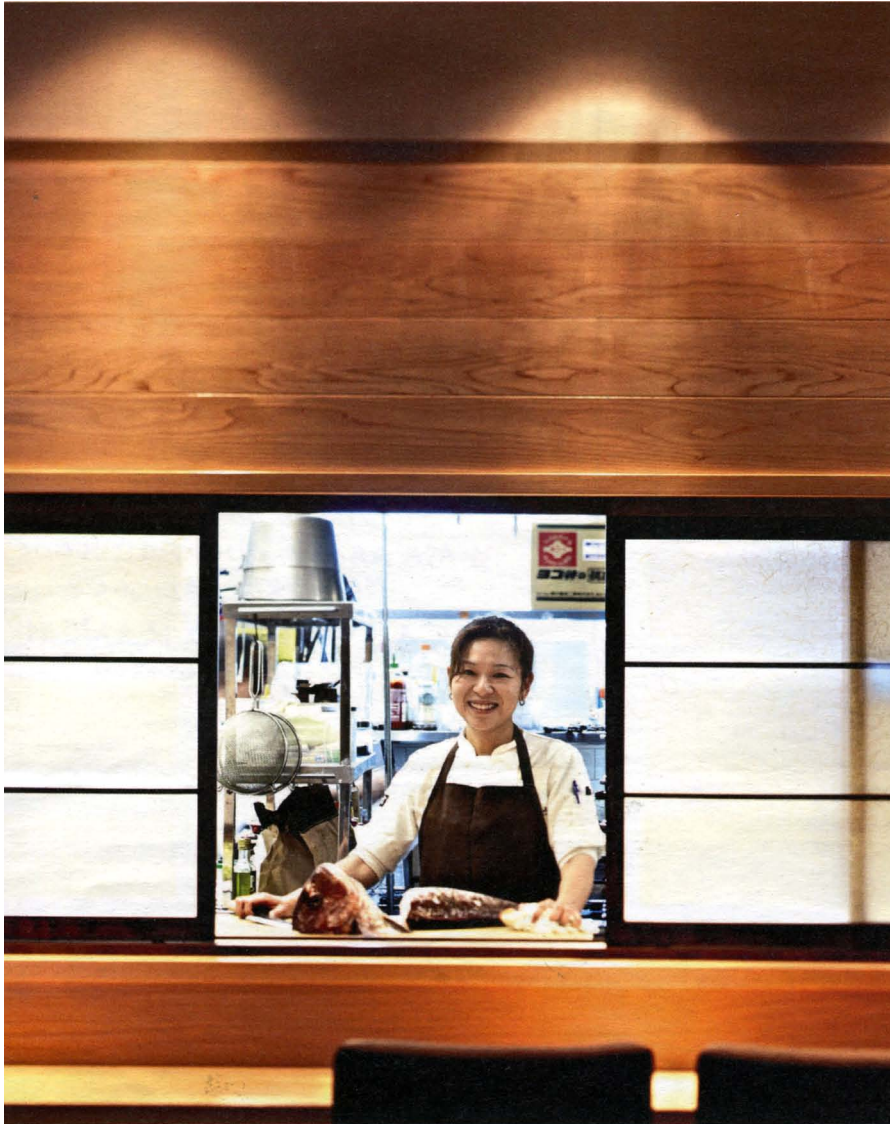


Angeleno



IN CONTROL Rather than passing out menus, chef Niki Nakayama of N/Naka selects multiple courses for diners.

Global Escape

N/Naka, one of the most unique experiences in L.A., brings the world to your table.

| By Lesley Balla | Photography by Carin Krasner |

"Every evening should begin with a glass of bubbles," our server says. We couldn't agree more, especially a lovely reserve brut from Burgundy, an auspicious start to our night at the hidden gem N/Naka. The French sparkler, while unexpected—this is a Japanese restaurant, after all—set just the right tone for the wonderful meal about to come.

Chef and owner Niki Nakayama specializes in *kaiseki*, which is similar to *omakase*, where you trust the chef, but it's more of a set multicourse meal where different preparations are used to elevate seasonal, often local ingredients. In many ways this is how every haute cuisine chef is cooking today. But with Nakayama's delicate, magical touch, N/Naka is utterly unique.

Over the last year, the restaurant has unfolded like a lotus flower. When I first went last summer, it hadn't really taken off. The room was quiet and nearly empty, and service was still gaining its footing. But the chef's dedication to what she put on the plate never waned;

N/Naka

★★★★

3455 S. Overland Ave., L.A.,
310.836.6252, n-naka.com

What the stars mean:

★ fair,
some noteworthy qualities

★★ good,
above average

★★★ very good,
well above norm

★★★★ excellent,
among the area's best

★★★★★ world-class,
extraordinary in every detail

Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambience and service.

HOURS

Dinner: Tue.-Sat.,
seating times generally
around 6 and 9PM

THE WINES

You're welcome to bring your own (\$25 corkage fee per bottle) but it's much more interesting to do the pairing.

WHAT TO WEAR

Don't go too casual, but no need to don a tie. The experience and cost don't dictate the feel of this room.

VEGETARIANS, REJOICE

There is already a ten-course all-vegetarian menu available any night.

WHAT IT COSTS

Chef's Tasting: \$110 (\$55 wine pairing); Modern *Kaiseki*: \$165 (\$85 wine pairing); Vegetarian: \$110 (\$55 wine pairing)

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STARK SPACE
Clockwise from top left: Whipped tofu with snow crab and asparagus; sake; the dining room at N/Naka



That Burgundy sparkler we sipped in the beginning of the meal was dynamite with the first course: a glass layered with whipped tofu, a few sticks of snow crab, green and white asparagus crowns and baby sorrel leaf. The tofu is like the essence of cool, white air with a hint of spring, when the first white asparagus arrives. Just lovely. The sorrel, as well as many of the greens and vegetables (like that fingernail-tiny cucumber), often comes from Nakayama's own garden. You really sense her connection to each ingredient.

The rest of the meal gracefully unfurls. A beautiful spot prawn is served two ways: one half left whole, grilled, served alongside a butter-poached tail. A swish of sauce, rich with the taste of prawn stock, separates the two on the plate. Nakayama trained with Morihiro Onodera (Mori Sushi) and Takao Izumida (Takao), both known as local sushi masters. Sashimi comes like little gardens from the sea: a Kumamoto oyster topped with a bite of Santa Barbara uni; pink ribbons of tuna shaped into a rosette; slices of sea bream sitting in a hollowed-out satsuma tangerine.

One of my favorite acts in this show is the grilled course. Once, we grilled wagyu beef in butter on tiny, flat-top grills delivered to our table. Another time, servers placed a flat-top grill with sea bass, mushrooms, peppers and a robust dashi broth on the table. A few minutes later, everything is steamed with the flavors perfectly melding.

Along the way, you may have penne with lobster sauce, and a few bites of Australian wagyu steak with leek potatoes and baby beets, two unlikely presentations compared to everything else. But it's here that Nakayama shows her prowess as a chef—the lobster sauce is rich and pleasing, the steak wonderful. There will most likely be some sort of green tea dessert, a crème brûlée, perhaps, or flourless cake. You won't leave hungry.

Our diverse dining landscape in L.A. is like global table-hopping; even the cuisine we call our own has influences from all over the world. This is why N/Naka, a blend of Japanese techniques and flavors with California ingredients and European influences, is exactly where it should be. I'm not sure it could exist anywhere but here. **A**

even then it was pretty exquisite. The few who heard of or found it—there's no sign outside—were probably already fans of Nakayama from Inaka, or Azami Sushi Cafe on Melrose Avenue before that.

Today, the room is full. It feels calm, not rushed, and in no way stuffy (which, given the price range and the experience, it could be). Fashioned out of a former spa, the minimalist space still has that sense of serenity. A few dark tables, each set with a tiny rock garden in the middle and lit by a spotlight, subtly suggest that the food is definitely the star here.

You're not handed a menu; a server will simply ask if you have any allergies or dietary restrictions. Then just sit back. You choose between the nine-course chef's tasting menu and the 13-course modern *kaiseki*—the difference is really just a few dishes—but either way, you're in for a couple of hours of dining. Do opt for the wine pairings with each course. Wine Director Jeffrey Stivers selects some eye-openers—who thinks of an Alsatian pinot blanc with cubes of Japanese mackerel, dots of homemade ponzu and a micro cucumber topped with a beautiful yellow blossom? You're as likely to sip wines from France, Spain and Santa Barbara as you are to sip sake.



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