



A LA CARTER  
**SYLVIA  
CARTER**

## Fugu, a fish both deadly and delicious

Last week, I ate the deadliest fish in the world.

Fugu, also known as blowfish or puffer, can kill within the hour if it is not properly cleaned and prepared. Despite its reputation for peril, it is highly prized because it is a sweet and delicious fish.

On Long Island, only one restaurant is licensed to sell fugu, Shiro of Japan in Carle Place, owned by Hiro Ishikawa and partners. The restaurant will offer fugu, this month only, because the seasonal supply is limited. (Ishikawa and his partners also own Taiko in Rockville Centre, and in the past, fugu has been offered there.)

"There is a money-back guarantee," Ishikawa said with a puckish grin, before I sampled Shiro's five-course, \$150 fugu menu. "If you die, I give you money back." Clearly, he was confident enough about it to kid around.

"Nobody died yet," Ishikawa added.

If things do go wrong, it is said that after the first half an hour the victim begins to go numb and blood pressure plummets. The poison causes the central nervous system to shut down. Although the victim remains conscious and aware of what is happening, it is a particularly cruel death; those who are about to die cannot speak, because the vocal cords are paralyzed.

None of that happened to me.

In the lush, skylit garden room of Shiro, I ate delicate, transparently thin pieces of fugu sashimi, served on a sky blue plate so that they looked almost like small clouds, served with a ponzu dipping sauce made with soy and sudachi, a Japanese citrus fruit similar to a lime. After that came a sumptuous array of sushi with fugu and other delicacies, including excellent fatty toro, the prized tuna belly.

Next came a platter containing chunks of broiled fluke in a foie gras sauce, broiled oysters in garlic sauce, crisp-fried fugu skin curled around a scallop. Then there were fried pieces of the fish skeleton. That was followed by techiri nabemono, a fugu broth in which pieces of the



Hiro Ishikawa, left, with fugu, and his partner in Shiro of Japan, Peter Faccibene, with the ingredients for techiri nabemono, below.



NEWSDAY PHOTOS / KEN SPENCER

## Fugu, a fish almost to die for

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fish were cooked at the table with enoki, shiitake and other mushrooms; mizuna, an Asian green, and other vegetables, as well as tofu. (The meal is normally served in the serene, private tatami rooms downstairs, but upon request can be served in the garden room, which is decorated with petrified wood and stone brought from Japan.)

Last, a grilled fin of the fish is briefly steeped in hot sake, the potent Japanese wine made from highly polished rice grains. The sake had the aroma of roasted fish, but it tasted more like sake.

In Japan, a license has been required to cut torafugu, the "King of Blowfish," for about the last 60 years. (There are roughly 25 edible kinds of fugu.) It is the sex organs and the guts of the fish that can cause a deadly paralysis, but expertly handled, it is safe.

Peter Faccibene, another owner of Shiro, said "fugu poison administered in the

right amount gives you a high," without death as a side effect. He hastened to add that he does not know this from personal experience. To have just the right amount for nirvana without death, however, is a dangerous balancing act.

Perhaps I experienced bliss, but it came only from being well fed.

Years ago, Nobuyoshi Kuraoaka, who owns Nippon, a Japanese restaurant in Manhattan, hired lawyers and set in motion torafugu licensing in this country, by the Torafugu Buyers Association Inc. Shiro sushi chef Nori Fujieda is certified by that body.

As with so many other fish these days, fugu is now farmed, as this one was. The fish is carefully prepared for shipping in Japan and must pass stringent inspections upon arrival here, to ensure its purity.

Samurai used to eat fugu before going into battle, for strength, Ishikawa said. But many of them died before the battles started.

In 1890, when Japan's prime minister visited a resort, rough seas prevented fishing for a few days. The hostess threw caution to the winds and served fugu to him, as it was what was available. The next day, he inquired, "What was the fish last night?"

The woman confessed, and the politician, instead of being angry, championed the notion that the delicious fish should be served.

Ishikawa himself said he would not eat fugu if there was the slightest chance of its being deadly.

"Why bet your life?" he said. "You die for your lover, you die for your mother, you die for your country, but you don't die for food."

Fugu is served only by reservation, to groups of at least four people. The meal described above is \$150 a person before tax and tip; an alternative five-course meal without fugu is \$100. Shiro of Japan is at 501 Old Country Rd. in Carle Place. Call 516-997-4770 or reserve by e-mailing [peter@shiroofjapan.com](mailto:peter@shiroofjapan.com).