

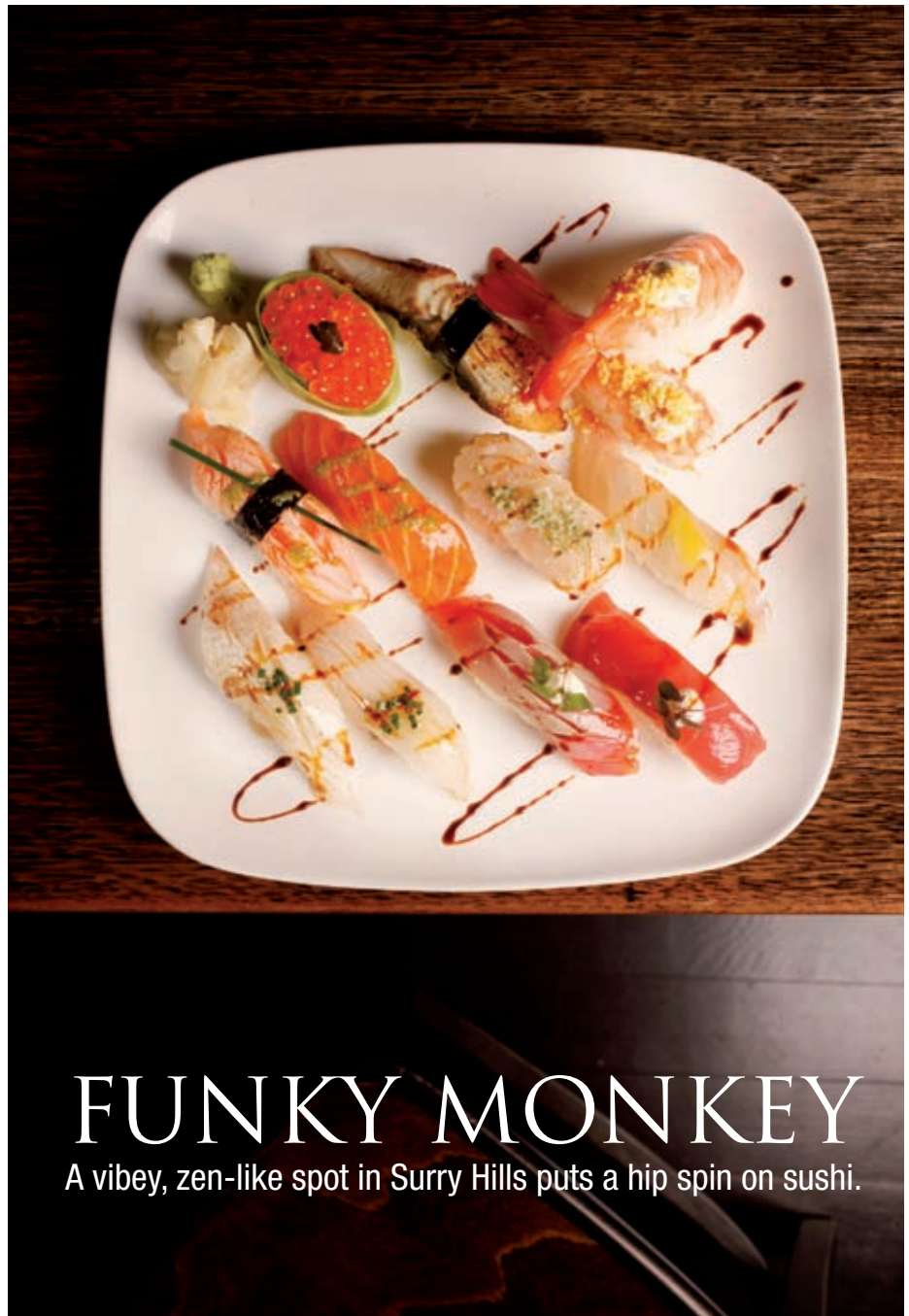
Since it opened last summer, Monkey Magic (named in honour of the cult TV show *Monkey*) has added its authentic Japanese flair to the culinary delights of Crown Street, Surry Hills. The ambience has a dramatic simplicity, starting with the towering cluster of tree trunks in the lobby lounge, where patrons can meet for a pre-dinner drink. A steep flight of stairs leads to the main dining area, which features earthy textures: wooden slatted panels, exposed brickwork and rustic metal screens. Different seating options range from banquettes to high-backed stools, with long group tables at the rear. This clever, airy layout helps to reduce the noise level even when the place fills up. The waiting staff are friendly and informative. Keeping a watchful eye over the proceedings is the hands-on manager, Hidetoshi Tsuboi, who was born in Nagoya and worked in Tokyo before moving to Sydney seven years ago.

We shared a selection of dishes, all presented with the artistry and attention to detail for which Japanese cuisine is renowned. The salt and pepper cuttlefish (\$11) was accompanied by bean sprouts laced with coriander and chilli. The cuttlefish was chewy yet tender, while the salt and pepper was well balanced and not overpowering. Almost too beautiful to disturb were the crab leaves (\$13 for 3 pieces), each morsel sitting on a betel leaf which Hidetoshi advised should be rolled up to consume. The juicy shredded crab meat emitted delicate lime and ginger flavours, followed by a zing of chilli.

Next we tried the Monkey Magic sushi selection (\$20 for 6 pieces), teaming pairs of raw salmon, tuna and kingfish. Each fresh segment of fish clung dutifully to its base of rice and was drizzled with a complementing sauce. Exploring the seafood further, we chose teriyaki salmon (\$23) as a main dish. The chunk of salmon was succulent, correctly cooked with a light touch and served with ultra-crunchy lotus root pinwheels. The coating of teriyaki sauce was mercifully not too salty, avoiding the persistent thirst that lingers after the teriyaki experience at some restaurants.

We recommend trying the Japanese-style desserts. The banana, chocolate and shiso harumaki (\$12) consisted of diagonal segments of pastry, slightly reminiscent in texture to a spring roll. The sweet filling of sticky banana smothered in saucy chocolate was offset by a side serving of green tea ice cream and raspberry coulis. The nashi pear and apple pithiviers (\$12) combined a delectable harmony of fruity flavours inside a cushion of puff pastry. Accompanying this creation were vanilla icecream in a brandy basket and a miniature pot of butterscotch sauce.

Monkey Magic is fully licensed (no BYO). Sake starts at \$11 and the “sake



FUNKY MONKEY

A vibey, zen-like spot in Surry Hills puts a hip spin on sushi.

INFORMATION

410 Crown Street, Surry Hills
Ph (02) 9358 4444
Monday to Saturday 6pm-11pm
(last orders 10pm); closed Sunday

metre value” from sweet to dry is helpfully explained on the wine list. To enhance our seafood choices, the Clifford Bay sauvignon blanc from New Zealand (\$9 glass; \$42 bottle) proved a perfect match. Also available are Japanese beers (from \$8), local beers (from \$6), a wide range of spirits (from \$8) and exotic cocktails like the “Hachi-Mitsu” with vodka, plum wine and orange blossom honey water (\$15).

Monkey Magic will appeal to health-conscious diners particular about their Japanese. Due to its zen-like atmosphere



and approach, we left feeling healthy and calm rather than needing to dance our diners off. ■■■