ZENKICHI

fine food izakaya

APR 22TH, 2015

Zenkichi is a Japanese fine dining Izakaya by the House of Small Wonders owners and in my opinion the best and most authentic Japanese restaurant in Berlin. In one of the coolest cellar venues in Berlin, guests can in an Izakaya setting share small plates of delicious Japanese food along with a great Sake menu and plenty of cold beer.

Zenkichi is a new fine dining Izakaya or Japanese Brasserie, as the owners like to call it, and the second restaurant by Motoko Watanabe and Shaul Margulies who last year relocated from New York to Berlin to expand their Japanese restaurant empire. First one out was the Berlin dependance of their Brooklyn restaurant House of Small Wonders, a beautiful, Japanese Deli that caused quite the stir when it opened up in December and quickly became a favourite hangout of all Matcha Latte loving Mitte trendsetters. Their new restaurant Zenkichi is located in the same building and a project with the ambition to bring some more authentic, Japanese food culture to Berlin. Izakayas are very popular and informal drinking establishments where you also can order simple food and Zenkichi brings this concept to a new level with an upscale approach.

Zenkichi is located in Mitte right behind the Friedrichstadtpalast, close to Oranienburger Tor, and you might have problems finding it on your first try. Look for a glass sliding door next to the Rocket Internet HQ and then, instead of going upstairs to the House of Small Wonders, take an immediate left down into the cellar. The owners have spent quite some time and resources to turn Zenkichi into an authentic Japanese cellar Izakaya where guests dine in secluded booths and don't really see each other. Add the facts that the whole space is laced with mirrors and that most cellular networks don't work and you get a very special and intimate dining experience. After my third visit I still can't find my way to or from the bathroom by myself and I've more than once tried to enter the wrong booth or talked to people's reflections in mirrors. It's a mirror maze and awkward encounters a part of the experience. A meal at Zenkichi means losing track of time and space, which in the big city life honestly can feel quite refreshing. While I like the private booth concept, I'm not entirely sure if the look and feel of the place entirely suits the quality ambitions though. Once in the while the bamboo trees or the black pebbles on the floor give me those spa/sauna vibes and I do think that the House of Small Wonders upstairs is designed better. That's tough love though and the venue does in the end provide an experience that is unique to Berlin.

THE QUALITY OF THE SASHIMI IS REALLY SOME OF THE BEST YOU CAN GET IN BERLIN.

The menu at Zenkichi consists out of lots of smaller dishes that should be ordered and shared family style. There is also the option of a individual tasting/Omakase menu, which is encouraged by the staff. Ordering a la carte gives you access to a larger variety of dishes though and you can choose between two pages of tofu, fish and meat dishes. The size of the plates varies a bit and can be everything from a couple of bites to a larger bowl. A great way to start a meal at Zenkichi is the Sashimi plate, where a couple of spectacular pieces of fish are arranged in a beautiful bowl. What kind of fish is served depends on the supply of the day, but usual picks are salmon, hamachi and tuna. The quality of the sashimi is really some of the best you can get in Berlin, I know the owners spend a lot of time and resources to source high quality fish from selected dealers all over Germany. This pays off across the menu, the raw Saba mackerel dish Maguro Tuna Carpaccio are damn delicious and the fish of the day always grilled to perfection. Not to mention my favourite dish on the menu, the Miso Black Cod, where the cod has been lightly seared and finished off with a buttery miso sauce. Extraordinary tasty and one of the best fish dishes I've had in Berlin for a while. The same goes for the silk tofu in dashi, the amazing texture of the tofu goes perfect with the condiments and it might just be the best silk tofu I've ever had in Berlin. The meat dishes might not be as impressive, which on this level still means that they are delicious. A favourite is the grilled Rocksalt Jidori Chicken served with a great yuzu pepper. Another favourite on the menu is the Udon soup, whose intense Katsuobushi smokiness works great with the thick noodles.

True to the Izakaya spirit there is an impressive Sake menu and you can order anything from high end bottles to simpler varieties. To make the experience even more Japanese, pretty much the entire front of house staff is Japanese. They are all ridiculously lovely and forthcoming in a way only Japanese can be, and while the knowledge and training of the staff doesn't fully match the ambitions of the kitchen yet, the playful kindness of the staff makes up for most of that. As it can be hard to get attention in the Zenkichi dungeon maze, you can just call the attention of your waiter by pushing the buttos of an electronic device on your table.

IT WAS THE BEST AND MOST AUTHENTIC JAPANESE RESTAURANT IN BERLIN THE DAY IT OPENED.

Berlin really doesn't have an abundance of great, Japanese restaurants and Motoko Watanabe and Shaul Margulies have truly injected some much needed fresh blood into the scene. At their first restaurant House of Small Wonder, the beauty of the venue might at times exceed the quality of the food, but at Zenkichi the food is in the spotlight and the kitchen has grand ambitions along with an astonishing dedication to details. There are a lot of things I really like about Zenkichi, the food is very good, the venue concept a lot of fun and in the end very authentic to what a higher end Tokyo Izakaya looks like. The largest questions arise around the pricing and the value for money, what you spend here doesn't always relate to what you get and that makes a diner think twice before returning. Personally I don't really mind spending 24€ on premium sashimi, but a bowl of Udon for 13€ and Beef Tataki for 16€ as a part of a meal are less appropriate. Zenkichi is really not a simple Izakaya and you will most probably spend more than 80€ on a meal here which puts Zenkichi in direct competition with restaurants like Nobelhart & Schmutzig who have Michelin star ambitions. Considering the resources that are invested into this place, this might be totally ok and up to every guest to judge. Because one thing is damn true, with Sasaya slipping in terms of quality and ULA offering much worse value for money, the question arises if Zenkichi might not just be in the run the become the best Japanese restaurant we have in Berlin? I say hell yes, it was the best and most authentic Japanese restaurant in Berlin the day it opened.

GOOD TO KNOW...

TUE - SAT
18:00 - 23:00

€€€ - FOR A PROPER MEAL
YOU'LL EASILY SPEND
70-80€ PER PERSON

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TOFU AND BLACK COD

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Per