

WABI SABI

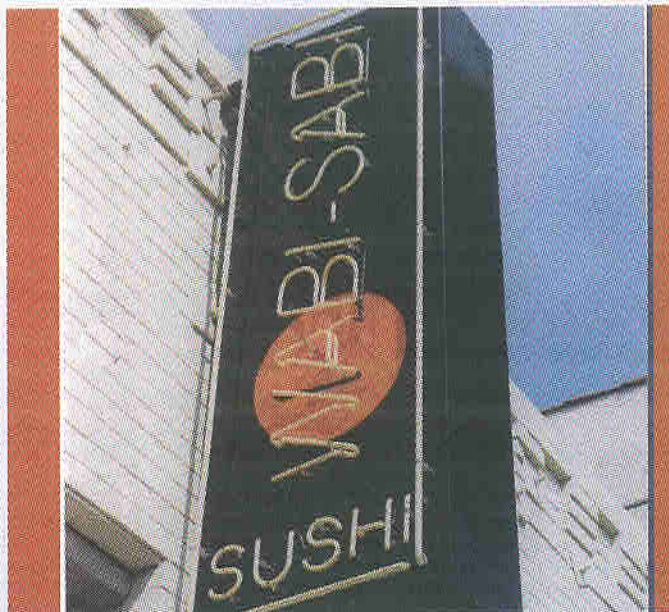
CALIFORNIA CONFUSION

BY CARLA FISCHER

Mahogany frames the handsome door, inviting us into the restaurant Wabi Sabi. Wabi Sabi refers to a traditional Japanese architectural concept: wabi means “down to earth” or “natural goodness,” and the sensitivity which went into an arrangement intended to heighten the tranquil atmosphere produced by wabi was called sabi... perfection in imperfection. Wabi Sabi is a year old fast-rising star, shining bright on Abbot Kenny Boulevard in Venice. Stephanie Talpis and Robert Schwann, are two out of five talented, enterprising locals comprising a team that got together and created Wabi Sabi. They talked with Malibu Monthly Magazine about the conception and evolution of their innovative Pacific Rim eclectic restaurant. These highly-skilled and creative partners reflect their diversity of backgrounds and styles that spell out a harmonious and successful design formula that ultimately ends up pleasing the well-tuned palates of the customers. The old Come Back Inn (for the rock 'n rollers of Venice history) got a modern face lift that enhances the superior presentation of the cuisine, including a first-class high-quality sushi bar in the first room, like a train, connecting to the second, fresh air room that opens to a third dining area, showcasing various local artists (presently slice of life photos of Cuba). They haven't missed a trick, as they offer sushi delights such as 'Wabi Sabi' rolled in green wrap instead of black nori, filled with cooked salmon, whitefish and tuna and something sweet and crispy, among a large variety of exotic sushi offerings. In addition to their sushi menu, a hard to choose from hot menu stirs the imagination of the pallet, such as teriyaki and lime infused grilled baby-back ribs, delectable bouillabaisse, elegant simplicity of miso or squash soups, and to top off the meal are luscious desserts such as green tea crème brullée among other high-temptation delights.

The members of this collaboration team include Stephanie Talpis, the master of food presentation and taster. Early on, she had a little art gallery (she has a master's degree in ceramics) on Melrose. She always loved food, especially the styling and arranging of the food which led to Off the Wall catering and now catering for Wabi Sabi.

Robert Schwan is the high energy manager who maintains the in-sync, lively pace so key to running a smooth, consistently high-quality operation, with the main focus on serving superb



THEY OFFER SUSHI DELIGHTS SUCH AS 'WABI SABI' ROLLED IN GREEN WRAP INSTEAD OF BLACK NORI, FILLED WITH COOKED SALMON, WHITEFISH AND TUNA AND SOMETHING SWEET AND CRISPY, AMONG A LARGE VARIETY OF EXOTIC SUSHI OFFERINGS

cuisine and service to the patrons. He brings years of managerial experience from L.A.'s top restaurants. He is also a talented photographer, handling some of the P.R. and graphics for Wabi-Sabi, aided by his experience as a promoter in the music industry.

Marcus Villa Gran, contributes his visual expertise in the form of masterfully-crafted ceramics and design knowledge.

Peter Trias is in charge of the visuals/graphics and restaurant design. He originally bought the property. He grew-up in NYC and has a lot of NY style, savvy and sensitivities, and really saw how it would work.

Bruce Horowitz is maestro techie, foodie and primary liaison to the sushi set up.

STEPHANIE TALPIS AND ROBERT SCHAWAN CONTINUE TO DISCUSS THE SEEDS, GROWTH AND VISIONS OF PROJECT WABI SABI:

ST: At this point in time, it's a year to the day and we're in the black. Some little struggles along the way, but really minor compared to the horror stories you hear in the restaurant business.

CF: What was it like in the beginning?

ST: Everything was here.

RS: The building had vaulted ceilings...brick, qualities you don't get much in L.A. in older buildings that are preserved, so it was fun that Peter had that to work with and he knew what to do to design it and maintain the integrity of the building. It was amazing that it really worked, and it was so great to see someone do it for so little money. It really feels like a neighborhood place and that's so rare in Los Angeles.

ST: It's really been fun. At first, we thought of doing three different restaurants and then, as we all got to know and like each other, so I said "Why don't we do just one big restaurant?" We began to get the permits and the rest is history.

CF: You have quality food and good recipes and you are becoming a household word... people keep coming back. How do you maintain your consistency in quality and service?

RS: The cool thing about this place that I love about it, and that's different for me from other places, is in other places there's a whole caste system to running a restaurant. I like all things to be equal; being with people and serving people what you have to offer. Who you are is not an issue. Everybody is treated the same here.

CF: You've gone through some incarnations in developing your menu. How have you accomplished this?

ST: We want to keep the menu fresh, the tried and true we keep. We know right away what works and what doesn't.

RS: We've brought in consultants. We've worked with Kasuto, one of the original chefs from Chinois. We tend to simplify and break recipes down. We have straightforward tastes, food that people can eat a couple of times a week... you can count on it. We developed a kind of Wabi Sabi 'way' of looking at things.

CF: What would you term your style of food?

ST and RS: The restaurant has been a very good combination of all of our tastes... 'Californian Confusion' or 'Fusion Comfort Food'.



ST: We want to keep things drop-dead fresh, and using seasonal and healthy choices of ingredients.

CF: Robert, do you like to cook?

RS: I like to be on the floor. I like to party and be with the people.

CF: You made me feel very comfortable one evening when I was here. I can't wait to come back. You've been in Venice for years and have seen a lot of changes.

RS: In the 80's, there were the 'first settlers' who tried to start businesses on Abbot Kinney, but soon said, 'Not yet.' Now in the last five years, you can have a good business here. There's an audience for it. People can walk down from the neighborhood. It's 'bohemian edge'. It'll never be Beverly Hills or Brentwood; it's just not that 'style' of people.

CF: I celebrate your continuing success and am refreshed to see your collaboration work so well.

RS: Our commitment to our customers has always been perfectly clear...we don't run from criticism, but embrace it, because we're dedicated, and we've never stopped striving to make it a more enjoyable dining experience. I think the main thing we all share is there are no pretentious people involved in this. It's a real Venice project.

TO CONTACT FOR MORE INFORMATION / RESERVATIONS:

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