

EAST MEETS LEX



*Tomo and Its Vibrant Owner
Energize Lexington's Sushi Scene*



By Louis Guida | Photos by Lee P. Thomas

On a Friday night in January, Tomo is a full canvas. It's eight o'clock. A crowd of mostly young professionals — some with preschoolers in tow — and college students settles in. A buzz of chat bounces off sleek wood tables and banquettes. A sushi chef pivots. A young wait staff is in edamame mode. And behind the bar register the master of the scene, Cha Tamura, the restaurant's longtime owner and manager, presides over every detail.

Sushi chef Hiroshi Aoyagi (left) and assistant Everardo Estebun prepare for a busy night.

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Tamura returns to her register and pours drinks — she's the bartender. The front entry hostess rushes up to tell her a 16-top hasn't arrived and hasn't responded to phone calls. The table is deconstructed and soon occupied by a party of eight.

"Somebody clean table 17," Tamura tells her waiters while uncorking a bottle of Riesling. "Table 8 needs tempura and sushi. And ask them if they want more soy sauce and wasabi." A runner on his first night training to be a waiter walks out with a rice order in the wrong color bowl. Tamura catches the mistake and stops him. "You need to double-check," she tells him. "Did you double-check?"

The rush continues. Tamura clears plates at the sushi bar and picks a scrap of paper from the floor on her return to her register. A recently former waiter comes up to say hello after dinner with his parents. It's his birthday, and he knows some of the current wait staff and, of course, Tamura. Empty bottles multiply. Receipts are filed in an open plastic box. Tables turn. Orders keep coming. The back of the restaurant stays on focus. Up front it feels like a party of friends.

Tomo, written up in a 2003 *Gourmet* magazine article and often voted best sushi in Lexington in local papers and periodicals, is the bricks-and-mortar and culinary reflection of its owner. Cha Tamura's staff and customers know that. So does she, but she doesn't promote the idea. She values her privacy, content to remain the ubiquitous wizard behind it all.

Tamura isn't a typical Japanese restaurant owner. She's a native Korean, for starters, and she grew up when Japanese and traditional Korean cultures, including culinary ones, "were mixed up a lot," a residue of Japan's 1910-1945 colonial occupation of Korea. Japanese and Korean food have similarities — sashimi is one — Tamura says, and she's familiar with both. "There are 22 Japanese restaurants in Lexington. A lot of competition. Japanese food has to be authentic, and my food is. My Japanese cooks know that."

Tamura is a bootstraps person. Now 45 — "I'm way up there; I used to be young" — she was born in Seoul, the youngest of seven daughters.

Her father left soon after she was born and she describes her childhood as "a story right out of Pearl Buck." She thinks her mother owned a store and remembers the family living fairly comfortably. Her mother died when Tamura was 13, and after that she stayed with older sisters.

"I always had a good personality, but studying and college were not my thing," Tamura says. "There was no life in Korea then if you had no college and no parents."

At 20 she came to the United States and stayed with a sis-



Owner Cha Tamura ensures that Tomo runs smoothly and that her staff provides an exacting standard of service.

As customers mingle, Tamura sorts out a martini order — dry or dirty — with a waiter and spots a couple walking through the back entry corridor, looking for a table. They're regulars, and they're carrying their 2-month old daughter in a portable car seat.

"Oh, a baby!" Tamura says. She quickly resolves the martini order — it's dry — and walks over to the parents. "She looks like you," she tells the father, and directs a waiter to seat the couple. "And bring them wine and sake on the house."

ter living in Colorado. There she met and married an American engineer from Lexington. “I was 22 or 23, in a rush,” Tamura recalled. After a move to Lexington, two children (both girls), and five years, the couple divorced.

To support herself and her children, she cared for the mother of a friend and later opened a house-cleaning business. After about four years of that, she took a job as a waitress at Sushi Zen, a small Japanese restaurant in Lexington’s Woodhill neighborhood. Within five years she’d become the restaurant’s manager and wife of its Japanese owner-chef, Tomohiro Tamura.

In 2001 the couple closed Sushi Zen and opened Tomo. The transition — from a popular, four-table, 50-seat, off-the-beaten-track dollar-night sushi place to an upscale 100-seat restaurant in trendy Chevy Chase — was risky. But Tomo soon took off and secured its place among the city’s leading Japanese restaurants. The Tamuras’ marriage, however, didn’t survive. After a few years Tomo Tamura “burned out,” says Cha, and eventually left Lexington.


Cha Tamura, now with three children (she and Tomo had a son), doubled down on her business. She kept Hiroshi Aoyagi, Tomo’s Japanese chef, behind the sushi bar. (He’s still there, helped by now longtime assistant Everardo Estebun.) Almost all else outside the sushi bar and kitchen, she delegated to herself. “I do everything. Run food to tables. Hostess. Open the computer. I’m everywhere.”

With up to 200 diners on a weekend night, Tamura obviously doesn’t operate her restaurant alone. She has about eight full-time and 24 part-time employees, including a wait staff of college students, mostly from the University of Kentucky, whom Tamura trains with a management style that mixes a little Oprah with a lot of Gordon Ramsey. “A server must control kitchen food and the sushi bar. It takes training. I don’t let them use notepads because they need to remember. Their job description is serving. Customers aren’t serving them. They’re serving customers.

“It’s a struggle sometimes to train them. I’m hard on them. I tell them, ‘I’m not your mother, your grandmother, your aunt. So don’t look to me for sympathy, for comfort. Don’t lean on my shoulder.’ Sometimes they get really nervous, but I tell them, ‘Only two people love you — your mother and Jesus. And neither of them is here tonight.’”

Waiters who survive Tamura’s cut usually work at Tomo off and on through college. (They can make \$150-200 in tips on Friday or Saturday nights.) They’ve gone on after graduation to become lawyers and doctors, Tamura says, and they often come back to say hello or have dinner, becoming part of the loyal customer base that’s the key to Tomo’s success.

“Our business is based 75 percent on repeat, regular customers,” Tamura says. She estimates that 25 percent of them are Japanese, a number that’s declined since management changes at Toyota’s Georgetown plant in recent years. The rest are American. Tomo is particularly popular with people in the horse



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industry. “They appreciate international food,” Tamura says. “When the horse business is slow, my business is slow. When it’s strong, mine is strong.” Most customers, including about 75 percent of them on weekends, come for sushi — from California and spider rolls to fried egg, flying-fish roe, and chef’s choice mats.

For Tamura, Tomo’s customers and staff create “a family situation.” That’s what sets her restaurant apart and makes it special. “I recognize people when they walk in the door. Hiro [her sushi chef] sees people come in and knows what they’ll want to eat. I’m not from here, but that makes me feel like I’m part of the community.”

Tamura says that as her January Friday night dinner rush

Tomo features an extensive menu that highlights the talents of sushi chef Aoyagi. A favorite of regular diners is the tuna and jalapeno carpaccio, above left.

winds down and the din of table talk subsides. Ten o’clock. A latecomer takes a seat at the sushi bar. A little after that, her regular customers with the 2-month-old baby leave their booth and come to say good night to Tamura, who thanks them from her spot behind her register.

“This was her first Tomo experience,” the father tells Tamura about his daughter, asleep in her portable car seat. “She really loved it ... Maybe she had too much sake. She’ll sleep well tonight.” 🐾



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