



EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

EPISODE INFORMATION

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TRANSCRIPT

Recently, Eater SF published a wide-ranging article on the Japanese culinary scene in San Mateo. The [article](#), titled, *Why San Mateo is the Best Place to eat Japanese Food in the Bay Area*, asked: What is the function of an ethnic food enclave once the cuisine in question goes mainstream and is there still any reason to endure a sometimes very long drive from San Francisco to eat in San Mateo? According to Eater SF, yes, absolutely.

San Mateo has about 40 Japanese restaurants, with most of them concentrated downtown. The article points out that San Mateo's Japanese population is small—relative to the amount of restaurants—and that's because it's a community hub and a link to more than 100 years of Japanese American history. Japanese immigrants, many of whom settled in San Mateo in the late 1800s, worked as domestic servants, gardeners, or laborers in the local salt mines. Later, many of these first-generation immigrants went on to start their own landscaping businesses and garden nurseries. Over time, grocery stores and restaurants opened to cater to the Japanese community. Takahashi Market, which opened in 1906, has been around long enough to weather the change in clientele, as the Japanese American population growth locally slowed down. The biggest portion of their business is now Hawaiian, or people who are interested in Hawaiian food. In the early 1960s, the market started carrying *lau lau*, *kalua* pork, and other Hawaiian foodstuffs to cater to the influx of Hawaiians who moved to the San Mateo area around that time.

One of the most interesting things about dining in San Mateo among a variety of different ethnic cuisines, is getting to know a cuisine well enough to understand that there are sub genres of that cuisine. An excellent example of that is the restaurant Yu Raku, which to those of us who've lived here for a while, is in the same space as the old Kaimuki Grill at 104 South El Camino.

It took me a while to get this, but Japanese-style Chinese food—known as “Chuka Ryori”—is one of the most popular cuisines in Japan. Over time many Chinese dishes have been incorporated into Japanese cuisine: ramen, gyoza or potstickers, fried rice, stir-fried noodles, and mapo tofu. It's a style that is very popular in Japan, but relatively unknown in the US. So, for the untrained eye and palate, it looks like a Japanese restaurant, but is really Chinese food the way Japanese like it in Japan. I think that I've got that right. What I can tell you is that when I ate there, I tried the Yu-Raku Mapo tofu, which was very different from the type I am used to in local Sichuan restaurants. I suspect that



EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

people who don't get the concept might not give the restaurant good reviews on Yelp, but if you're a Japanese expat missing some Japanese style Chinese food, this is the place for you.

When I "discover" a new place in San Mateo, I wonder why it took me so long to try it. A few years ago, a friend was surprised when I told her I'd never heard of Nini's coffee shop on North Idaho, which is a San Mateo local treasure. The answer to that one was easy - I'm not a big breakfast eater, and don't seek out good breakfast/brunch places like a lot of people do. And, although San Mateo is not exactly San Francisco, many people tend to get comfortable in their own neighborhoods, or go to the places that they've been going to for years. If downtown isn't really convenient, you'll try places closer to home. I'd lived in San Mateo for over 25 years before I discovered that Ravioli House on B Street has a thriving lunch hour crowd that likes the sandwiches as much as the pasta. And, I did not become a true fan of Sushi Sams for about 15 years after it opened because our family had always liked Kaimuki Grill - we liked the chef who was a jazz and Beatles fan.

Around the time the chef left Kaimuki, we discovered a small place on 37th - Yuzu Sushi. People get their favorite places, and stick with them, which is what makes the small neighborhoods around San Mateo special. The way I discovered Takahashi Market was a few years back I was parked in front of it after running an errand. It was around lunchtime, and I looked up and saw a line coming out the door, and people sitting out front eating lunch. I headed inside and first saw the Hawaiian plate lunch menu on the wall to the right of a small kitchen counter. Before I ordered, I walked around the store. I felt like I was on vacation in Hawaii, and had just popped into a local store to grab lunch before hitting the beach. Talk about authentic! Again, I wondered why it had taken so long for me to discover this gem. The family works in the store together and the atmosphere is warm and friendly.

The Eater SF article wanted to know whether it was worth the time to drive from San Francisco to San Mateo for Japanese food. Local San Mateo people might ask if it's worth the time to drive from the Highlands neighborhood to Downtown for a new dining or recreational experience. And, just like the Eater SF article concluded, yes it is. Absolutely.