

Restaurant Review: Shimbashi Soba/Jugemu

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If you want authentic Japanese food in Sydney at accessible prices, venture northside to the twin restaurants Shimbashi Soba/Jugemu in Neutral Bay.

By accessible, I don't mean dirt cheap, just not expensive or exorbitant.

Because Japanese food is categorised as Asian, it's assumed to be comparable to Thai, Vietnamese etc cuisine in price, but just remember, Japanese food uses very different (and expensive imported) ingredients. So cheap Japanese usually implies inferior quality.

Shimbashi/Jugemu is an attractive eatery where chefs use quality ingredients, adhere to Japanese presentation principles (like using real bamboo leaves and shiso leaves), and dishes are served in classy dishes. Yet the prices are very reasonable, from little entrees you can munch with your Asahi beer like Soba Chips (\$5), Edamame (frozen of course, but only \$6) and beautifully presented and delicious Kamo-Shio-grilled slices of duck—for only \$15.

Bigger dishes like the Tempura Moriawase (assorted tempura) is \$20 and the Aburi Sushi (nigiri sushi where the toppings are grilled, we recommend this as there is a paucity of good fish around these days so sushi can be disappointing) is \$28.

The most confusing thing about this restaurant is the menu. Shimbashi Soba/Jugemu is like Albury/Wodonga—two restaurants right next to each other. The idea is that Shimbashi Soba is a soba restaurant and Jugemu is a Teppanyaki restaurant. But it doesn't matter where you sit, you can order from both menus, and the menu is so huge, items should be numbered, but that's just uncouth.

Soba fans might remember the old Shimbashi Soba in Neutral Bay from years ago, which moved to Woolloomooloo around 2000. The owners, the Shibazaki's have now moved to Queensland, so this Shimbashi Soba is not related to them, except that the soba chef in this new restaurant was an apprentice under Mr. Shibazaki.

And that's the best thing about these twin eateries—the soba. Made with buckwheat from Tasmania, the soba is beautifully crafted, fresh and delicate. The soba sauce can sometimes be a bit salty, but the soba is always perfect.

So the idea is to order a lot of small dishes from both menus (we like Satsuma Age or fish cakes \$7, Asparagus Wrapped with Pork \$16, Hotate Butter Yaki or scallops grilled with butter \$18), which you must share with your fellow diners (don't polish off your order by yourself—that's not how you eat in Japan), but you can order your own soba dish and you can polish that off all by yourself. The udon is not hand made, but they plan to hand make that soon. The day we went, there was a great special—three kinds of soba—lemon, green tea, and normal soba.

There is a teppanyaki bar where you can watch the chefs at work, and that's where all the grilled dishes come from. There is Okonomiyaki, Japanese pancakes which are richly covered with mayonnaise and tonkatsu sauce. Not our recommendation, as we feel you can easily make these at home (we do when we don't want to cook). I heard someone express disappointment that the chefs didn't throw their knives around. That's not Japanese,

it's a western rendition of teppanyaki, and if you want that, you're going to have to go to an inauthentic Japanese restaurant, or back to the 1970's.

The wait staff is very helpful (and good looking), unlike a lot of Japanese restaurants that use working holidayers who don't speak English. But the kitchen can be slow, so be prepared to wait a long time between orders. We've ordered Teriyaki Chicken on two different visits, and it took ages.

We heard that Sydney Morning Herald is publishing a review in the next week or so, and the reviewer was impressed with the Gyoza and Wagyu Dice Steak. Not our favourites I'm afraid, but there's certainly enough at Shimbashi/Jugemu to tempt and satisfy all palates. We hear that there are expansion plans to put an up-market tempura bar upstairs. We can't wait. Definitely book before you go. If you get there just on 7 p.m. when the clearway ends, you can park right in front of the door.

246 Military Rd

Neutral Bay NSW 2089

Phone (02) 9904 3011

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