

RESTAURANT REVIEW | NARA SUSHI

TANTALIZING TASTES OF JAPAN

By Tammy Jaxtheimer Restaurant critic

Nara Sushi on Independence Boulevard in Virginia Beach changed ownership in 2005 and more recently its location.

Elaine Lee and her husband, Eric, bought Nara Sushi, when its owner, Kevin Chang, went on to open Zushi at Town Center. In May, Nara Sushi moved up the road to Independent Plaza, on the corner of Independence Boulevard and Haygood Road.

Soothing colors, framed sushi art, subdued lighting and an intimate sushi bar maintain the comfortable atmosphere of the original Nara Sushi. Service, too, appears to remain a priority, a quality I always enjoyed when visiting the original Nara. Our server was kind, attentive and accommodating, which added to the pleasant atmosphere.

We visited for lunch and quickly deduced from the conversations around us that Nara has maintained its loyal following.

As we debated what to order, our server suggested an order of gyoza (\$4.95). It was an excellent recommendation. Pan-fried pork dumplings delivered six golden plump pillows of pleasure. As my young guests shared the last one, they craved more.

Lunch specials, priced from \$7.25 to \$14 with soup or house salad, include a variety of sushi preparations. Bento box lunches are offered with soup, salad, steamed rice and half California roll. "Deluxe bento" comes with the above and half spicy tuna roll instead of California. It also has tempura. I highly recommend deluxe, especially if you enjoy tempura, because the additional price is nominal and the tempura phenomenal.

Tempura zucchini, sweet potato and a shrimp lightly battered were expertly fried. A small bundle of green beans, flash-fried, with a squiggle of sauce with some heat, was another titillating treat. The miso soup with mini cubes of tofu and seaweed and the iceberg lettuce salad with creamy ginger dressing were both satisfying. The spicy tuna roll had just enough kick from hot sauce blended with tuna tidbits that were neatly wrapped with rice and seaweed wrap. My guest's request to substitute the accompanying California roll for the spicy tuna was easily accommodated.

The bento selections we tried were teriyaki chicken (\$8 or \$9 deluxe), shrimp tempura (\$9) and pork katsu (\$8 or \$9 deluxe). Teriyaki, also available as beef, delivered a tender breast thinly sliced that was terrific in a well-balanced sauce. Two shrimp were equally terrific, just like the ones that accompanied the "deluxe bento" selections. Pork katsu, also offered with chicken, was a crunchy, coated pork cutlet perfectly matched with its piquant sauce.

The sushi and sashimi lunch special (\$14) was an abundance of attractive fresh seafood with a bonus sampling of tasty sesame seaweed salad. The negiri pieces were shrimp, salmon, tuna and red snapper, all perched atop footballshaped rice ball with a smidgin of wasabi. The sashimi pieces were tuna, salmon, red snapper and octopus. All were savored, with the exception of a red snapper slice that tasted waterlogged.

From the seven dessert offerings, we opted for mochi (\$5), miniature ice cream mounds encased in rice cake. The smooth, cool ice cream – green tea, vanilla and strawberry – was a burst of flavor and textural pleasure from the spongy rice cake. It made us giggle with delight.

My young diners can't stop talking about Nara Sushi and all of the various tantalizing tastes that they enjoyed. I am happy to see that the restaurant, with its new owners and new location, is carrying on the tradition of fine Japanese sushi fare and service. I, too, look forward to returning.

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GARY C. KNAPP PHOTOS | SPECIAL TO THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT Menu items at Nara Sushi include New Wave Roll, top right (tuna, crab, cilantro and lettuce wrapped with rice paper); Oishii Roll, center (spicy crab, avocado with tuna and salmon on top with brown rice); and tuna and salmon sashimi, bottom left.



Eric and Elaine Lee bought Nara Sushi when its owner left to open Zushi at Town Center. Nara Sushi has since moved to Independence Plaza.