

Magazine > Dining At UNI

DINING AT UNI

By Caroline Phillips



Outside it has the look of a Belgravia hair salon or a candle and scent shop – with its black awning and white façade with lots of glass, and window with a big image of a Japanese face. From the pavement, passers-by don't really see diners. But inside is UNI – a restaurant serving Japanese and Peruvian fusion food, aka Nikkei cuisine.

Japanese immigrants arrived first in Peru in the late 19th century, and currently the country boasts South America's second largest Japanese community – and UNI (Japanese for 'sea urchin') has transported their cuisine to minutes from Victoria station. Imagine Japan's fine food mixed with the spicy oomph of Peruvian cooking, and the flipping-fresh and raw fish beloved of the Japanese combined with ingredients from the Americas such as corn, limes and peppers – and you get the idea. And who better to do this than the former chef from the fusion-loving kitchen of Nobu, Rolando Ongcoy?



Once across the UNI threshold, it's immediately clear that I'm not going to be able to buy scent or get my hair cut here. The décor is by Andrew Martin – chandeliers made of mini bottles of Campari from which you could drink if you had a chandelier as your luxury item on a desert island, and shelves with rusty, characterful fifties toy cars, and vintage storybooks with titles like 'Pitch Ball.' The vibe is a bit 'upstairs, downstairs' – set as the restaurant is on two floors.

Upstairs is a hip, sushi bar with loud music, open kitchen to watch the chefs at work, white leather bar stools and room for 26 – attracting a young, cool crowd after light bites, bento boxes and cocktails. Downstairs – via a glass staircase – is a compact space for 34, with wooden

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tables, brown squishy banquette seating and comfy tub chairs. Under the pavement, there's what UNI call 'semi-private alcoves' – and I'd call old coal holes with disco ceilings (gold leaf flecks on white background); possibly good for an affair, if you're feeling a guilty Catholic need to sit straight-backed on a narrow banquette amid a mild cellar smell.



It's almost like a separate restaurant downstairs. One that better suits people like me who don't like to crane their necks to hear, and assorted Euromoney on a group outing on my first visit. Ah yes, did I tell you that I'd been there twice?

On our premier outing...oh, let's just stick to the positive. The pan-fried sea bass with watercress salad was spot-on – super fresh, moist and beautifully cooked – and the delightful friendliness of the staff more than made up for any culinary shortcomings. The service is charming and attentive on both occasions. Not to mention that the waiters speak Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, English and probably Icelandic – a veritable Nikkei Babylon.



So to meal two, a mere few weeks later – sitting happily in the main part of the downstairs restaurant and drawn back by good reports from friends and family. There must be a sea somewhere near Belgravia, so fresh is the fish. Turbot tiraditos (very Peruvian, those tiraditos) with ponzu, minced ginger and chilli radish gets the thumbs up; the spicy tuna tartare with guacamole is mwah; and we are given the most succulent black cod with a piquant anticucho sauce – another Peruvian influence. We also have excellent, melt-in-your mouth Wagyu beef with rock salt and chilli.

They didn't have their signature sea urchin roe, a Japanese delicacy, on either of my visits, and I don't recommend the spiced edamame beans with chilli and garlic – not for the taste (which was original), but because they're too messy and red saucy to eat with your fingers.





The food is beautifully presented, unlike my notes – which have spicy edamame sauce on them. But, roughly, my red-splodged scribble tells of elegant platters; an aesthetic tangle of grated vegetables, orange and white colours, and a teaspoon of gently chopped something atop a Tunisian, is it? Plus a black canoe boat plate of sushi on a green leaf, with fish eggs of green black and orange dotted on top a 'squiggle of miso?' Maybe. It doesn't matter. It was all very pretty.

There is one minor shortcoming in the design. Whisper it. The loo. It's like an aeroplane one – with enough room to swing half a Maki roll and just the one door: remember to close it. You have been warned.



That much said, UNI is miso (keep up, that's like saying it's Nikkei honey), to hedgies, minor wags and the like. I've tried it at lunch and dinner – I prefer the former. Our kids have also been independently and want to go back – not just for the coconut-based Chilli Mojito and the Peruvian Pisco Sours. "We'd like go to UNI," they say. Thankfully, we can do that now for around £50 a head and it doesn't involve UCAS forms.

UNI is open Monday to Saturday 12 pm to 10.30 pm.
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Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines and various luxury websites. To see more of her work, go to www.carolinephillips.net.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WEEK

