

Yoshi Begets Begay

*At Sushi on Oracle, chef Tommy Begay is learning from the best
—and adding his own spin.*

BY EDIE JAROLIM | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF SMITH

DON'T CALL Yoshinobu Shiratori—Yoshi, as everyone knows him—a sushi master.

Yes, the owner of Sushi on Oracle is arguably the most respected sushi chef in Tucson. But Yoshi dislikes the implications of the term “master.” Tommy Begay III, the restaurant’s associate sushi chef, explains, “Once you say you’ve mastered something, it implies you’re no longer seeking to improve. Yoshi is always learning, always asking what’s next to further his knowledge of the craft.”

Begay is not only Yoshi’s culinary colleague but also his informal spokesman. He is naturally outgoing, chatting easily with customers at the sushi bar. Also, Begay says, “My English is a lot better than his.” This is true, even though Yoshi moved to Los Angeles from the city of Kyushu in southern Japan some 30 years ago. He relocated to Tucson—“it’s smaller and doesn’t have earthquakes”—and opened his northwest side restaurant in early 2002.

Yoshi soon gathered a following among Tucson’s next generation of sushi chefs, including Begay, who worked at Neo of Melaka and Ra Sushi before being offered a coveted position at Sushi on Oracle. But while most members of the close-knit culinary group are Asian—from Korea and China as well as Japan—Begay is Navajo.

Raised in a small reservation town in the Four Corners area, he found that his culture and Japanese culture have some key affinities. “They share the basics of respecting your elders and utilizing a product to its fullest potential rather than throwing it away,” Begay says. Yoshi and his wife and daughter, who also

work at the restaurant, “feel like family. It’s kind of like being back home only with completely different surroundings.”

Begay isn’t the only one who finds these surroundings completely different. Although it is in a strip mall and has a generic name, Sushi on Oracle doesn’t look like any other Japanese restaurant in town—or anywhere else for that matter, which is what Yoshi intended. The “mismatched decor,” as Begay puts it, includes a whimsical mix of driftwood branches, mobiles of cardboard fish, and corrugated-steel ceiling panels. Original pieces by local artists line the walls, including a wood block print on rice paper by Monica Warhol (second cousin to *that* Warhol) and the colorful postage stamp collages of Barbara Brandel.

Of course, the artistry behind the sushi bar is the restaurant’s main draw (although many of the cooked Japanese dishes are popular, too).

The freshness and texture of the fish, as well as the aesthetics of the presentations, are some of the core criteria by which sushi is judged, but subtle differences in flavor that may be lost on most Westerners come into play, too. Sushi was popularized at food stalls in Tokyo, formerly known as Edo, in the early 19th century, and then spread to the rest of Japan. Tokyo-style sushi is comparatively sweet, according to Begay; the farther away you get from Tokyo, the saltier the taste.

Yoshinobu Shiratori (left) is the owner of Sushi on Oracle and arguably the most respected sushi chef in Tucson. Tommy Begay III, the restaurant’s associate sushi chef, spent months preparing to work alongside his mentor.





(Top) Begay is Navajo, and says that his culture and Japanese culture share key affinities. (Left) Begay breaks down a yellowtail fish from Japan. (Right) Sushi on Oracle's futomaki roll, a traditional Japanese roll usually eaten at lunch time.

Yoshi is from southern Japan, so his flavor profiles tend to be on the savory side. That's noticeable in the rice, for example—which makes it a perfect fit for Tucson. Sushi chefs throughout Japan add salt to their rice in the summer, on the principle that people need to replenish the amount they lose by sweating. It's no stretch to have salty rice in this warm-weather town year round.

Although Yoshi largely sticks with the style of his region, his preparations shift with the times—and with available ingredients. When he moved to Tucson, there were not many fish markets to choose from; everyone struggled to get the best of the best. With the advent of sushi's popularity in Arizona, however, distribution to Tucson became far more dependable, making it easier for all restaurateurs to get a variety of high-quality fish. Now black cod, geoduck (GOO-ey-duck) clams, and monkfish liver are as likely

to turn up on the menu as the more familiar salmon, yellowtail, and tuna, and Yoshi is able to focus on his preparations.

When Begay was hired six years ago, he was nervous at the idea of working for someone as skilled as Yoshi, who was revered by all his young colleagues at Ra: "He is a very sweet and humble man," Begay says, "and he made the best sushi that we'd ever eaten." He gave Ra several months' notice, and spent this time feverishly getting ready for the new job. "I bought a lot of different knives and learned to use them," he says. "I watched a lot of YouTube videos, talked to a lot of people, ate a lot of sushi. I would go to Lee Lee market and buy fish and learn how to butcher it so I wouldn't make any mistakes."

All this preparation stood Begay in good stead; Yoshi let him make sushi for the customers from day one. It was another year and a half, however, before Yoshi was open to the innovations

that the younger chef wanted to introduce. “He didn’t let me go wild right off the bat,” Begay says. “I had to earn it.”

The first change Begay made was to introduce a Japanese craft beer program. “The scene is exploding in Japan, just like it is in Tucson. I thought it would be nice to offer beer that was actually brewed in Japan as opposed to Canada,” he says—alluding to the source of such familiar brands as Kirin, Sapporo, and Asahi. The ever-changing selections from Japanese boutique breweries—Black Bean Ale from Kizakura, say, or Nipponia Pilsner from Hitachino Nest—mingle with picks from Tucson microbrewers. Begay is happy to detail the taste profiles of each bottle listed on the whiteboard behind the sushi bar.

Begay also introduced a playlist for the restaurant. He became interested in Asian music in the early 2000s, searching MySpace for sounds he enjoyed from a variety of regions and styles, like Malaysian indie rock. At Sushi on Oracle, you’ll hear what Begay describes as “underground Japanese jazz/hip hop with an overlay of live instrumentation created by a DJ”—a genre found nowhere else in Tucson (or in most cities, for that matter).

But beer and obscure music aren’t Yoshi’s areas of expertise. It took a bit more daring for Begay to suggest dishes that he calls “fusion-y.” Take his Perfect Pear creation: yellowtail and Asian pear sashimi with kiwi wasabi purée. His original concept for the dish included brie but, Begay concedes, “I didn’t think it would sell.”

Perhaps more typical is a dish consisting of edamame and avocado purée served with tuna that’s been soaked for a day in soy sauce and sake; the fish comes out cured on the outside but still raw on the inside. “I like to take an old-style method like this one, which I learned from Yoshi, and use it with something new that I think would complement it,” Begay says.

This epitomizes the relationship that has evolved between the two chefs, Begay doing creative spins on Yoshi’s traditional preparations, Yoshi trusting him to come up with pleasing tastes. His recognition of the value of change when not merely done for novelty’s sake is why Yoshi eschews the title of “master”—and why others nevertheless confer it on him. ♣

**Sushi on Oracle. 6449 N. Oracle Road.
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