

East Meets West — And Conquers

by Ani Rubin

AAA Miyabi
Navrátilova 10, Prague 1.
Tel. 29 53 76.
Open Mon.–Fri. 11 a.m.–11 p.m.,
Sat. noon–11 p.m. No credit cards.
125–300 Kč.

Japanese food in Prague, authentically prepared, made affordable. This feat has been pulled off by a Czech woman, married to a Japanese man, who recently returned to Prague after living in Japan for many years. Although certain costly items have been left off the menu to keep prices down (such as the much loved raw fish sushi — a great disappointment to those for whom sushi and Japanese cuisine are inextricably linked), diners will find that Miyabi has a great deal to offer for a minimal investment.

Diners can choose between a traditional Japanese dining room or the more “Western” front room, which is nevertheless imbued with Japanese ambience. Tall cherrywood shelves hold beautiful Japanese ceramics and books on Japanese culture. The tables and chairs are of matching cherrywood. The ceiling is a mosaic of gold, and the menu is a work of art in itself: rough natural brown paper binds separate accordion drink and food menus; they are held together by a paper sleeve with Miyabi written in red calligraphy across it.

Food presentation is an art in Japan. At Miyabi they understand this too. Japanese meals come lovingly packed in lacquered boxes or artfully presented on handsome Japanese ceramic plates. Chopsticks are the only utensils offered.

Miyabi offers international and vegetarian in addition to Japanese cuisine. The Japanese offerings are mixed in throughout the menu, which can make it difficult to follow. *Makizushi* and *onigiri* are listed under the rice heading. Both are built of a filling surrounded by sticky, short-grain

rice, all held together by paper-thin sheets of seaweed (*nori*). The dark green color and crunchy texture of the seaweed add visual and textural contrast to the soft white rice. *Makizushi* can be ordered with a filling of either egg and vegetables or fish and vegetables. Three pieces are served with soy sauce and grated ginger on the side. *Onigiri* comes as a single rice pyramid. Among the fillings available is *slosh umeboshi*, a fruit unique to Asia. It looks something like a cherry or small plum, but has a flavor not sweet or sour, but salty. Poor families used to press their tongues against the fruit and follow with a bite of rice, in hopes that its saltiness would satisfy cravings for costly fish or meat.

Misoshiru is a soup made from crushed and fermented soybeans. Miso paste is very important in the Japanese diet and miso soup is frequently served for breakfast. Small cubes of tofu are added to the soup. *Tori jiru*, the other Japanese soup on the menu, is a light chicken essence flavored with pieces of chicken, carrots and mushrooms.

Obentō (boxed meals) are available in small or large portions for lunch; large only for dinner. When the waitress set the beautiful lacquered box down before me, it was like receiving a present. The surprise was heightened because I had no idea what would be inside — the contents are not described on the menu. The treasure box was filled with *jakibuta* (neat marinated pork rolled with leeks), *hirjodzu* (fried balls of tofu accompa-

nied by Japanese rice sprinkled with sesame seeds), and shredded carrots in a sesame dressing. All of these items can also be ordered à la carte.

Two kinds of *tempura* were offered: vegetable, available all day; and vegetable and fish, from the dinner menu alone. Both used local ingredients deep fried in a light, crisp batter. *Karaage*, pieces of chicken marinated in ginger and then fried in a light tempura batter, was served on bok choy (Chinese cabbage) with a shredded carrot and sesame salad and lemon. I could not detect the ginger flavor, but the chicken was very refreshing with fresh lemon squeezed on top.

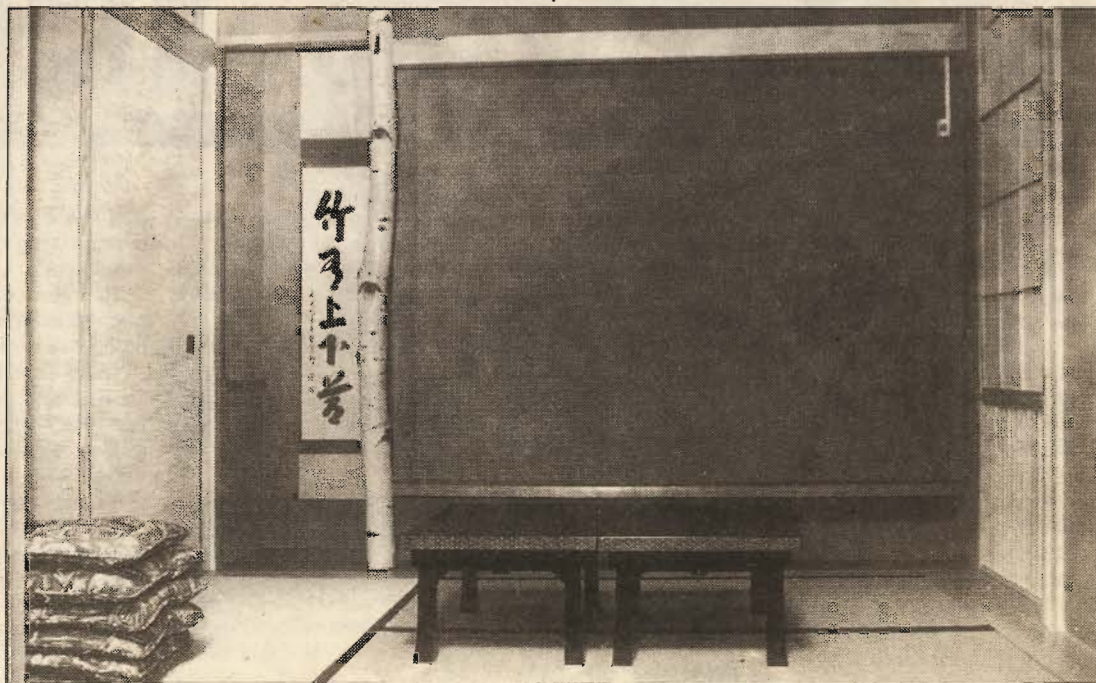
Japanese tea, or sake served warm, makes the

perfect finishing touch.

From the international options, I tried the homemade spinach noodles with cream sauce and mushrooms — a disappointment, bland and served with canned mushrooms. I'll stick to the Japanese choices from now on.

Desserts are from the West. The cheesecake was not the dessert the Americans invented. It was heavy, but had good flavor. Carrot cake and apple strudel were also offered.

I used to doubt that an affordable Japanese restaurant could be done well in a land far from the sea. I eat my words, for Miyabi has managed to do just that.



Traditional Japanese furnishings accentuate the authenticity of Miyabi.