

Ichiban: a sushi smorgasbord

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We headed down to Ichiban Japanese & Chinese Restaurant one Saturday night, three of us, to sample sushi. Ichiban is located just off South Tamiami Trail, a few blocks east on Stickney Point Road in a little strip mall.

My friend planned in advance to order the all-you-can eat sushi special (\$17.95) so he didn't need much time to check out a menu that showcases a large selection of poultry, pork, beef, chow mein, lo mein and chef's recommendations. It's big.

For starters my niece ordered a cup of hot and sour soup (\$1.50). It was the first time she has tried this wonderful soup; she found it mildly spicy and tangy and said she would order it again. Other soups are egg drop, wonton, wor wonton and Chinese vegetable.

I started with a small seaweed salad (\$2.25). The salad was quite good and lightly flecked with traditional sesame seed. The dressing consisted of sweet vinegar and light oil. The seaweed texture has a fabulous crunch all its own and a bite to the tooth, that is very different from any leafy green or green vegetable found among all vegetables typically consumed by Americans.

A house salad accompanied my friend's all-you-can eat sushi dinner. The salad was a typical combination of greens, tomatoes and vegetables with a ginger-style dressing, fresh and crisp. Along with the salad, the entr?e came with a cup of light miso soup. My friend said the soup was light and simple, as this Japanese staple made from bean paste ought to be.

They have a nice selection of beers, and we ordered cold bottles of Asahi, Kirin and Bud Light.

For appetizers, my niece and I shared a rolled sushi platter (Makimono Combo \$19.50) that was excellent. Sushi has built the reputation of Ichiban. We could easily see why. For the Makimono platter, you can select three rolls of your choice. We chose a spicy tuna, shrimp tempura roll and Alaska roll, filled with salmon, avocado, cucumber and massago. All of the seafood was brimming fresh, and the sushi tasted great. A traditional ball of hot wasabi and pickled ginger were served with the platter for smearing on the sushi and spiking up flavors.

The all-you-can-eat sushi entr?e provides a selection of about 30 styles of rolls and fillings, including octopus, tuna, Mexican roll, salmon skin hand roll, snapper, shrimp, squid and Pacific cobia. My friend found all of the seafood quite delectable. Our server advised however, not to order more than can be eaten in meal. There is a charge for excessive leftovers. In this case, leftovers posed no problems because there were none.

For a main course, I chose the Delight to Three, a combination of steak, shrimp and chicken kew, stir fried with snow peas and fresh mushrooms (\$9.95). My niece tried the Four Treasure with Garlic Sauce (\$9.95), a dish filled with chicken, shrimp, pork, beef, celery, carrots, zucchini, green pepper and water chestnuts. Both dishes were coated lightly in a mild and flavorful soy-based brown sauce, and vegetables cooked tender crisp. Meals were served with a big side of steamed white rice. We relished the meals, and both had lots of leftovers that were packed into to-go containers. Each meal was really enough for two persons to share.

For dessert, our server said they had one item that evening, tempura (fried) cheesecake. I've had fried ice cream, but never fried cheesecake. It takes the meaning of fried to new heights. We ordered two slices of the cheesecake to share among the three of us. I had just a bite or two, and it was super-rich and super-caloric, with crisp tempura coating all around outside and cool creamy cheesecake inside.

We enjoyed our dinners here and the service was excellent.