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BY *Laura Hupp*

*SILVERS OMAKASE
IS PURE GOLD*

PHOTOGRAPHY *Ryan Mayo*

Meticulously Crafted Meals

RENOWNED SUSHI CHEF LENNON SILVERS LEE OPENS A NEW SANTA BARBARA RESTAURANT FEATURING DISTINCTIVE JAPANESE TASTING MENUS.



A mural blending Japanese and local mountainscapes is the backdrop as chef Silvers Lee puts a finishing touch on a dish at the Silvers Omakase dining bar (left). A mixture of Isehikari rice and sea urchin (right) is artfully topped with Silvers branded caviar, fresh hanaho flowers, and wasabi buds.

While carefully slicing and plating sushi during dinner service at **Silvers Omakase** (silversomakase.com), executive chef and owner Lennon Silvers Lee pauses to reflect on the recent opening of this unique spot, which he calls, “a dream come true.” The omakase debuted in February in Santa Barbara’s Funk Zone, offering a chef-curated multicourse dinner at a 10-seat bar that allows each guest a front-row view of the culinary action.

Back in 2021, Lee helmed Montecito’s Sushi Bar (now Sushi by Scratch Restaurants)—owned by his brother and sister-in-law, chefs Phillip Frankland Lee and Margarita Kallas-Lee—when it was awarded a Michelin star. Lee left that post the same year to chase his dream and has spent the two and a half years since bringing his intimate restaurant to life with fine details, many of which are imported from Japan, like custom Yu Maruta ceramic tableware, Kagami crystal,

and exclusive ingredients for the menu.

Open Tuesday through Saturday, the omakase offers seatings, by reservation only, at 5 p.m., 7:15 p.m., and 9:30 p.m. Guests begin the evening in a cozy candlelit lounge for a welcoming glass of wine, champagne, or sometimes a bit of miso soup. Then, they proceed as a group to the bar in the dining room, where each is served a fixed tasting menu, printed on rice paper. The number of courses varies but hovers around 14. The focus is on *nigiri* sushi, composed of a small mound of sushi rice pressed into shape by hand and topped most often with a small piece of raw fish.

“I’m very excited about the rice,” Lee says of the hillside-grown organic Isehikari variety he uses, which is typically served only in Japan. His meticulous attention to detail and passion for his craft is on display as he works in tandem with sushi chef Nathan Lapidés, a colleague from Sushi Bar, to deliver creative combinations that stretch the boundaries of traditional nigiri.



The chef slices a deep-red center cut of bluefin tuna (top, left) that has been marinated in house shoyu and lightly grilled over Japanese charcoal. He serves it (above) with a prickly ash leaf and freshly grated wasabi on the side. Cushy seating, dramatic lighting, and a calming cloudy night wall treatment in a small lounge (left) welcome arriving guests.

"The protein should shine," says Lee. He sources most of his fish from Tokyo's famed Toyosu Market; about 15 percent comes from local fishers. "We'll get local *uni* (sea urchin) when we can, and spiny lobsters, rockfish, and spot prawns when they're in season," he says.

The menu changes frequently, but a recent course of Akami Zuke was made with a deep-red center cut of bluefin tuna marinated in house shoyu, lightly grilled over *binchotan* (Japanese charcoal), and served with a *kinome* (prickly ash) leaf on top for a hint of minty flavor and freshly grated wasabi on the side. Tuna is also featured in the decadent *chu-toro* (medium fatty) tartare, which gets a play of textures and flavors from freshly grated wasabi, *bubu arare*

(seasoned rice cracker pearls), and aged caviar branded for Silvers Omakase by Astrea Caviar. "We'll probably always have the caviar," says Lee. "It's nice to have a caviar bite on the menu."

For a meat course, thinly sliced A5 Wagyu beef rib eye is grilled over binchotan and served with Okinawan brown sugar-*sansho* (peppercorn) sauce with Périgord black truffle shaved on top. Though each inventive course is thoughtfully crafted and infused with original touches, Lee says, "I'm forever a student and never a master. I will continue to grow, and being humble is important to the growth process."

The beverage list, curated by bartender Jaime Rocha, also a Sushi Bar alum, features a selection of rare sakes and wines, alongside Japanese beers. Pairings of sake, wine, or nonalcoholic beverages are offered at an additional cost.

The cornerstone of the dining room's simple, contemporary design is a striking mural painted by Santa Barbara artist Kelly Clause. It depicts the local Santa Ynez and San Rafael mountains, the Japanese Alps, and Mount Fuji as if all were in one range. Works by Santa Barbara artist Joan Rosenberg-Dent adorn flanking walls.

"I wanted to keep it local," says Lee, "and to support the community with a cool, badass omakase for local people, with a staff that cares." ♦