



## Tanuki

413 NW 21st Ave., Portland, OR 503-241-7667, [tanukipdx.com](http://tanukipdx.com)

**Wildly popular in Vancouver, B.C.**, “izakayas”—Japanese bars that serve small plates of food to accompany sake and beer—remain few and far between on Portland’s dining scene. There’s Syun in Hillsboro, Biwa in Southeast Portland, and now Tanuki in the Northwest quadrant. For the time being, the Japanese practice of hashigo sake, literally “lad-der drinking” (“barhopping” to English-speakers), before catching a ride home is out of the question.

That’s all right, really. Because once you enter Tanuki and order your first round of kushiyaki—skewers of miso-glazed scallops, shoyu-cured pork belly, sesame tofu, or hot-and-sour wild boar—chances are, you aren’t going anywhere else anyway.

A hole in the wall with seating for 15, maybe 20 diners, Tanuki isn’t the most spacious or comfortable environs by any measure. Japanese all-girl punk-rock bands rule the sound system, samurai movies play on a television over the sake-and-beer-stocked refrigerator behind the bar, and the air emanating from the kitchen can get smoky when the orders start piling in.

But the deliriously delicious food makes any shortcomings in ambiance worth the while: once the plates start arriving, all other senses take a back seat to taste.

The raucous surroundings receded when I took my first bite of chilled silken tofu with cucumber salad, fresh (real) wasabi, and ginger in citrusy ponzu sauce—so heavenly light and bright were the flavors. Pork riblets braised in beer and glazed with sweet miso sauce instigated such intense finger-licking, I didn’t care who looked on. Time and space suspended as I pondered and savored the mind-blowingly complex and bold flavors contained in a bowl of slow-cooked pork belly and sake-steamed clams in kimchi broth with bean curd noodles.

Owner/chef Janis Martin began her fine dining career in Chicago at Tru and Charlie Trotter’s, then materialized in New Zealand, where she lived on a cattle and sheep farm while cooking and consulting for three- and four-star hotels. She was drawn to Portland’s culinary bounty (and, one might surmise, the city’s dearth of izakayas) last year. She honed her Japanese chops at Biwa (see our write up in the July/August 2007 issue) before opening up her own place.



**Chef Janis martin deftly balances flavors and textures in this plate of chilled silken tofu in ponzu sauce, at Tanuki in Portland.**

Martin creates each day's menu based on the ingredients she finds freshest and most inspiring. The morphing menu is uncannily appropriate for a restaurant named after a Shinto spirit creature, Tanuki, who possesses the power to shift shapes at will in the pursuit of women, sake, food, and mischief. A few dishes make regular appearances—one day the okonomiyaki, a crêpe-like griddle cake, is stuffed with bay shrimp and vegetables and topped with bonito flakes, scallions, and spicy mayo, another day succulent shreds of pork belly fill the interior.

Considering the quality of ingredients and preparation, Tanuki is a stellar value. Dishes top out at \$12–\$15, with most under \$10, including \$5 skew-ers, \$3 miso or edamame, and the must-have \$4 oshinko, an assortment of house-made pickles. Order as you go, or decide what you'd like to spend and say the magic word, "Omakase," and let the chef choose your plates. Either way, \$20 should satisfy most appetites.

If you come home missing a few extra bills, libations may very well be the cause of the empty space in your wallet. Creative cocktails include the refreshing Tanuki KintamaWa—a Japanese mojito, as it were—sake shaken with fresh citrus juice and poured over ice with shiso leaf. An exceptional selection of premium sakes is available by the bottle or eight-ounce tok-kuri, with prices ranging from the economical to the indulgent. Beer-lovers can choose from Kirin on draught, extra-large cans of Sapporo, or one of the craft beers made by Oregon's Rogue Brewery.

Something to keep in mind: An izakaya is essentially a bar, so Tanuki is not a place to bring children. Wait until you can shapeshift out of that parental guise, then enjoy an adults' night out.

Open 2–10pm, Tuesday–Saturday.

—*Peter Szymczak*