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DINING REVIEW

Scene | Food

Mexican/ Asian mix puts zing in Zengo

By Kyle Wagner
Denver Post Dining Critic

The hostess eyed us closely. She was wearing one of those tight, black outfits that women's magazines say transition well from day to night, which is to say, she was better dressed than we.

At this point I half expected to be asked for a retinal scan to prove our worthiness, but after poking at her computer screen several times, she announced that even though the restaurant was full, she could seat us at the ceviche bar.

And thus we were granted entree into the Zengo universe.

Zengo, in tony Riverfront Park, is the next piece of the culinary puzzle being assembled by restaurateur Richard Sandoval, who in this town has made a name for himself with Tamayo in Larimer Square.

Sandoval's primary passion has been upscale cuisine from his native Mexico, and it is those flavors he wraps around the similarly bold, sharp bites of Asian cooking, particularly Japanese, at Zengo.

It's not as weird as it sounds; forget cheese-gloppy burritos and teriyaki. The marriage of Latin and Asian flavors works because the cuisines share a common love of fresh seafood, using chiles and sweetness to bring up other flavors, contrasting cooling and heating elements.

The Japanese name translates as "give and take," and

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that certainly fits here. You give Zengo a bunch of money, and that allows your taste buds to take away the memories of flavor combinations unlike any other in town.

The presentations follow suit. This is food as architecture, dishes as I.M. Pei would envision. Plates serve as foundations, fish and meats as building blocks; chiles are doorways to other flavors; guacamole is stabilizer. Sauces are the first floor instead of the plaster, while garnishes are integral components rather than window dressing.

It helps that the food is presented in a worthy space, moderne enough to make all diners immediately hipper, even if they aren't wearing all black. By the time the lights fade outside and the colors meld inside, it feels as though you're sitting in a giant, orange Jolly Rancher.

Red peeks through the orange plate-glass light fixtures above the exposition kitchen, and bunched-up orange fabric makes the line of booths in the back comfy. A couch-filled bar and ceviche bar lined with square-topped stools fill one side of the main dining area, which is set off from a back room full of red banquettes by a see-through divider of metal bubbles.

The hostesses hopped up on haughty pills notwithstanding, the service at Zengo works it, no wasted motion but friendly. They're eager to turn Zengo newbies on to the unique menu, which features three panels of meal options.

"We suggest two from the first column, two from the second, and then split one from the third," they'll say, and for two diners that turns out to be a great idea, since chef de cuisine Troy Guard, who grew up in Hawaii and trained with restaurateur Roy Yamaguchi (of Roy's fame), runs a tight ship of about a dozen talented chefs.



Glen M.

The winning won ton tacos hold diced ahi, sushi rice, pickled ginger and mango

Zengo

LATIN, ASIAN | 1610 Little Raven St., 720-904-0965 | ★ ★ ★ ½

Atmosphere: Sleek and groovy, classy see-and-be-seen scene. Great outdoor patio.

Service: Efficient and friendly.

Wine list: Skip it for a cucumber-garnished mojito, top-shelf margarita or sake instead.

Dinner entrees: \$8-\$27 (Kobe beef extra).

Open 5 to 10:30 p.m. Sunday-Thursday; 5 to 11 p.m. Friday-Saturday. All major credit cards; valet or street parking; medium-noisy; smoking in bar and lounge only; no reservations
2 visits

(\$24), sliced Angus beef in an elixir of ginger, serrano chiles and black peppers, the onions wok-tossed with the slivers of beef adding their juices, too. And black cod (\$22) had been brushed against an aioli thinned with lemon and spiced with *togarashi*, a fiery Japanese red chile.

If you have room for only one dessert, make it churros

and chocolate (\$9). The fried strips of dough arrived hot and liberally sprinkled with sugar, a perfect foil for the slightly bitter, slightly frozen chocolate parfait.

You're worth it, no matter what that hostess says.

Dining critic Kyle Wagner can be reached at 303-820-1958 or kwagner@denverpost.com.