

Robata Zawazawa



RESTAURANT OF THE FORTNIGHT

Licensed to grill (clockwise from top left) pork rolls with plum; paper umbrellas hang from the ceiling; seared beef tataki; Tanuki udon; foie gras; and dashi fish stock

CALVIN SUI

★★★★★

Verdict Good grills come in small packages

Robatayaki, Central

Robata Zawazawa is a weird and wonderful space. A killer makeover has left the former Sushi Qube digs looking like something lifted off a movie set. No surprises there – Zawazawa's interior designer Shigeru Sato is also the man who inspired some of the scenes in Quentin Tarantino's B-movie classic *Kill Bill*. The design is heavily entrenched in Japanese shogunate history. Strips of kimono fabric trail along the sides of the restaurant while beautiful paper umbrellas drape down over the ceiling lights. But even more surreal than the striking décor is the unbelievably teensy size of the venue. To call Robata Zawazawa small is a gross understatement. A lone robata bar already takes up most of the dining room, with just ten high stools fitted around the lacquered bar table.

Behind the bar, Zawazawa's head chef Daisuke Nakano turns out a concise repertoire of inventive izakaya bites. Two slabs of foie gras come in a bowl, propped up by an island of daikon over a pool of dashi fish stock (\$60). The round radish is softened by the broth and arrives at the table swelled with the soup's delicious, umami essence. The foie

gras takes the dish up another notch – pan-seared to a smoky crust on the surface but soft and still runny on the inside with a creaminess that resembles a perfectly poached egg. Deep-fried ebi shrimp dumplings (\$30) are nothing too special on their own, but a small dish of black sesame flecked yuzu miso dipping sauce turns the prosaic plate into something poetic. But it's the simplest maki tamago (egg omelettes, \$50) that make the highlight of the appetisers selection. The pale yellow blocks melt on the tongue with a subtle mirin-charged sweetness reminiscent of silken steamed egg custards.

From the robata, small green chillies are split down the centre and plumped with mashed prawns (\$40). Served three to a skewer under a pile of wispy bonito flakes, the chillies come with black blisters on the skin that still carry the smoky tinge from the open fire grill. Certain items fall short of expectation; pork rolls skewered around ume and shiso (\$35) read like a winning combination but the tart plum overwhelms the meat and the floral shiso feels lost within the power play of flavours. The tsukune (Japanese styled chicken meatball, \$30), on the other hand, is close to sublime, made by shaping moist, minced meat and crunchy crumbs of chicken cartilage into a thick slice for finishing off on the grill with a dash of shichimi togarashi. Grilled

turban snail (\$120) is plated in its shell with a dark, peppery broth bathing the succulent morsels of meat. Premium "syu-ichi" beef tataki (\$350) is flash-seared to perfection with the meat's beautiful white marbling shining through the rare centre. Unfortunately, the meat runs on the mild side with its flavour and, for the price, we'd much rather order a few more rounds of the simpler skewered items.

Taking a break from the grill, the Tanuki udon (\$50) is one of the best items on the menu. The handcrafted noodles taste satisfyingly rustic with a thick, al dente body that anchors the meal well. The broth is delicious enough on its own but turns transcendent with a fat dollop of fragrantly spicy yuzu wasabi. An extra dose of deep-fried dried shrimps and tempura batter dumped into the soup transforms the whole affair into something that's well worth its own paragraph.

The final course is a choice between ice cream and "houji-cha" roasted green tea pudding (\$35), with the latter being the obviously more interesting option. Topped with tart pomegranate seeds, the firm tofu-like dessert comes with a small vat of dark honey and puffed rice, making a light, palate-cleansing finale that tastes particularly appropriate after the banquet of meat-heavy grilled goods.

Robata Zawazawa's cramped quarters feel close to uncomfortable

at first, but after a few glasses of sake or several cocktails (especially the shiso basil mojito, \$80), the restaurant turns into one of the best izakaya experiences in this part of town. Good food helps too, of course, and at this venue there's plenty of that to go around.

Dorothy So

THE BILL

Seared foie gras and dashi stock	\$60
Fried shrimp dumpling	\$30
Egg omelette	\$50
Green chilli shrimp filling	\$40
Pork, plum paste and shiso basil	\$35
Tsukune	\$30
Turban shell	\$120
Syu-ichi beef tataki	\$350
Tanuki udon	\$50
Houji-cha pudding	\$35
Shiso basil mojito	\$80
Ten per cent service charge	\$88
Total (for two)	\$968

Robata Zawazawa LG/F, 41 Wyndham St, Central, 2536 9898; www.zawazawa.com.hk. Mon-Thu 5pm-midnight, Fri-Sat 5pm-3am, closed Sun.