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Tanpopo Noodle Shop

by Ingrid Skjong

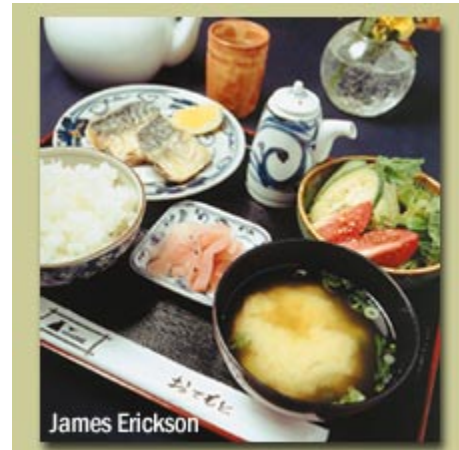
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This feature has not been edited or updated since its original publication.

In a world of showy open kitchens and cavernous dining spaces, sometimes something smaller and quieter hits the spot. So when we stepped into the celadon-hued, shoe-box-sized Tanpopo Noodle Shop, it felt as though we'd walked into somebody's dining room during dinner—in a good way.

Perched at the end of a quiet block in St. Paul's Cathedral Hill neighborhood, Tanpopo specializes in traditional Japanese noodle dishes made with wheat-flour udon noodles—long, springy, and akin to linguine—and chewier soba made from heartier buckwheat. Swimming in large pottery bowls of fragrant broths made with bonito (tuna) and kombu (kelp) flake stocks, they're a simple treat—and by the mix of couples, small groups, and even a toddler or two, one that's catching on.

Owner Koshiki Yonemura—a native of southern Japan and a veteran of the kitchen at Origami—opened her seven-table restaurant in March, attracting a following almost immediately. During both our weekend-

**Tanpopo Noodle Shop**

367 Selby Avenue,
St. Paul; 651-228-9967.

Entrées \$5.50–\$8. Lunch 11:30 a.m.–2:00 p.m. Tuesday–Friday; noon–2:30 p.m. Saturday–Sunday. Dinner 5:00–8:30 p.m. Tuesday–Thursday and Sunday, –9:00 p.m. Friday–Saturday. Wheelchair accessible.

Tips for Diners**If you go:**

Parking on street. Be prepared for a wait at peak times. No credit cards.

The experience:

A tiny storefront Japanese noodle shop serving traditional noodle dishes, sushi rolls, appetizers, and a small selection of desserts. Quiet atmosphere.

evening visits, as many as ten diners were patiently waiting under the restaurant's navy blue awning by six o'clock, peering through the large front window and poised to nab a fresh-flower-topped blond-wood table or a seat at the four-stool bar.

The small seasonal menu featured eight entrées and six appetizers. We enjoyed the nine-piece avocado, cucumber, and crab-meat California rolls, as well as the avocado and cuke vegetarian versions, paired with wasabi and pickled ginger. The lightly salted edamame (boiled soybean pods) disappeared quickly, and the boiled spinach tossed with soy sauce and toasty sesame seeds was a hit.

What you really come here for are the noodles, of course, which can be mixed and matched with five of the entrées. Shrimp tempura soba (vegetable is also available) yields large, nicely done shrimp amid scallions and mushrooms, while the beef udon's thin, tender strips of beef bobbed alongside green onions and spinach in a slightly sweet, salty broth. The tender teriyaki-chicken udon was comforting—like a soy-and-ginger-tinged take on chicken and dumplings.

Nabeyaki udon, the most complex dish on the menu, comes in a large tureen mingling with tempura shrimp, slices of chicken, shiitake mushrooms, two rounds of sweet Japanese omelet, spinach, and slices of rubbery, hot-pink-rimmed fish cakes in a golden broth. Each component retains its own flavor within the aromatic broth, and it's fun to fish around for the next bite.

The wild-mushroom soba with spinach, green onions, and a sliver of omelet was earthy and good, but seemed a bit low on mushrooms. Purists will appreciate the plain soba or udon garnished with nothing more than green onions and perhaps a sprinkle from the pot of seven-spiced, red-chili-flake-based shichimi on each table. Served in large bowls, the entrées looked daunting, but we slurped to our hearts' content.

Along with noodles, Tanpopo offers two teishoku meals—one served with tofu, the other, on our visit, mackerel. Each is elegantly served on a tray with rice, miso soup, and a winner of a romaine-lettuce, cucumber, and ripe-tomato salad in a tasty soy-sauce/ sesame-seed dressing. The deep-fried mackerel was greaseless but proved too salty; the tofu alternative came with a bowl of silky, deep-fried tofu cubes in a deep, rich broth garnished with green onions, bonito flakes, and ginger.

Wine- and beerless, the restaurant relies on sodas, juices, and four teas, including oolong and jasmine. The green tea is imported exclusively for Tanpopo, and the genmai—green tea with toasted brown-rice kernels—was as savory as promised. Desserts consisted of delicious ginger and green-tea ice creams and decadent truffles, including amaretto and raspberry, from Just Truffles on Grand Avenue. The pair of polite, soft-spoken young servers had a good handle on the menu and were efficient

as they slipped back and forth through the kitchen's fabric curtains. Food comes amazingly fast yet well paced, and even when eager diners began backing up outside, we never felt rushed.

Casual intimacy like that should keep Tanpopo's tiny space filled, and although the lack of a waiting area could be a problem come winter, these noodles might just be worth the chilly wait. n

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