

(Not Just) Instant Karma

Trendy Sushi Restaurant Finds Staying Power

By Gamin Summers | Photos by Josh Biggs





After two-and-a-half years, the simple fish graphic and red-scrawled moniker over Karma Sushi Bar and Tapas has come to signify an essential component of

Flagstaff's downtown restaurant scene. This trendy and popular sushi bar, with its modern black tables, deep crimson linens, butter-yellow walls and custom glass pendant lights above the bar creates the atmosphere for hip college students and discriminating locals alike.

Steve Scully, owner and chef, actually imagined this scene, dreamt it, envisioned it, down to the light fixtures made by local hand blown glass artist George Averbeck. But wait — why the East Indian name?

Scully has made a name for himself as a "good white guy sushi chef," a title he's earned over many years of hard work and through the tutelage of some of the finest in the industry. While working in Scottsdale, he told a regular customer of his grand plans for a unique Flagstaff sushi restaurant. But what would he name it? The customer's 12-year-old daughter offered, "Doesn't matter what you call it — it just needs good Karma."

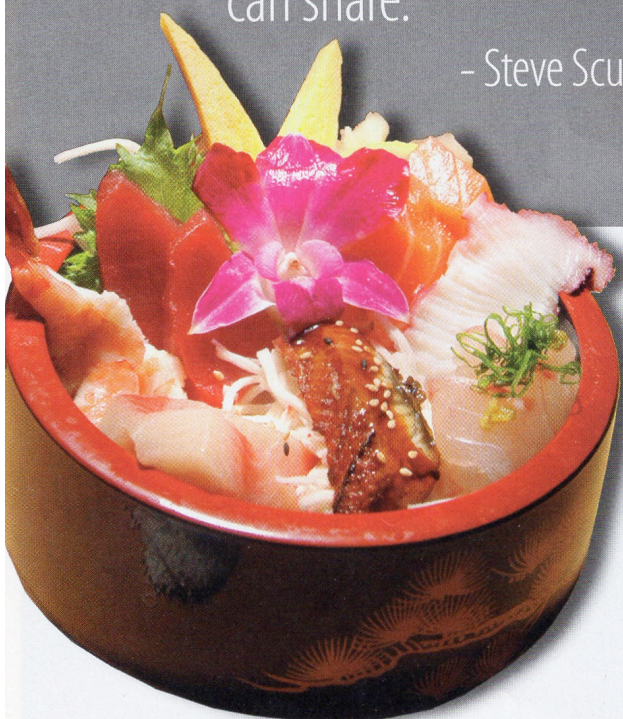
And thus a concept was born, a daring fusion of Japanese sushi and sashimi with Spanish-inspired tapas. Popular throughout Spain, tapas are simple yet powerful appetizers that usually accompany cocktails.

"Tapas are like sushi. They are small, sharable portions of typically hot, cooked food. It's the same feel as sushi — different plates everyone can share," Scully explained. His tongue-in-cheek tapa "Sashimitini" is a cocktail of fresh tuna, salmon and yellowtail sashimi swimming in sake, citrus ponzu and mint.



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Karma's fall menu is replete with intriguing tapas offerings, including a delectable ceviche of salmon and octopus atop crunchy tempura seaweed chips, tender Japanese eggplant fashioned into a mini volcano and topped with sweet miso, yellowtail carpaccio with roasted jalapeno yuzu sauce, and Spanish mackerel in a ginger citrus marinade.

Scully is energetic, creative, business savvy and highly involved in all things Karma. Most nights find him working the sushi bar. He fashions playlists from his vast music collection for eclectic background music ranging from classics to trip-hop to alternative. He has a team of trusted chefs, yet he personally trains newcomers to preserve his standards and insistence on quality.

And that quality is defined by insistence on only the freshest fish for sushi, with shipments arriving three times a week from Hawaii and Southern California. A large refrigerator contains massive slabs of fresh tuna, whole octopi, and a large bucket of fresh Maine lobster featured in rolls like the Godzilla with avocado, cucumber and snow crab, topped with spinach crunch.

The signature "Karma Roll" combines shrimp tempura, cream cheese and caviar, and is topped with freshwater eel, sweet sauce, wasabi cream and spice. Traditional sushi lovers might balk at Scully's imaginative combinations, but the funky rolls beg to be tried.

Imagine the vegetarian Popeye with fresh vegetables, wilted spinach, roasted red peppers and a sweet sesame sauce. Try not to succumb to Lucy, a luscious fusion of tuna, avocado, roasted red peppers and mango, wrapped in soy paper. The roll is named for his late black Labrador retriever, and 10 percent of "Lucy" sales go to Paw Placement of Northern Arizona.

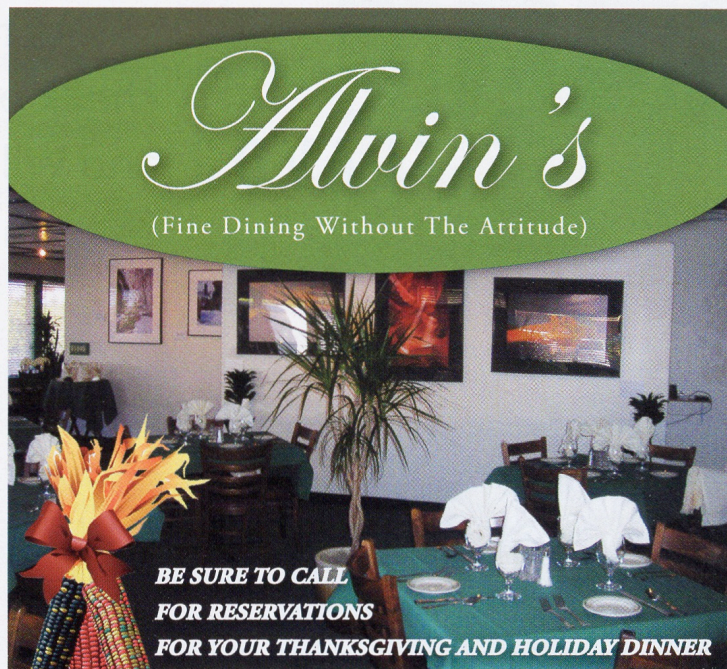


But true sushi connoisseurs will appreciate that the standards are all there: nigiri (a slab of fresh fish atop formed rice), sashimi (sliced raw fish sans rice) and a superior, freshly grated wasabi.

Scully is inspired by "things I've done in the past in other restaurants. I have good ideas for flavor combinations; a good palate for knowing how things will taste." He loves to experiment. Staff members will occasionally request something off-menu, so he'll toy with the new idea. Food shows, his days in Scottsdale, trips to New York, friends — all influence his palette of flavors and he loves to "put a twist on something I've picked up elsewhere." Suppliers mention a new product, and he researches ideas for the best way to dazzle with it.

For those still squeamish or unsure about sushi, Scully is well-versed and enjoys educating diners, taking their hands and guiding them through the process of acquiring a taste — a yen — for sushi. He might even throw in a history lesson or two.

Central to his original vision for Karma is the customer. He asserted, "I like to leave people with the feeling of 'next time we'll move to the next level (of taste exploration).' I want people to be excited about coming back." ▲



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