

## We miss you, Kevin



By Michael Philippi  
Ungaretti & Harris • Restaurant Critic

**W**here in the world is Kevin Shikami? One place he isn't anymore is Shikago Restaurant, the Asian fusion restaurant that he and his brother Alan opened after the tragic closing of Kevin's, which, not too many years ago was the best thing in food to ever happen to Hubbard Street (with apologies to the venerable Shaw's Crab House). He needs to be found and extradited back to Chicago. Surely there is an outstanding parking ticket? Please come back. We will slay the fatted calf, but only if you cook it.

I have gone to Shikago four times over the past month or so. Once it was pretty good; once I was invisible at the bar for so long that I just left; and the last two times it was pretty ordinary.

This venue has all the potential in the world. It is in an underserved location in the heart of the financial district, walking distance for about a million bankers and lawyers with clients to impress. It is a nice lunch, but not a great one, and it could be a great one. The space is as cold and industrial as Kevin's was warm and inviting. The attempt at warehouse space vaguely split with a screen makes it seem unfinished, like the black-and-white walls that apparently started out white and were rolled black until they ran out of paint and someone decided that it was art.

The tables are heavy, rough-hewn wood and look like they should support great hearty plates of spicy food and icy cold steins of cold beer, but they don't. They support delicate cups in off-center saucers of tea and little ducts of lukewarm sake. In fairness, there are some good plates, like the signature Sizzle Plates. Try the boneless skinless chicken breast, which came, as advertised, sizzling, in an acceptable teriyaki sauce, with a vegetable stir fry and mashed potatoes that would have been fine if

they didn't come from a box, which I am pretty sure they did. I've had this same dish before, and the way to go is double veggies, pass on the taters.

The menu also includes Banh Mi Sandwiches, which are basically Vietnamese sub sandwiches, served on a roll with veggies and either short rib, tofu, chicken breast or pulled pork. They are served with pretty good french fries, coleslaw and a nice aioli and pate spread with a little of spice. It's a little pricey for a sub, but a legitimate choice given the venue.

The problem is that Shikago wants to be a sushi restaurant and either it needs to be a better one or it needs to get out of the sushi business. Harsh, I know, and the sushi is okay, but you expect so much more from a place like this and what you get is ordinary sushi. The tekka maki came in the traditional six little rolls. Of our six, two fell apart because the nori wasn't wrapped all the way around.

Cucumber rolls come with the order but unless you are on a medically restricted bland diet there is no reason to eat them.

I had high hopes for the red dragon roll — shrimp tempura, spicy mayo, spicy tuna and an unagi sauce. What I got was okay, but expectations outpaced reality, which was bland, lukewarm to cold and on the mushy side.

The Vietnamese spring rolls were great. They were what one should expect — a surprising mix of greens, mango, papaya and basil circling a core of tender and salty short rib. Sweet, salty, crunchy, all held together tightly by a well-crafted rice paper wrap. Together it is a blend of flavors from disparate foods, which, when combined, burst into a new and creative taste far more flavorful than any of the ingredients alone — you know, like fusion.

The salads are good too, the best being the seared tuna and avocado. A half-dozen gen-

erous pieces of thick blackened ahi over surprisingly few little pieces of avocado, along with a mound of mixed greens with a light Asian dressing. Beautifully presented and marred only because it would have been so very much better if there was a little spice.

I like the idea of Shikago so much I think it deserves another try or two, but not three. Kevin, whatever we did, we're sorry, please come home.

**Lagniappe:** All this talk about sushi made me remember that there is ridiculously good food in this city in the strangest places if you know where to look. Take for example the now legendary Heaven on Seven, hidden in the Garland building. Or possibly my favorite, the Oasis Cafe, the tiny Middle Eastern dive in the back of the Jewelers mart on Wabash that might have the best falafel in the city.


**Travelers' Tip:** If you haven't found a way to get to New Orleans post-Katrina, start working on it because there is no better food on the planet. I have a thousand tips for eating in the Crescent City, but the one that you get today is La Petite Grocery. Deep in Uptown, a \$5 cab ride from the Quarter, you will find this flower shop transformed into the kind of casual fine dining that only exists in this city. Crusty warm bread, innovative soups, braised pork shanks over stone grits or the finest cheeseburger south of the Mason-Dixon Line. ■

### Pleadings:

Shikago Restaurant  
190 South LaSalle, Chicago  
(312) 781-7300

### Court costs:

Appetizers: \$4-\$13  
Entrees: \$14-\$31  
Sushi: \$8-\$25

**Verdict:** 

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