

Eat Index: Las Vegas

Akira Back's Kumi Japanese Restaurant + Bar is one of several recent openings headlined by big-name chefs in Sin City.



Five years ago *Restaurant Hospitality* editors had the pleasure of eating at Yellowtail Sushi Restaurant & Bar at the Bellagio in Las Vegas. We were so impressed with the newly enshrined executive chef there, we declared him a Rising Star. Since then, Akira Back and Yellowtail have won numerous awards, including the Korean-born chef being named the “Best Chef in Las Vegas.”



Earlier this summer, Back and The Light Group once again teamed for another new restaurant, Kumi Japanese Restaurant + Bar at Mandalay Bay. Kumi features Back's signature Korean-American twist on traditional Japanese dishes and is a bit edgier than Yellowtail.

“The approach is more of an all around mix of Japanese, Korean and American ingredients and flavor profiles,” says the Colorado-raised chef and former professional snowboarder of the difference between the two. “Coming up with the menu gave us more freedom to experiment with flavors that weren't so traditional, yet familiar enough for our guests to feel both comfortable and adventurous.”

Although the restaurant officially opened on July 24, several dishes have already become favorites. The Crispy Rice, a cool shared plate for \$17 featuring soft blackened tuna, sweet seaweed and Back's spicy Screaming O Sauce, is a “dish packed with so many flavors and textures it pretty much hits you on all levels,” he says. The Rock Shrimp Tempura, a warm shared plate for \$16, sounds like a pretty standard offering, but Back says it's not: “Nobody has it like we do. We took something as simple as sriracha sauce and ranch dressing and made it work.”

Two signature rolls—Pop Rockin' (spicy tuna, crab, salmon, avocado and Pop Rocks) and 007 Octopussy (crab salad, spicy octopus and crispy potatoes), both \$19—illustrate the restaurant's more adventurous side. “It's definitely part of being modern and hip,” he says, adding the restaurant's design matches the menu. “Having a DJ booth, crazy lighting fixtures, cherry blossom covered walls in a dimly lit room surrounded by beautiful wood brings a certain type of sex appeal and good vibes.”

The 10,000 square-foot space offers seating for up to 300 in multiple dining areas. The sushi bar, with its glazed cobalt blue tiles in a scalloped pattern inspired by common Japanese homes, is the centerpiece of the main dining room decorated with raw natural woods, steel accents and splashes of red lacquer.