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NOT YOUR
AVERAGE SUSHI

CALIFORNIA, DYNAMITE, SPIDER: FOR ALL THE IMAGINATIVE SUSHI ROLLS CHEFS ACROSS NORTH AMERICA ROUTINELY SERVE, THE MAKING OF SUSHI REMAINS STEEPED IN TRADITION. Preparation, like presentation, is the product of a steadfast ritual, right down to the knife work. Having worked with the best of them, ostensibly, Miki Izumisawa can cut the mustard. But why stop there? At 242 Cafe Fusion Sushi in Laguna Beach, Orange County, she breaks from tradition, offering up arty, nature-inspired sushi with bucolic monikers like Cherry Blossoms, Prairie and the astral-inspired M45 (Pleiades). Most dishes come with equally innovative, tailor-made sauces that put soy sauce, the staple sushi condiment, to shame, though the latter is often incorporated into the recipe. As a female sushi chef in a male-dominated sphere, her very presence behind the counter eschews convention.

"I definitely want traditional Japanese sushi chefs to change," says Izumisawa. "They continue to state how female hands have a higher temperature compared to males and are not appropriate for making sushi. I want to ask them: what is the most important thing to consider when making sushi?"

For Izumisawa, that's delighting the senses. Laguna Canyon, a rainbow roll drizzled with smelt eggs, seared with a blowtorch no less, and topped with sesame and a spinach mix, is her culinary homage to the expansive gorge. The popular dish is edible art, as visually pleasing as it is appetizing. Drawing on molecular gastronomy, her culinary sceneries, where ingredients like white truffles, beef carpaccio and mango are nary rarities, model her nature photography (she's also an avid sculptor). In Izumisawa's all-women kitchen, sushi isn't bound by rules or constraints. "Placing various fish on top of vinegar rice with a dab of soy sauce — this is already delicious," says Izumisawa. "[But] what if I change the preparation? What if I

use different ingredients? I find so many possibilities for new discoveries by removing the box of tradition."

Initially an aspiring P.E. teacher, at 23 she moved from Tokyo to Okinawa where she met renowned printmaker Bokunen Naka. Izumisawa apprenticed with him for three years, exploring her artistic side and cultivating a burgeoning spiritual connection to nature, a relationship that informs much of her culinary and artwork skills. In 1986, at 27, she headed to the United States, working in the kitchen at various restaurants for the first time. "The first thing I learned was how to make eggs at a breakfast diner," she recalls. Before long, she acquired bona fide culinary chops; she became head sushi chef at the now-defunct restaurant Sambi of Tokyo in Downey, California, and even worked with master sushi chef Nobu Matsuhisa at his namesake restaurant Nobu in Las Vegas, though a tense working relationship with a fellow chef saw Izumisawa leave after a year.

"At this point in time, I started wanting my own restaurant," she says. "My good friend pushed me. I went all in, encouraging serendipity." A yin yang symbol etched into the concrete on the street leading to 242, identical to the one she'd had tattooed on her back, sealed the deal. "I truly believe I was led here by fate," says Izumisawa.

Since opening shop in 2000, she has been experimenting without reserve, her culinary creations routinely drawing praise and a full house at her cozy 21-seat eatery. "I love initiating evolution with my own hands," says Izumisawa. "Even to this day, it makes me excited to use colourful ingredients and ingredients which enhance the existence of sushi."

What does Izumisawa hope to tackle next? A sushi cake business perhaps, so long as the universe agrees. "If I receive a message or find a sign somewhere, I may start something all of a sudden." *