

Review: Sushi Jianken

By [Meg Tilton](#)
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Photo by Paul Aiken

Ray Johnson, left, and Ed Mahoney have lunch at Sushi Jianken in Longmont.

Food: 3 1/2 stars

Service: 3 stars

Ambiance: 3 1/2 stars

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Sushi Jianken's name has a story behind it. "Jianken" refers to the Japanese version of rock-paper-scissors. According to Nick Park, who owns the restaurant with his wife, he and his employees played the game frequently when they were first starting the restaurant. They used it to make decisions like who should scale the fish.

It's fitting the name is so whimsical. Sushi Jianken opened this past December in Longmont's Prospect New Town development -- a neighborhood that epitomizes whimsy. Prospect's mix of buildings is colorful and eclectic. Craftsmen-like bungalows sit next to modern, boxy houses, which in turn border European-style buildings. The development is worth seeing if you haven't been there.

And if you do pay a visit to Prospect, Sushi Jianken offers an excellent destination point. Food is tempting and artfully presented. Dishes also reflect Park's diverse culinary background. He's worked at Sushi Zanmai and Hapa, but he's also cooked in Western restaurants like Le Chantecler, Q's and Zolo. So his lobster bomaki, for instance, features a European-style galantine preparation, in which the lobster tail is poached and then stuffed with crab and rice.

As for the restaurant's ambience, it's modern but cheerful. The only drawback to the décor is a practical one: booths often don't have backs to the seats, which can make them uncomfortable. Still, the atmosphere is pleasant, and both nights I visited most tables were full.

A good way to begin your meal is with a fragrant bowl of miso soup (\$2.55). If the restaurant happens to be serving the magic mushroom special on the day you visit, consider ordering this as well (\$3.75). The "mushrooms" are really salmon wrapped around avocado and then topped with a luscious Japanese aioli and eel sauce. The ingredients make for a silky, distinctive combination.

Avocado is used to impressive effect in several other dishes too. Take the tuna poké (\$9.05). Poké is a Hawaiian dish that features small cubes of raw fish -- think ceviche, but with sushi-grade fish, so that no vinegar cooking is required. Sushi Jianken serves theirs marinated in a chili-sesame dressing. The fish can then be dipped in dollops of delightfully tart yuzu cream, with ripe avocado slices balancing out the stronger flavors.

The salmon-and-avocado roll (\$4.50) is also buttery and delicious. And the California roll (\$4.95), of course, offers another tasty seafood-and-avocado combination. On one visit, we tried a nightly special involving a California roll topped with salmon and pesto (\$9.95). The pesto, fish, wasabi, crab and avocado flavors all popped up in quick succession, in a cycle of stimulation for the tongue.

Some of Jianken's sushi rolls offer less value than others. A lobster roll special (\$13.95) turned out to be a disappointment, not because the lobster wasn't good but because it may as well have been cod. Between the roll's spicy sauce and strong lemon accents, the meat was hard to taste. Likewise, the crab in the snow crab roll (\$8.35) is tender and sweet, but the delicate flavors are easily eclipsed by soy and wasabi. And if you have the irksome habit of calculating how much each bite is costing you -- in this case about \$1.40 -- you may find yourself wishing you'd ordered another California roll instead.

Still, both these rolls were very tasty. The only thing I sampled at Sushi Jianken that I didn't like was the chilled tofu (\$3.95). Neither my dining companions nor our waiter approved much of this choice, so maybe I should have known better. But I'd been curious to see if the accompanying ginger, green onions and bonito flakes (shavings of dried tuna) could make cold tofu appealing. They couldn't. The fried version was much better, our waiter told us, and I believed him. Another good option for vegetarians is the daikon maki (\$3.55), which features daikon -- an Asian radish -- that's been pickled in a sweet-and-sour brine. The roll is crunchy and delicious.

When it comes time for dessert, order the green-tea cr me brul e (\$5.95) if you want something novel. The tea taste comes through in just the right proportion. Another yummy dessert is the warm chocolate cake (\$5.95), which is rich but with a lighter and spongier texture than many soft-centered chocolate cakes.

All in all, Sushi Jianken offers an indulgent way to spend an evening. And the trip to the restaurant is a colorful one. First there's Prospect New Town itself, with its the rainbow array of buildings. Then there are the restaurant's bright mosaic lanterns. And finally there's Sushi Jianken's food, the fish and vegetables of such deep hues they can look like jewels. Something about all that sparkle that makes you feel like a kid. It's a fun visit.

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