease the pain, I recommend the all-vegetable sushi roll (\$5) made, on my visits, with cucumber and avocado, which might not sound exciting, except that the roll is made fresh to order, is the perfect room temperature, and is thoroughly addictive. A California roll, made with surimi--that sweet, pink, processed fish cake, and avocado (\$5)--was equally good. Either roll makes a fine appetizer to share. The two other appetizers are both vegan: Edamame, the boiled soybeans (\$2.50), and a salad of sesame-dressed spinach (\$2.50).

Unfortunately, I grow weary of edamame without a beer or sake to break up the saltiness, but when I asked Yonemura whether she plans to get a beer and wine license for her new, tiny, 30-seat restaurant, she made an unforgettable noise that made me feel terrifically guilty--it was a noise I recognize from long ago, when I once asked a sword-juggling tightrope acrobat if she would throw her swords up higher, the better to help me open a particularly annoying pickle jar. I felt just terrible as Yonemura, whose hands have been full as oceans since she opened her spot in March, explained all the physical modifications to the building, such as adding restrooms, she would have to make to qualify for a beer and wine license. But I didn't feel bad for long: She'll work it out, I thought. After all, she's got lots of good noodles, a scrupulous control of the deceptively simple dishes that emerge from her tiny kitchen and, of course, that sheltering awning.

TABLEHOPPING

CUTE CHEF ALERT: Few chefs possess the cutie-pie chubby cheeks, aw-shucks charm, and deadly skills with a sauté pan that Eric Scherwinski, longtime chef at the Napa Valley Grill, has. That's why so few chefs have the utterly devoted, giggly, bona fide groupies that Scherwinski can draw around him with a mere tilt of his menu. Alas, Scherwinski

has left the mall, having landed the spot as executive chef at long languishing Lord Fletcher's. "But Eric!" I cried, snaring him on the phone one afternoon in his new kitchen: "How could you? What about the groupies?" "They're crying now!" hoots Scherwinski, and suddenly I can picture them all, women who wanted nothing more than good wine, great food, and a little charm, tearing their manicures out in the now-desolate halls of the Mall of America. "No, seriously though," said Scherwinski. "They've already found me--and I've only been here two weeks. I see more of them every day, those familiar faces. And not to worry: Things will be busy here all summer, but by the time the fall rolls around we'll be doing the wine dinners and wine lunches--it'll be better than ever." For the meantime, Scherwinski just debuted his new menu, and from the sounds of it, it maintains the same extravagant American style he made a name with at the NVG. Look for a double-thick pork chop stuffed with leeks and portobello mushrooms in a cider-bourbon sauce, served with golden potato succotash; or a breast of chicken, pounded thin and rolled around a filling of andouille sausage Monterey Jack cheese, oven roasted and served with dirty rice and crayfish étouffée. My fears about the groupies allayed, I tried to press Scherwinski into telling me why the California Café and sister Napa Valley Grill seem to be actively trying to have less exciting menus and to be less enticing to non-mall crowds. "The new ownership in California is trying to make [the Napa Valley Grilles and the California Cafés] all the same, so if you go to one in one city you'll have the same experience you'd have in any other city. Except that here, here we used to have a niche. People came to ours and said it was better than the one out in Napa. The new corporate ownership didn't want that anymore. It bummed me out." Bummed him out how? As in the new ownership wouldn't let him cook to his ability? Scherwinski wouldn't say (what a gentleman!): "Let's just say I have free rein in my kitchen again." Can't wait to join the adoring, albeit reoriented, masses? Visit Lord Fletcher's on Lake Minnetonka, 3746 Sunset Dr., Spring Park, (612) 471-8513, www.lordfletchers.com.

XXXX ADULTS ONLY: Beer aficionados are advised to make their way, posthaste and preferably by bus or limo, to Sherlock's Home, in Minnetonka, for proprietor Bill Burdock is putting out, for a very limited time only, a beer that will knock your socks off: "It's SOB--I tell people it's the only beer named

for me," laughs Burdock. "No really, it's a Special Old Bitter, and what's notable is that it's the beer that Michael Jackson [the famed beer writer and hops guru] has said is the best British bitter in the U.S. It's a high-gravity bitter, and it's delicious--but we also have a love-hate relationship with it. The X's stand for strength, and a four-X--well, let's just say it's a wee bit stronger than ordinary beer, and so we have to be extra-mindful of what people are drinking. It can sneak up on you quite dramatically." Expect the supply of Sherlock's XXXX SOB to last until about mid-June. After that the beer, aged for three months in wooden casks, will be gone until this time next year. And speaking of next year, will there be a more urban Sherlock's in the new millennium? "Oh heavens no, no, no, no," says Burdock. "I take regular shots to immunize against that. The highways are littered with people who thought they'd open a second place." Sigh. Sherlock's Home, 11000 Red Circle Dr., Minnetonka, (612) 931-0203.

TIME-WASTING TIP: Bunky, do you find yourself just drowning in extra time you can't possibly fill? Well have I got the solution for you: Speed your way to eBay (www.ebay.com) and try to search for old Minnesota restaurant memorabilia. It's fun and not particularly easy! The trick is to search in the collectibles part of the site for things from Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Minnesota, and hoo boy, let the good times roll! Lately I found: A picture postcard from the Ranch House, a chartreuse-green restaurant at 79th and Lyndale in Minneapolis (which is interesting on a couple of levels--first, because 79th and Lyndale is now Richfield, and second, because 79th and Lyndale is now in roughly in the middle of 494, but mostly because they had such a great slogan: "Food & Environment Dedicated to You."); a large tin spatula stamped with the slogan "Miss Minneapolis: The Distinctly Better Flour"; a half-dozen goose-quill toothpicks (!) from the Huddle Restaurant and Lounge, formerly at 101 E. Hennepin Ave. (across the street from Nye's?); postcards from St. Paul's Grotto Lounge and Minneapolis's Bird Cage Lounge, and--my favorite--a shot glass from the California Wine House, which, judging by the engraving was "Established in 1852" served "the Highest Quality Liquors" and was located at 29 Washington Ave. S. And Bunky, if you've got as much spare pocket change as you do time, you can buy all these sorts of things, almost all for less than \$3.

What do you think?

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