

# The Boston Globe

December 14, 2006

Sushi and more: done fast

By Bella English

Beni Cafe

Location: 405 Hancock St., Quincy; 617-657-0008

Cuisine: Japanese/Sushi/Korean

Prices: \$2-\$12

Hours: Sun-Thurs 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Fri-Sat 11 a.m.-11 p.m.

Handicap access: Wheelchair accessible.

One doesn't normally associate sushi with fast food, unless it's the sketchy sort sold at the grocery store. But Beni Cafe, which just opened in North Quincy, offers fresh sushi, quick and cheap. Well, cheap for sushi. You can get a spicy tuna/spicy salmon maki combo (12 pieces) for \$6.50, and the most expensive item on the menu (a dozen unagi/ebi/tamago/caterpillar pieces) is \$12. In sushi land, it's a steal.

There's much more at this corner restaurant, which is doing a brisk takeout business. Its few tables are constantly filled, and so are the three computer stations the owners have installed, the better to stay connected (for free). Customers are waiting in line for a warm bowl of miso soup studded with tofu (\$1.50), a crunchy seaweed salad (\$3), and a spicy tuna wrap (\$6.50). There are teriyaki dishes, ramen dishes, and rice bowls turned out with incredible speed in the small open kitchen.

We wondered about the sweet potato fries (\$2), which stick out like a hamburger would at this all-Asian eatery. But as it turns out, they're done with an Asian twist: in a tempura batter. They're wonderfully crunchy and flavorful, served with spicy ketchup, and already a favorite with the North Quincy High School crowd, just down the street.

This is the fourth venture of partners — and North Quincy High graduates — Jimmy Lliang and Peter Tse. The men opened Fuji further down on Hancock Street several years ago, sold it, and opened Fuji 1546, a stylish, popular restaurant and bar in Quincy Center. There's an Asian bakery in the Wollaston section of Quincy. The Beni Cafe is their attempt to capture people who want good food without the fancy trappings. You order at the counter from a menu that is posted on flat-screen TVs, then either take it home, or head to a table with red plastic chairs that blend nicely with the warm red walls.

The menu is simple, says Lliang, to keep the prices down. "Sushi is very labor intensive," he said one recent day, as he turned out several orders of spicy tuna maki. By offering limited choices (and with no waiters) he hopes customers find the food in their price range. "It's quick and casual, not really fast food but not exactly sit down."

After miso soup and seaweed salad, move on to the shumai (\$3.25), the shrimp dumplings that are melt-in-your-mouth tender. The rice bowls are popular here: big portions of white rice with curried chicken or pork (\$7). We loved the chicken version with its crispy skin and medley of carrots, celery, and onions — a meal in one bowl. Four bucks will buy you a bowl of curried rice.

Three teriyaki dishes are offered: chicken (\$5), beef (\$6), or shrimp (\$6). They're fixed right in front of you on a steaming grill and are accompanied by rice and crunchy stir-fried veggies. Try the ramen (\$7), or noodle dishes, also three offered here: miso, tonkotsu, or soy. Each has a different soup base: the dish is half noodles, half hearty soup. We tried the tonkotsu and were happy with the marinated pork slices, ground pork, and bean sprouts, bamboo shoots and bok choy. It's a great cold-weather dish.

But sushi is the main draw here; there are several maki and nigiri combinations. We sampled several and found them all superb with the freshest seafood, vegetables, and varying sauces. If you're up to dessert, try the fried ice cream (\$2.50). The shell is light, allowing the real star — ice cream from Christina's in Cambridge — to shine through. We loved the mango, and there's also coconut, green tea, and red bean. You say you want gummy bears or another topping with that? No problem: 25 cents extra.