

MISO HAPPY

Lively izakaya restaurants could be the next wave in Asian dining

By Scott Gardner • Photography by Randall Cosco



THE ALTERNATIVE PUB

At Jason Ault's izakaya Hapa in Vancouver, small plates and a raucous atmosphere are the norm — a far cry from the demure sushi house we've come to associate with Japanese dining rooms.

It's 7p.m. Thursday night and Justin Ault's sleek black restaurant Hapa on Vancouver's Robson St. is seriously happening. Tables are packed with small plates of tapas, liquor is being quaffed freely from chilled tumblers, cooks in the open kitchen shout updates to servers on the floor, and all the staff greet incoming guests with hearty cries of "Irrashaimase!"

Yes, irrashaimase — that's "Welcome" or "Come in" in Japanese, and all that kitchen-server chatter is also in a high-speed, high-volume East-meets-West patois. Even more disorienting, the tables are low and many recently de-shoed first-timers are wishing their companions had warned them to wear better socks. But that's all part of the fun at Hapa — full name Hapa Izakaya — a prime example of a lively new style of Japanese restaurant that's taking off in hubs like Vancouver, New York and L.A. These joints, called "izakaya," are a far cry from the demure sushi houses that most North

Americans associate with Japanese cuisine, and as they gradually spread inland they're bringing a radically new concept of Asian dining.

"I haven't invented it," says Ault, "it's been common in Japan for years. Izakayas fill the role of the pub because they don't have the kind of watering hole where you go to catch a Leafs game with beer and wings." And he knows what he's talking about. The thirtysomething Ault is a fourth-generation Japanese-Canadian (on his mother's side) and spent a number of years in Japan learning the language as a student, and later, as a stockbroker in Tokyo,