

RESTAURANT OF THE WEEK

Ichiban Japanese Restaurant / 19 S. Orange Ave.

By Joe Van Leer
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The new owners of Ichiban Japanese Restaurant, a 20-year fixture in Downtown Orlando, are spicing up the lunch and dinner menus and are stirring up patrons with events such as art nights and "cinemaki" – movie nights.

Owner Owen Siah was a sushi chef for three years at Ichiban, and before that, a chef at another popular Sushi restaurant, and his partner, Jenifer Relich, was a server in Ichiban. The pair is transforming the 79-seat restaurant from more traditional Japanese cuisine to a fusion of western styles. The menu has not changed for about eight years, said Siah, who is from New York and familiar with the latest food trends.

The new lunch menu is cooking with regular customers – mostly business executives and professionals. The lunch menu now has a much larger sushi selection – as many as 50 additional sushi rolls – prepared in a new sushi bar. Relich said patrons are not tied to the menu and can "create and design" their own sushi rolls. Sushi entrees are on the menu. Lunch entrees include shrimp or chicken tempura, pepper steak, fish or chicken (breaded and deep fried) katsu, spicy chicken, beef or chicken teriyaki, hibachi shrimp or scallops and Yakisoba – stir-fried noodles and vegetables.

The Unbelievable Roll is a dinner favorite and consists of crab salad and cucumber wrapped with tuna, eel, avocado and a tempura crunch.

Dinner business is unpredictable but Siah and Relich are planning to introduce their new dinner concept next month. The



Owners Owen Siah and Jenifer Relich offer a large assortment of sushi rolls at Ichiban.

new dinner menu will include more seafood choices other than shrimp, scallops and lobster. Duck will join chicken and steak items. Because Bento Boxes are savored dinner items, the traditional Japanese boxes in which compartments are filled with chicken, seafood and/or steak items, veggies and rice, will be on the new dinner menu.

There are vegetarian selections, salads and numerous appetizers. During weeknights, dinners seem to draw families while weekend dinners attract club goers before they hit the clubs.

Siah and Relich assumed ownership in October after the previous owner retired. They are taking a gamble – buying a restaurant while the economy is questionable and in a competitive downtown location where many restaurants are vying for

diners.

"Japanese cuisine has changed over the years in Orlando where there is a large Japanese population because they love golf," said Siah. "Sushi is no longer just raw fish, for example. Some Sushi dishes are now cooked. There are more choices and spices and more western style sauces are being used on entrees."

Ichiban, which means "number one" in Japanese, was so traditional that until about seven years ago customers could be seated on Japanese Tatami mats on the floor for a leisurely dining experience.

After the mats were lifted, more booths were added to accommodate diners who prefer faster service.

Artworks cover the walls of

the restaurant, which is decorated in the Asian

style that includes delicate Shoji-like screens that divide the booths. Working with the neighboring City Arts Factory, Relich and Siah are planning to exhibit new artworks every month.

"Art is huge in Orlando and local artists can get exposure in our restaurant and our customers can look at art while they enjoy their meals," said Siah.

Every couple of months there is a Sushi 101 class for patrons to roll their own sushi dishes and have fun. Reservations are required for the class that includes food and beer.

"Cinemaki" nights occur every couple of months. Indie films made by many Full Sail University students and customers are shown.

Siah and Relich also cater events and have catered affairs for as many as 300 people.

"Owen and I do what it takes to make this a success and that can mean waiting tables," said Relich.

Beer, wine and saki are served.

Location: 19 South Orange Ave. Lunch hours: 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.; dinner hours: 5:30 to 10 p.m. Happy Hour is from 5:30 to 7 p.m. Phone: (407) 423-2688.



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