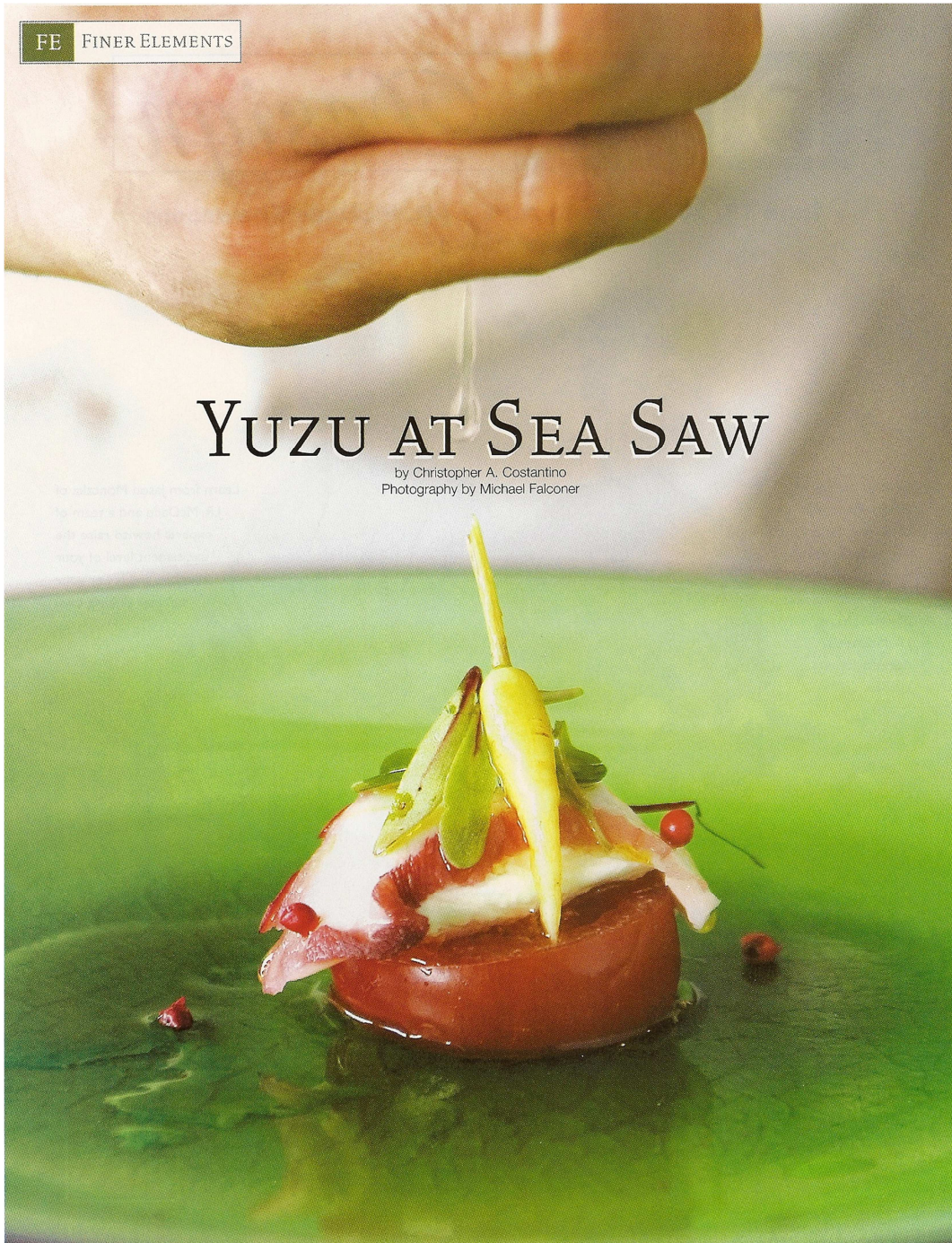


YUZU AT SEA SAW

By Christopher A. Costantino

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Ordering several appetizers and splitting them among the dinner party is rapidly growing in popularity. The Spanish call them “tapas”, the rest of us call it “grazing.” Many restaurants are offering this as an alternative to the traditional “appetizer-entrée-dessert” sequence. Phoenixians are fortunate to have one of the nation’s best examples of such a restaurant right here, Chef Nobuo Fukuda’s Sea Saw.

Fukuda, a Tokyo native, came to the United States in 1980 and earned his first job at Behihana’s in Scottsdale. He toured through several restaurants, including a four-year stint under Chef Shinji Kurita at Phoenix’s Yamakasa and under Chef James McDevitt at Restaurant Hapa. He even did a stint outside the (bento) box, becoming an EMT with the AZ ski patrol. Ultimately (and fortunately for us), he returned to his real love and talent – cooking. Completely self-taught, Fukuda has garnered numerous awards, including the 2003 Food and Wine’s Best New Chefs in America. Gourmet magazine even went so far as to call him “the other Nobu.” Fukuda was even nominated for a 2005 James Beard award for Best Chef: Southwest.

In July 2002, Fukuda partnered with Peter Kasperski (of the Cowboy Ciao and Kazimierz Wine Bar fame) and opened Sea Saw, located between those stellar restaurants. Having two “big brothers” allows Sea Saw to exploit the 2,500-plus wine list those restaurants boast. The small, intimate 26-seat dining room with simple décor is open for dinner daily, and reservations (especially for the tasting menu) are recommended. The majority of seating encircles the bar, a community-dining venue that reflects Fukuda’s concept of family-style dining. “In Japan, we eat food not just for dining, but for spending time with people.” Chef Fukuda and his staff of six culinary school graduates are there to provide dinner, as well as a show. “I feel like I’m creating drama or theatre. We are not the actors; the food and wine are the actors.” With his history at Behihana’s, it’s no wonder the dinner is so entertaining.

Fukuda employs many unusual ingredients, but the exotic Yuzu – a rare, expensive fruit, common in Japanese kitchens – is one of Fukuda’s specialties. Like lemon, it can be grated into zest or squeezed for its juice. Yuzu is a hybrid of a primitive citrus called Ichang papeda and a sour mandarin orange

A native of China, the yuzu is cultivated in Japan from a small tree between 6-25 feet in height. To protect U.S. growers from diseases prevalent in Asian groves, fresh yuzu cannot legally be imported into the United States. But yuzu is grown and sold domestically, many of which are in California’s San Joaquin Valley. Yuzu trees were unofficially introduced into California before 1888, grown in home gardens by Japanese-American aficionados. About 10 years ago, enterprising farmers started raising yuzu to fulfill a growing demand from chefs. One of the hardiest of citrus fruits, the yuzu reportedly survives down to 10 degrees Fahrenheit. Fruits usually ripen towards the end of fall, which is earlier than many other citrus. In fact, the sight of ripe golden yuzu suggests to Japanese that winter is approaching.

Fresh, tangy flavor characterizes this fruit, which is less sharp and more subtle than lemon, allowing its fruitiness to come through. The size of a mandarin orange, it has a thick uneven skin and paler flesh, containing many seeds. Yuzu's exterior color changes from green to yellow as the season progresses. Exterior color is not important, and either color fruit can be used interchangeably.

Like its cousin the lemon, Yuzu is also used in non-culinary applications. Fragrance is extracted for use in perfumes, lotions, and soaps. The Japanese often wrap several of the fruits in cheesecloth and float them in a hot bath to give off a relaxing scent.

The yuzu is ever present in Fukuda's kitchen – especially seasonally. For example, WHITE FISH CARPACCIO features thinly sliced white fish with ginger, sesame seeds, yuzu juice and roasted garlic oil, while SHINSHU MUSHI uses the fruit as a garnished zest on top of steamed sea bass, green tea soba noodles and ume-shiso scented mushroom broth. Shiso, a jagged-edged leaf widely used in Japanese cooking (as well as for garnishing) is related to mint and basil; its flavor is reminiscent of both. Fukuda offers HAMACHI for a cool refreshing dish; sliced yellowtail over grapefruit and avocado with ponzu sauce (made with soy sauce, truffle oil, fish sauce and yes, yuzu juice.)

Chef Fukuda tries his hardest to purchase local ingredients whenever possible – in fact, fifty percent of his produce is grown locally. According to Fukuda, there are nearly 300 yuzu trees in the United States. Because of their scarcity, the yuzu fetches high prices, (\$8 to \$20 a pound). Fukuda decided to contract a specialized citrus grower who currently has 32 trees. Last year (their first growing yuzu), they yielded 29 yuzu fruits. This year, even with a short growing season from Mid August to November, Fukuda estimates harvesting over a hundred fruits. Out of season, he uses bottled juice (imported from Japan) and in season, the sky's the limit.

At Sea Saw, an extremely talented chef pairs quality, unique ingredients with an entertaining, casual environment for a package that delights patrons and dazzles the palates of discriminating diners. “We want to focus on the whole experience with food and wine.” Yuzu isn't just some fad ingredient – great chefs such as Thomas Keller and Charlie Trotter are also yuzu enthusiasts. So give the yuzu a try at See Saw – when your mouth thanks me later, I'll just say, “I told ‘yuzu.’”