

# Jurin

Helen Greenwood, reviewer

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**Little dishes with big flavours are the signature of this hidden Japanese gem.**

Exhilarating . . . Jurin's provides a "whirl of sensations".

**Address**

316 Pacific Highway, Crows Nest

**Phone**

9966 5811

**Style**

Restaurants

**Cuisine**

Japanese

**Hours**

Tues-Fri, noon-2.30pm; Tues-Sun, 6-9pm

JURIN is an inconspicuous restaurant, marked only by discreet, deep-red noren curtains and stylised calligraphy.

The reason we're parting the curtains this Sunday night is on the say so of a regular who owns a Chinese restaurant in the neighbourhood. He has one simple suggestion for us: ignore the huge a la carte menu and order off the specials board.

It's a keen piece of advice. The specials are handwritten on a greenish perspex board, where the waitresses congregate on their way to the kitchen, and they change frequently. They sound as if they are plucked from the markets according to the cook's fancy.

Tonight's 18 offerings go from deep-fried school prawns to braised alfonsino, stopping along the way to throw in roast duck, iberico jamon, dried mullet roe, deep-fried leather jacket and Japanese turnip.

We don't know it at the time but alfonsino is usually marketed as imperador and hails from Australia's eastern waters. Ignorance is not only bliss but also an incentive, so we can't resist.

Our curiosity is rewarded with a handsome fish with a silvery-red skin and large eyes. Those of you who are squeamish be warned: the dish arrives with two heads, beautifully arranged.

If, however, you're into the kind of extreme eating that the American chef and adventurer Anthony Bourdain revels in, then you'll love the fish's wonderful sweet, firm flesh and a delicate skin that enjoys a sticky soy and sake, mirin-based sauce.

The school prawns are less of a culinary challenge, especially if, like me, you're not averse to eating a charred prawn tail. They are all crunchy transparent shell and heads, deftly seasoned.

The little meat we can find is surprisingly chalky rather than springy. Still, it's a pleasure to dip their translucent shells into a light sauce and savour the saltiness.

These are just two of the eight plates that we easily work our way through this Sunday evening.

We are sitting on a comfortable burgundy banquette that lines a brown suede backing. We're directly opposite the sushi counter, a handsome slab of shark-skin grey-green marble topped with the usual glass cabinet. About half a dozen high-backed wooden stools are perched around the generous rim of the marble.



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Jurin looks like it has been freshly redecorated. The walls are blocks of colour: orange, red and purple-grey. Metallic-grey place mats top the dozen or so grey laminated tables and the floor is a kind of concrete.

Above the sushi bar is a shelf of sake, just to the left of a scattering of origami shapes pinned to the wall. Manager, Masa Kakinuma, suggests sake number four from the left. No complaints.

We move on to sea urchin sashimi and it's wondrous. Coloured peachy pink with almond and pinenut-like tones, it is even more beautiful when you wrap it in the nori sheets.

Next is a dish of fat white udon that are deceptively delicate. They bounce vividly into life when the black sesame paste with a dash of chilli is scraped out of its serving dish on to the cold noodles.

Tempura burdock, with its paper-thin batter, rangy bitter notes and traditional dipping sauce, settles the stomach and cleanses the palate.

This is followed by clam miso soup with the tiniest molluscs, no bigger than a fingernail. I prise each of the miniscule morsels from the shell even though they are mild tasting. They do, however, infuse the miso with distinctly vongole-type undertones.

Jako chazuke is an impulse order and traditionally ends a meal. This rice dish is spiced with wasabi, sansho pepper and green tea, then garnished with minute semi-dried fish. Again, it's settling, subtle and surprising.

We finish with the spanish mackerel, whose whorled steaks are grilled, fragrant and flaky. They have an usukuchi shoyu sauce spiked with mirin, sake, sesame, chilli and konbu.

I'm so exhilarated by the whirl of sensations that I can't stop. Nor can I ever resist the words "red bean". But I am on my own with this one. Happily. The red bean soup has grilled puffed crisp rice cakes in a thin liquid that would be sweet if it weren't for the dash of salt - my idea of a good finish.

In case you're thinking that we are outlandishly greedy, most of the tables around us are doing the same as us, basically a DIY degustation. Small plates, big flavours.

They are young families, dating pairs and very mod Japanese youths mingling with their non-Japanese friends. I'm told that Jurin is a favourite haunt among sushi chefs and Hong Kong businessmen. It may look inconspicuous but it's got great word of mouth.

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