

The Where: Mizu, Hibachi/Japanese Fusion. 1370 South Ribaut Rd., Port Royal

The What: Bento Box lunch



This just might be the original lunch box, and I don't mean like the one you had in the first grade with Mickey Mouse or the Smurfs or Transformers all over it. Bento is a centuries old tradition in Japanese cuisine that has as much to do with the quality of the meal as it does with the aesthetics of the meal's presentation. Japanese cooks were creating beautiful forms of edible art as an afterthought while most of Europe was still rolling around in the muck of the Dark Ages gnawing on whatever was available. It is said that a traditional black-lacquered bento box was the inspiration for the original laptop computer, an appropriate tribute to something designed to be sleek, efficient and full of good things. And bento is also the original box lunch. Hundreds of years before Happy Meals, take-out or the ubiquitous Styrofoam "to go" box, the Japanese were enjoying good food on the go, bento style. In fact the compartmentalized design of the traditional bento box was the basis for those Styrofoam containers.

So, when we heard about the bento at Mizu, we decided to put a lunch crew together and check it out. Forget the suspense, we were not disappointed. In fact, the opinion was unanimous: for fans of Asian cuisine, this is one of the best dining values in the Lowcountry. For less than ten bucks (before tax) the meal includes a choice of soup or salad, the box comes filled with a spring roll, a California roll, pickled ginger, a generous portion of rice and a choice of one of thirteen entrees. These run the gamut of teriyaki dishes to tempura shrimp and chicken as well as tonkatsu and chicken katsu (lightly breaded and fried pork and chicken, respectively).

The table orders up three teriyakis (shrimp, chicken and salmon) and the chicken katsu. The service is prompt and professional as is the kitchen. The first course comes out almost immediately. The garden salad is fresh, crisp and clean, tossed with Mizu's house-made ginger dressing. Like all of Mizu's soups and sauces, only the freshest ingredients are used and absolutely no preservatives are incorporated. The miso, a breakfast staple in Japan, is richer and layered with much more flavor and depth than the thin watery broth that is so often the norm in these parts – a simple thing done remarkably well. The same can be said of the bento. As the remnants of the soup and salad are cleared away, each meal is greeted with a little bit of awe. The presentation is inspired, each compartment of the box filled with an immaculately arranged and prepared delicacy. "Presentation is very important," says Mizu owner Selly Roshto. "We just don't throw it out there. It has to be pleasing to the eye as well as the palate." She also makes certain that what goes on the plate or in the box is as fresh and local as possible. The sushi is top notch and the sushi bar ranks as a "find" on its own.

My teriyaki shrimp is perfect, there's just no other descriptive, and the kudos continue around the table. The entrées are prepared with care and attention, nothing is overcooked or undercooked – not even the salmon, and the portions are generous. Even the vegetables accompanying the entrees are just right, adding color and crispness to the chef's creation.

Something else becomes extremely apparent: this is all very healthy, proof that good food can be good for you without compromise.

Long silences at the table during these gatherings are usually a good thing. Someone finally sums it up, “Just a beautiful presentation. And this was a lot of food – *a lot of food* – and everything was excellent.”

Mizu serves lunch Monday – Saturday 11:00 – 3:00, Sunday brunch 12:00 – 4:30, Dinner Sunday – Thursday 4:30 – 10:00, Friday & Saturday 4:30 – 11:00

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