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Haru — unpretentious Asian fusion in Old City

PGN Staff Reports
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If you have ever been to Tokyo, you know sushi restaurants with large, open floor plans are a rare species. High ceilings just aren't an option in a city with 12 million people sardined into it.

Alas, Old City is not Tokyo and Haru, 241-43 Chestnut St., is an American Japanese restaurant housed in what could pass for a huge luxury loft condo.

Occupying an old bank building, the eatery employs the requisite minimalist décor of anywhere that sells raw fish, the austere — not sterile — atmosphere aided by industrial-design-high ceilings and plenty of natural lighting, courtesy of its collection of windows.

Hardwood floors and light yellow-green walls help to conjure the idea of spring — the English translation of "haru."

Beyond the main dining room, there is a dedicated sushi bar and upstairs lounge, which takes on a club-like atmosphere with a live DJ from 11 p.m. to 2 a.m. Thursday to Saturday.

Founded by Rocky Aoki of Manhattan favorite Benihana, Haru is part of a small New York City-based chain and is the only branch outside of Manhattan.??

As far as Old City Asian fusion goes, think of Haru as in line with Buddakan or Morimoto, sans price tag (and attitude). Here fresh, sizable Japanese fusion is delivered with all the hipness and urbanity required by most Center City diners.

Opened last summer, Haru offers an array of sushi and cooked entrées. On one recent visit, we sampled appetizers — Agedashi

Tofu (\$6), King Crab Dumplings (\$9) and Lobster Miso Soup (\$7.50) — and sipped signature cocktails — the Komodo Dragon is an elixir of vanilla vodka, coconut rum, pineapple juice and Blue Curacao; the Lycheetini a vodka, lychee liqueur and lychee juice mix — before our entrees arrived.

The firm tofu was well flavored with ginger and bonito flakes (thinly shaved tuna slices that heat causes to undulate), the dumplings



mild and bursting with crabmeat. The soup, a departure from traditional miso, was rich and full-bodied. (They use butter.)

Other starters include duck, tempura, edamame, yakitori (grilled meats), shumai (small dumplings), spring rolls and eggplant miso. Appetizers range from \$5-14.

For the main course, we went for a vegetable roll and a several pieces of sushi. The fish, toro, smoked salmon and shrimp, was a stand out. The toro (fatter meat from a tuna's belly) and salmon were thinly sliced and delicate — perfect for a sushi novice. In addition to standards like yellowtail, white tuna and shrimp, Haru offers smoked eel, live orange clam,

octopus and sea urchin for the more adventurous. Sushi is \$2-6 per piece. Market prices dictate the cost of delicacies.

The rolls — sushi and cooked or vegetable varieties — also include classics (Boston, California, spicy tuna) and novelties (Park Avenue: gold leaf, mango, tuna and avocado; Hatsu Yume: super white tuna, caviar, crab, asparagus and cucumber). Rolls cost \$3.50-\$18.

We wrapped up the meal with a banana spring roll with chocolate sauce. It was decadent without being overwhelming — a perfect finish to an enjoyable foray into the city's sushi scene. Other dessert options include tempura-style cheese-cake, a take on

tiramisu and a selection of frozen treats.

Though not on our menu this visit, the salads are enticing. Beyond a field green salad with ginger dressing, Haru offers a Wafu Seaweed salad, Tangerine Duck salad and a Calamari salad priced from \$5.75-9.50. There is also salmon and chicken teriyaki, crispy duck, grilled filet mignon, wok-seared tuna, seafood pasta and Chilean sea bass. Prices run from \$16-27.

Haru has an attentive, helpful service able to answer advanced sushi queries. And, surprisingly, the vegetarian among us did very well in the non-meat selections. For more information, see: www.harushushi.com.