Number

143

SUSHI HAYAKAWA

written & photographed by **CHRISTINE KIRK**









WITH HIS TRADEMARK RED CLOTH tied around his head, I observed Chef Atsushi "Art" Hayakawa slice cuts of fish with surgical precision. I asked him about his knife, a long, thin blade of Japanese steel. He informed me that it cost a mere $1,400. "No one touches," he elaborated with a smile. You know how chefs can be about their knives.

Chef Hayakawa is the mastermind behind Sushi Hayakawa and the real deal concerning the art of sushi. Whether you're at the six-person sushi bar, or you've landed a spot at one of the five small tables, you'll come to understand why *Men's Journal* included this little spot on Buford Highway on their list of the "12 Most Authentic Sushi Restaurants in America." Considering reservations book weeks in advance, it seems it has earned its notoriety.

Born in Hokkaido, the second largest island of Japan, Hayakawa began his path toward becoming a renowned sushi chef when he was just 15. Years of hard work and apprenticeships paid off in 1988 when he received his Sushi Chef qualification certificate. He moved to Atlanta in 1991 and eventually decided to open his own restaurant in 2008 hoping to expand sushi culture in Atlanta, while also providing a traditional experience for other Japanese expatriates.

Hayakawa imports fresh fish from the famous Tsukiji seafood market in Tokyo via a trusted vendor who acts as his eyes and ears overseas. He receives updates and photos of the daily catches, which allow him to focus on seasonal and Japanese

specialties. I recommend ordering the Omakase, the chef's special tasting menu. You'll get the best of Hayakawa's creativity and ingredients this way. However, you can order a la carte if you prefer. Just don't ask for a California roll, as those Americanized versions have been sworn off in favor of more authentic tastes at Sushi Hayakawa.

Considering the most important element of great sushi, Hayakawa explained that, "sushi is all about balance." Using the metaphor of mixing colors, he stressed the importance of balance between the rice and the fish as well as its quality. His Japanese customers are particularly complimentary of his sushi rice. "People that know sushi know that sushi rice is very important," he said.

Sitting dead center at the bar, I watched Hayakawa work as he guided me through a round of sashimi, which included the best tuna I've ever tasted and paper-thin slices of tender Hokkaido octopus that tasted fresh from the ocean. Next, his perfectly prepared sushi rice was a conduit for delicate pieces of striped jack and Japanese snapper. Be careful with the fresh wasabi served on the side; a little goes a long way.

This is more than dinner; it's a special event for your palate. Plan to spend between two and three hours here. Hayakawa prepares all the sushi himself. There's no need to go crazy with the soy sauce either. You'll be advised on which pieces should be dipped, and which should not. Let him guide you with his expertise and craftsmanship, and you'll be rewarded with the most ideal flavors and textures.

It's no surprise that Hayakawa has had multiple offers to take his skills to New York, but he remains devoted to his current home. "Why would I do that?" he asked. "For money? For my ego? I don't want that." He has developed an allegiance to his customers, as they have to him, and he doesn't intend to abandon them. For that, we're grateful. PN

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