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Hot Hibachi at Jinbeh

photo by Andy Johnson

Jinbeh

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(scale of five forks)

Unadulterated Hibachi

By Jarrett Steele

THE FIRST THING YOU NOTICE walking in the front door at Jinbeh are the display cases with the ornate porcelain Japanese cherubs beaming back at you. Behind the hostess stand, colorful paper cranes, lions and other intricate origami jungle dwellers are likewise prominently encased. As kids run amok in the small foyer and lobby bar at the front of the house, you may question whether you've arrived at a seemingly authentic Japanese brazier... or an alternate Asian-themed version of Chuck E. Cheese.

While the spectacle of watching a foreign cuisine skillfully prepared before your eyes is obviously a big draw for kids (and kids-at-heart), the experience is upscale and the food honest in its flavoring. It's absolutely Japanese, with no kitsch on the menu at all.

Two long rows of eight-top hibachi tables were packed with diners in the dimly-lit space during our Friday night

visit. I marveled at the ceilings of the main dining room and then realized why they were so high, as a quick flash of flames shot upwards from one of the nearby grills, previewing what was to come. Our young server brought our chilled sake and Sapporo drink orders as we looked over a menu listing of mostly unfamiliar cuisine.

Hibachi dinners at Jinbeh allow for any combination of meats and seafood, served with a large assortment of grilled vegetables. All dinners include small bowls of soup and house salad, starting with a translucent miso with an occasional floating leak ringlet. The broth was warm, soothing and not overly salty; it was followed by a small bowl of crisp, cool iceberg lettuce topped with orange peanut-ginger dressing.

Taking the final two seats at our u-shaped table, we felt a little rushed knowing that the order had to be submitted for the entire table at once

and that any delays would hold up the meal. This became more daunting when we came upon the multitude of 23 appetizers to choose from. Keeping things simple, we abandoned the copious sushi menu and relinquished the raw for the cooked that night.

A gyoza appetizer of steamed dumplings (\$4) was packed with finely minced beef and vegetables in large half-circle casings. The contents were flavorful and delicious, though the paper-thin wrappers were a little too soggy. Deep-fried shrimp and soft-shell crab tempura selections (\$5, \$8) served at our table looked crisp and golden.

Assisted by the efficient wait staff, our chef appeared not long after the appetizer and preliminary courses, double checked each order and got down to business. Trying to talk with him was a wash; unlike the younger chefs at the other hibachis, he was not chatty, just very focused.

What he lacked in conversation, he made up for with his grill skill. He wielded a dazzling spatula and knife, doing things with the vegetables and meat that would cause a disaster area in any normal kitchen. I knew I should check my homeowner's insurance policy before attempting to try what he did with onion slices and a squeeze bottle of cooking oil. Surprisingly, neither of the two kids at the table were as interested in the cooking display as the adults. The three-year-old on the left shredded saltines all

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over, while the five-year-old to the right favored Crayolas over chopsticks, coloring intently in the near darkness.

Everyone at the table chose fried rice with their dinner, and we watched him cook up a mountain of it. As I gave up on trying to master my chopstick technique so that I could more easily devour my steaming rice bowl, I was momentarily stunned when the woman at the end of our table was offered (and accepted) an additionally generous dollop of butter atop hers.

I expected heavy seasoning of the soy, teriyaki or perhaps even wasabi variety with my dinner, but I was pleasantly surprised most by the untainted taste of the pasta yakisoba (\$13). The stringy noodles entangled firm, large shrimp and plump, tender chunks of calamari with a mild hint of lemon juice. The grilled onions, zucchini, carrots, mushrooms and sprouts served with all of our entrées stood on their own flavors, too. Unaccustomed to the simplicity, I naturally basted some of my bites with the two dipping sauces provided.

My dining companion's filet mignon

(\$19) was served cubed; a light oil coating didn't take anything away from the beef's balanced, juicy flavor, soft texture and rosy color. The other diners who chose hibachi-grilled sesame chicken, scallops or teriyaki steak were also pleased with their selections.

Still feeling the heat of the grill, we skipped dessert, but promised to try some of the unique options (e.g., red bean and green tea ice cream; tempura fried banana) during our next visit. As the flames ignited again nearby and illuminated the room, we saw the tables of many other young and old faces sampling Jinbeh's uncomplicated flavors.



Jarrett Steele is a writer living on the verge of Frisco. When his fork isn't busy sampling new and interesting restaurants in town, you'll find him kicking back and grilling out.



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