

Helen Lucy Burke enjoys the splendours of Japan in



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## Art In The Land Of The Rising Bill

IT was past midnight on a balmy evening in West Cork. Our host led us through the dark garden to a clump of sword-shaped leaves from which rose a spike about 10 feet high. Agave flowers clustered as thickly on it as Brussels sprouts. Shaped like giant croci, they were gleaming white, flushed with rose; earlier, they had adorned the work of art which was our pudding plate. They will be my abiding memory of the Shiro Japanese restaurant in Ahakista.

Westerners serve a piece of meat which looks plainly as if it were cut from an animal, and similarly with fish. The Japanese use their art to turn raw fish — essentially dead bodies — into gleaming translucent coral shapes which are a kind of edible jewellery. The Shiro has won many commendations. Rather to my surprise, it is heavily patronised by locals. Pricey is the word for it, so West Cork must be loaded. On several points I feel I must offer a cautionary word: one of my fellow diners remarked that the wine-list was "saucy" by which she meant that a certain rather down-market wine, selling for £12.50 in one of Cork's top restaurants, was £17 here, and that was by no means the only example. Saki was about 40% dearer than is charged by the Ayumi-ya in Blackrock.

Tea and coffee — *be warned* — cost £2. And an unobtrusive line on the menu indicates that if you pay by credit-card the price rises by 5%, which I had understood was against the rules of the credit

card companies.

There is a standard dinner-menu costing ostensibly £24, but realistically think of £26, as everyone automatically orders tea or coffee. The prices for these are (curiously) on the wine-list, so the nasty extra shock hits you only with the bill.

But except for the soup and the dullish main courses, it was a splendid meal, as much an adventure as a gross satisfying of hunger. Our host was a trim little German ex-Luftwaffe airman, Werner Pilz, married to Japanese Keiko Kono. *She* does the cooking, and *he* the waiting and butling, attired in a Japanese pinny. Don't imagine a Madam Butterfly figure toiling over the stove in kimono; Keiko wears jeans.

If there is such a thing as Japanese Victoriana, you have it in the two dining-rooms. I pinched myself in astonishment at the variety of artefacts, Eastern and Western, which include a range of old flat-irons, and a positive grove of bonsai trees. As the house was an old parochial house, the decision to go thataway was probably wiser than attempting to recreate a Teahouse of the August Moon. Only two parties can be accommodated at a time, one per dining-room, seated conventionally at mahogany tables.

The set dinner starts with two courses of appetizers: Zensai, "which is a collection of various Japanese appetisers" and Moriwase "A delicate snack comprising of Egg dishes and Sushi". Glorious was the only word to

describe them. Each set came on its own lacquer tray, which in turn held little dishes of differing shapes. In the first course, a leaf-shaped dish held fried lotus root (like a fried doiley in appearance) and two lengths of beef sausage. Tofu with tuna-fish shavings on top like fishy candy-floss was in a square dish, and a fish custard, made with "fish-flour" according to our host, had a coiled thing on top and was in a covered dish. Squid with caviar on top was almost ordinary beside this, but we moved further into the heart of darkness with the *Shiitake* (cloud-ear) mushrooms.

Second courses were laid out on a long rectangular black dish: of course *Noritaki* was there — two pieces of rice sausage in a seaweed skin, a tiny dish of dipping sauce, a pile of grated green ginger, and some puzzling pieces that tasted like a sweet omelette. All ravishing, like the nicest kind of doll's supper. Soup which followed was not so successful, we thought. It was not much more than tepid, and the *tofu* (bean-curd) squares in it were tough and the broth seemed as if it were run up from soya sauce and water.

Some other members of the party professed to be very happy with their main course of charmingly laid out raw fish. My guest and I did not score lucky. He had tempura (selection of fish and vegetables in batter, like the Italian *fritto misto*) served on a strong little wooden board with legs. A shaggy looking tempura, not like the deep-fried tissue