

Eastern promise that's not afraid to make itself heard above the din

O Oliver

Arriving at Issho Japanese restaurant and bar is a bit like entering a discreet, members-only club.

After a circuit of Victoria Gate, Leeds's latest shopping mall where even the sandwich bars are improb-

ably glamorous, we locate a side alley and a lift that whisks us silently to the third floor. It was to be the last silence of the evening.

The din of loud music in the bar is redoubled by a well-oiled leaving party. Steady rain means there is no retreat to the attractive looking rooftop terrace bar.

We order cocktails, a summery non-alcoholic Basil Refresher and a punchier Toyko Punch. Mysteriously subtitled "praying mantises hatch", it's a vodka, raspberry and Prosecco mix at £9.50.

It's that sort of place.

The sort of place that's owned and financed by the D&D upmarket restaurant group which also has expensive upstairs outfits in the shape of Angelica and Craft-house in Trinity Leeds.

No sooner have we got our drinks than the staff are taking

them and us to our table in a handsome long room of 200-plus covers with acres of light oak and de rigueur shiny open kitchen.

It's quieter but not by much as we're seated next to a private dining room that got progressively rowdy.

Still that doesn't bother our daughter who has joined us from a sleepless 15-hour flight from Tokyo, ready with a jet-lag appetite and an appreciation of all things Japanese.

We need maki, she says, and sashimi, robata, bao buns, hot dishes, cold dishes, raw dishes and sake – on ice, naturally.

Our ever-present North American waitress talks us through the menu and brings sake cups on a tray. When she has established our daughter is familiar with sake, she lets her go for her chosen Tosatsuru Azure (£10), a "premium rice sake with

added brewer's alcohol". For me, the inexperienced sake drinker, she recommends the "easy drinking" Dassai 39 (£9).

Both arrive in a ceramic flask embedded in crushed ice. Only faintly alcoholic, it goes well with the sashimi. I'm yet to fully appreciate the subtleties of one of the world's revered drinks.

After two weeks living frugally on the last remnants of a student loan our daughter is keen to trade up.

Except for the predictably pricey wagyu beef (£38) and fish on the bone, we work through most sections of the menu at prices for small plates ranging from £3 to £17.

Executive chef Ben Orpwood does not sound as if he has deep Japanese heritage but his take on Japanese food is a step up from your average sushi bar. Sashimi

on more crushed ice brings salmon firm and sea-fresh.

Smoked eel wafts up with a wonderful campy fire smokiness.

Soft shell crab is hefted with the crunch of batter and a thwack of wasabi. Fat little

California maki rolls are stuffed with crab, avocado and fish roe.

A doughy steamed bao bun stuffed with sticky spiced pork is a comparative snip at £4. Two stand-out dishes are sea bream grilled with salt and sesame and a tangy ponzu sauce and worth its £13 tag and the miso marinated black cod at £25.

The soft yielding fish is marinated in sake, mirin and miso then char-grilled to a pleasing sticky-sweetness. It's very good, but between three it's a bit of a scramble for a decent mouthful.

Nine small plates you might think would be enough but the waitress advises a couple more. Some salads

perhaps?

It may be English reserve but I'm starting to feel uncomfortable with all this helpfulness. Is it enthusiasm or salesmanship?

The grilled courgette slices she suggests are fine but not a patch on the bowl of cherry tomatoes doused in a slithery sauce of whipped tofu, sherry vinegar and sesame which is something I've never tasted before, a heavenly sweet/sharp combination.

Desserts bring meringue with an astringent yuzu curd and a plate of delightful little sugary doughnuts, as fluffy as clouds with two dipping sauces of yuzu curd and chocolate ganache.

There you have it, a new high-end, contemporary Japanese restaurant for Leeds. It's cool, it's glamorous, it's just a little bit pushy and its prices ensure a measure of exclusivity, even celebrity. It's the sort of place to impress your out-of-town friends with if you're feeling flush.

It's also part of that broad swathe of new sophisticated bars and restaurants which wallow in (not always misplaced) self-belief, which is, by extension, a statement of the city's own aspirations and sense of grandeur.

Yes, that was a Yorkshire and England cricketer eating on one of the stools. Yes, it was noisy but the food made all the best noises.

Dinner for two, including wine and service came to £125.

FACTFILE

ISSHO, VICTORIA GATE, LEEDS

Address: Victoria St, Leeds LS2 7AU

Telephone: 0113 426 5000

Opening hours: Mon (closed), Tues-Sat noon till late. Saturday brunch 11am-3pm, Sunday 11am-5pm

Website: www.isho-restaurant.com

Email: reservations@isho-restaurant.com

Food ★★★★★

Value: ★★★★★

Atmosphere: ★★★

Service: ★★★

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