



GRACEFUL *beginning*

With its upscale take on contemporary Japanese cuisine, Yūgen makes a bold debut in the West Loop.

By Ariel Cheung // Photography by Anthony Tablier

I am not exaggerating when I say there is simply nothing like Yūgen in Chicago. The thought first struck me when a friend, who was raised on traditional Chinese fare, exclaimed joyously that a bite of tonkatsu—a breaded, deep-fried pork cutlet—was akin to something her mother would make. Executive chef Mari Katsumura wouldn't be surprised. "I wanted to bring something to the table that felt very personal and authentic to me," she says. "Something that people in the neighborhood could enjoy that I don't think they've seen before."

Both elements—the personal and the unique—combine for a meal that incorporates Japanese flavors and ingredients in upscale renditions that nevertheless remain approachable and easy to love. Even the most casual patron of sushi joints will recognize elements of Katsumura's continuously evolving 13-course tasting menu (\$205 per person). At a midwinter dinner, miso soup arrives as the third course, but Katsumura transforms it. The broth is silky and light, with just a hint of sweetness, while the

yuzu-coated edamame and puffed rice crisps cut through the softness of the broth.

While Katsumura has served as sous and pastry chef at some of Chicago's top restaurants, from Acadia to Entente to Grace—the shuttered three-Michelin-star gem that occupied the same West Loop building Yūgen calls home—this spot is the first where she gets top billing. Celebrated for her delicate flower-adorned desserts, Katsumura shines just as much in the savory realm—all while conveying the sense that she is utterly at home with her food.

Between beautiful takes on Miyazaki wagyu, grilled octopus and sashimi are interpretations of family recipes Katsumura grew up making or watching her father—the late, beloved French-Japanese cuisine pioneer Yoshi Katsumura—whip up. The crab rice, served right after the miso soup, counters its predecessor's levity with bold, funky, salty flavors gleaned from egg yolk, roe and puffed grains. It's a re-creation of an after-school treat Katsumura used to make for herself as a teenager. Japanese curry, the final savory course, is forged from a version Katsumura's father would frequently make in winter. The butter-yellow pool with curls of parsley

oil perfectly complements morsels of Slagel Family Farm beef cheek, and its curried warmth reaches the depths of your soul.

Further elevating the experience are beverage pairings (\$135) by sommelier Denise Collins (Proxi), from the Laurent Perrier cuvée rosé brut, which lends its cucumber-scented, strawberry-laced bubbles to Katsumura's three richly flavorful canapes, to the 2015 Eric Bordelet pear cider that beautifully complemented apple-lemon cheesecake for dessert. Just as enjoyable are the many sakes offered a la carte or as a pairing option.

That puffy wedge of a cheesecake, brightened by sprigs of dill that my friend declared "such a nice surprise," was one of three delightful desserts from pastry chef Jeanine Lamadieu (Smyth + The Loyalist, New York's Le Bernardin). Her light grapefruit sorbet is a cool take on the traditional Asian palate cleanser, while the sculptural Milk and Cookies—in which thin polygons of meringue are stacked around caramelized hojicha milk ice cream and compressed cookies—is almost too pretty to deconstruct.

Thoughts of my meal at Yūgen stayed with me for weeks, and I yearned for some of my favorites without knowing when I'd return for another 13-course dinner. But the answer to my woes lies in Kaisho, Yūgen's sister bar concept. Akin to The Loyalist or The Bar at Acadia, Kaisho is the relaxed counterpart offering a separate a la carte menu. There's some crossover—that excellent curry appears, as does Lamadieu's Milk and Cookies—but there are also unique dishes, like a wagyu burger (\$28) topped with giardiniera, wasabi-massaged arugula and optional lamb bacon. Daily specials range from Thursday's pork shoulder ramen raviolo (\$24) to Japanese fried chicken (\$18) served on Fridays, making a perfect excuse to return again and again for dishes you just can't find anywhere else.



Clockwise from left: Binchotan-grilled octopus is accented with smoked chanterelles, crispy squid ink and winter huckleberries; compressed apple adorns the bruleed cheesecake; Yūgen's addition of a live wall brightens the former Grace dining room. Opposite page: Pork is prepared three ways, including as a breaded kurobuta tonkatsu and crispy pig ear, while toasty almonds lend contrast.

YŪGEN

652 W. Randolph St.
312.265.1008
yugenchicago.com

Open for dinner Tue.-Sat.