

Sakura Teppanyaki and Sushi

At Sakura Teppanyaki and Sushi, the food is fresh and the chef is a showman. These are the pillars of teppanyaki, a Japanese style of cooking characterized by raw, fresh ingredients cooked tableside on a large iron griddle. Pyrotechnics, sleight of hand, and chopping at hyperspeed are all used as a teppanyaki chef transforms raw seafood, meat and vegetables into seasoned morsels. Raw eggs are juggled between spatulas before being scrambled into a heart-shaped mound of fried rice and razor-thin vegetables. Teppanyaki is tableside theater.

In Redwood City there are two Sakuras offering the flair of teppanyaki—Sakura (2198 Broadway St.) which opened in 2011 and Sakura 2 (373 Main St.), opened in 2014. Conventional wisdom may warn against two restaurants within a half of a mile of each other, but for the Vu family—brothers Tim and Thanh, and Thanh's wife, Rose Tran, the numbers of guests turned away from the downtown restaurant justified the risk. According to Tim Vu, risk is not something from which his family shies away.

"We're used to taking risks," he said with a smile. Almost on cue, a column of fire shot up from the griddle, warming the air and spitting a crackling soundtrack. With less drama but just as much presentation, a plate of bright pink salmon roe sushi is delivered, each piece placed to create a flower on the plate. Tim continued to explain that the family's embrace of risk began in Vietnam.

"It took me 22 tries to escape Vietnam," he said with a laugh. "The first time was 1979. I was nine years old. My dad and I were caught and jailed. I was only there for sixty days, but my dad was there for six months, because he had fought for the United States during the (Vietnam) war." A family of seven, the Vus had to escape



Tim Vu

separately, but each knew the final destination: Memphis, Tennessee.

"We had a cousin in Memphis," Tim explained. He was 14 years old when he spent a year alone in a Malaysian refugee camp, waiting for the United States to verify that his father had indeed been on the American side in the war. "I still remember the day I landed. It was February 1985 and I had never seen snow." He paused for a moment to take a sip of a cold Sapora beer. "I got off of the plane and started running to my family. Those were the days people could walk right up to the gate. I hit some ice and slipped and fell right on my back." Tim chuckled at the memory.

The Vu family settled into American life, doing everything possible to make ends meet. Tim and Thanh's father became a teppanyaki chef at the famed Benihana, and the teenaged brothers worked as dishwashers. "Thanh and I would walk three miles a day to wash dishes," Tim

recalled. As young adults, Thanh studied internal medicine at Georgia Tech, where he would meet Tran, a future pediatrician. Tim followed his father's footsteps, mastering the precision and performance of a teppanyaki chef.

"I like that teppanyaki brings people together," Tim explained, as he gestured to the table and griddle stations steadily filling with families and friends. "It's great for celebrations. People can interact." Rose Tran agreed, adding, "It's not just the chef's performance, but also the fresh ingredients. You can see the quality of meats—the steak, chicken, all of the seafood—even the freshness of the vegetables, before it gets seasoned and cooked."

It was the draw of California's diversity that inspired the family to relocate from the southern states. It was the draw of Music on the Square that inspired them to open their restaurants in Redwood City. "We visited in the spring (of 2011) and thought, this place is incredible. We knew that between the community events, and the uniqueness of teppanyaki, we could make it here," Rose Tran said. The trio rushed to open Sakura in time for the 2011 summer, only to learn that Music on the Square was in jeopardy. "We heard that there wasn't enough funding," Rose Tran said, "We told the city that we'd pitch in, and to see if the other businesses would too." Yet another risk, but it paid off. Collectively the downtown businesses funded the summer program.

One table over, a volcano of onions erupts into flames, much to the delight of a young guest. Tim Vu smiled at the sight, and then shared one final thought: "It has been a tough road for my family," he said, "but this is where we are meant to be. We are so thankful." 