

BEYOND UMAMI AT OOMA

By GINNY MATA | Photography by PIA PUNO

"Mezurashii," exclaimed a Japanese diner in wonder, while he was trying out his very first meal at Ooma Japanese Rice Bar. Translated into English, its closest meaning is "rare." There is no attempt at subtlety or suggestion at Ooma—the flavors come on bold and strong, its waves and crests of *umami* receding and descending with every bite.

True to the rock n' roll style of Chef Bruce Ricketts of Mecha Uma fame, this addition to The Moment Group of Restaurants uses Japanese techniques and ingredients to produce unique flavors suited to the Filipino palate. Its clientele mostly includes young foodies, or those who see the experience of dining out as an adventure. There are many fried items on the menu, such as taco makis, *aburi* makis and *donburis*. However, this doesn't mean it's like fast food, or at least the flat, one-dimensional way that we perceive fast food to be. Far from it.

Sous chef Liezl Enriquez has the daunting task of consistently translating Chef Bruce's complex vision on the diners' plates every single day. "We're doing constant *mise en place*," she says, "with about 25 to 30 sauces that need to be prepped regularly." One look at the menu, with its detailed list of elements for every dish, lets the diner know of the many gastronomic surprises that await her. Despite these contrasting and complementary textures and flavors, the end result is not muddled at all. "Similar to the

way Chef Bruce did things in his first restaurant, Sensei Sushi," Maita Quesada of the Moment Group affirms, "it all comes together in the end."

The best way to start is with Uma Viche, a dish that reminds one of refreshing *kinilaw*, using *lapu-lapu* (brought in fresh everyday), its necessary tartness and piquancy supplied by Ooma's unique ceviche dressing, pickled carrots and red onions, and punctuated by the satisfying crunch of *kangkong* tempura.

What's representative of the signature Western-Japanese fusion style of Ooma is the Salmon Skin *Aburi* Maki. "It's for people who don't actually like to eat raw sashimi, or who are sensitive to raw food," says Chef Liezl. Using the *aburi* (torch) method, salmon is lightly seared, its skin made crispy. It's the perfect bite: one is able to discern the smokiness of the *aburi* salmon, the unctuousness of cream cheese, and the clean, vegetal taste of asparagus, all coming through quite clearly.

Thus when one comes to Ooma, one must be prepared to experience *mezurashii*, or this wide, unique range of gustatory sensations. There's nowhere else quite like it here, so it certainly delivers on its promise of a bold, new and unorthodox approach to Japanese cuisine. **■**

3/F Mega Fashion Hall, SM Megamall, Mandaluyong,
(02) 656-4591

BOLD AND MODERN FLAVORS (Clockwise from top) Crispy Salmon Skin *Aburi* Maki; the Tsujuki market-inspired interiors; Uma Viche inspired by *kinilaw*; Buta Kakuni Katsudon, a classic with a twist; Corn & Oyster Kakiage, best enjoyed hot; spicy O-Gyoza with cream cheese

