

SUKEBAN, (TRANSLATED PERFECTLY)

By ANGELA RABKE Photography by DAVID RANGEL

Have you ever wondered what happens when a client declares that the inspiration for their space should be, “Tokyo Street, at the intersection of *Kill Bill* and *Lost in Translation*?” Look no further than Sukeban, a Sushi and Champagne Bar located in a corner of San Antonio’s Blue Star Arts Complex, to know the answer.



San Antonio entrepreneurs and restaurant owners Gerry and Mon Shirley wanted their third restaurant, a sushi bar, to stand out in a category that is typically defined by a sort of quiet Zen minimalism. With a perfect location that blends neighborhood foot traffic with destination diners, a unique concept, and a tight timeline to bring their idea to fruition, they enlisted San Antonio architect Rob Robbins of ryb studio to capture the concept in a unique design.

The team first worked to bring the concept to life through a character and a story. ‘Sukeban’ is the Japanese word that defines a female juvenile delinquent, or ‘Boss Girl.’ The reference is edgy, subversive and youthful. A large anime-inspired mural by Holden William Dunlop captures the restaurant’s vibe and creates a narrative that starts with the introduction of Sukeban as a character.

Guests are introduced to Sukeban’s fierce presence as they glance to their left at the host’s stand, and can follow her story as she uses her killer yo-yo to battle the Sushi Samurai, who kills by slashing open champagne bottles with his saber and directing the corks at his enemies. The murals are alive with color, sexy graphics and dramatic plotlines. The plotline develops in a clockwise direction as you move through the space from the entry, through the restaurant and into the bar. Compositionally, faces and focal points are positioned to be on path with the circulation in the space, heightening the visual experience of moving through it. Walls without the mural are equally dramatic, featuring beautiful Japanese-style burnt wood siding (Shou Sugi Ban). Traditionally, cedar was burnt in Japan to increase the wood’s resistance to insects and fire, and treating wood in this manner creates a

one-of-a-kind finish. Sukeban's burnt wood walls are yellow pine finished with linseed oil, and instead of commissioning a mill for the costly work, owner Gerry Shirley took to his backyard and patiently did all of the burning himself, one piece at a time.

Of course, the restaurant's design goes far beyond the unique walls. Initially, the room was wide open so that you could see the entire space upon entry, but the program demanded that the space be able to operate as a restaurant/bar during food-service hours, and as a bar-only after food service was closed down. To create a sense of intimacy, enhance flow and encourage a sense of arrival and discovery, Robbins designed the sushi bar to be closed off after hours, giving a more intimate feel to the bar in its stand-alone state. However, access to the restrooms and both exit doors was still required. The solution was to ring the space in banquettes that are covered in virtually indestructible champagne-colored Xorel fabric by Carnegie. Red swan chairs add a pop of color against the concrete floor, which is finished in a Sherwin Williams matt epoxy. The center of the space is designed with back-to-back bars; the sushi bar on the restaurant side and the champagne bar on the bar side. This idea mirrors a unique aspect of the restaurant's menu, which is the pairing of champagne with sushi — a surprising but delightful combination. In terms of space planning, it also creates a loop around the space that is efficient for seating, yet easy to navigate and spacious in its feel. The interjection of a soffit over the bar gives the loop a one-to-one height-to-width proportion

that makes it more intimate while appearing to be higher than the original wide-open space. Structural concrete columns and beams are painted an evocative red, creating an arch that frames the mural on the bar side.

Lighting is another important piece of the programming for Sukeban. "We wanted a darker space, which actually means quite a lot of light fixtures. Lighting is one of those things that people can't always point to — but they can feel. Good lighting makes you want to linger longer," said Robbins. By using lamps at the bars instead of hanging lights, the feel is almost more residential than commercial, and is reminiscent of the bar scene in *Lost in Translation*. The illuminated shelf system for the bar was almost cut from the budget, but Robbins turned to local sources at Studio Autoforma to get it done at a far lower cost. To further the sense of intimacy, and to enhance the relationship between customer and chef, the sushi bars were lowered, giving customers more visual access to the work of the sushi chefs.

The space feels authentic and true to the owner's intent. The murals spark lively and colorful conversations at tables. The mix of old and new materials provides visual texture. "We let the stuff that is old look old, and the stuff that is new be new," says Robbins. From the logo, which recalls subtitled Japanese films, to the employees, whose personal styles whisper of anime characters — all hats tip to Sukeban, the yo-yo wielding Boss Girl of this unique spot.



Ultimately, the restaurant opened its doors on time, just six months after design began. Robbins adds, "While there is artistry to design, there has to be efficiency in opening a business. It's rare to find a client who is willing to go there with you, but when you've got someone who is burning their own wood, it's very special. This is one of those things." ❖

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DESIGN TEAM:

Architecture and Interior Design — ryb studio
Architect — Rob Robbins, RA, LEED AP
Intern Architect and Renderings — J. Michael Berringer
Mural Artist — Holden William Dunlop
MEP Consultant — Rey Gutierrez, PE, LEED AP
Graphic Design — Paul Sparks
Lighting Consultant — Andrew Stevens
Registered Accessibility Specialist — Julie Alexander

RESOURCES:

Banquettes — Alexander Perez, TX Luxury Interiors
Banquette Fabric — Xorel®, Carnegie
Epoxy Flooring — Sherwin Williams®
Paint — Benjamin Moore® and Ralph Lauren®
Signage and Illuminated Shelving Fabrication — Robert John Mezquiti, Studio Autoforma

