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Manhattan Beach Sushi Eatery Serves Up TV Chef

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When Manhattan Beach real estate brokers Greg Harris and Jeff Benson got tired of driving to the Westside for an upscale sushi restaurant, they decided to open one of their own.

While lots of people open their own little restaurant, they did something extra. First, they spent two years planning, and then they sunk a considerable \$3 million investment in their venture, thanks to backing from friends and family. Harris and Benson call their place Sashi: Sushi and Sake Lounge.

“Manhattan Beach people like to stay in the area, and they only had your typical small place where people just go for the sushi,” Harris said. “We wanted a place where you can have drinks, appetizers and incredible food.”

But they didn’t stop there. To make Sashi what they envisioned, Harris and Benson hired chef Makoto Okuwa, known for his appearances on the Food Network’s “Iron Chef America,” a cooking competition program.

Okuwa created a menu of hot and cold dishes, including sake-steamed Chilean sea bass and a trio of sesame-and-seaweed-encrusted tuna sashimi served on skewers.

General Manager Leonard Matsumoto came to the venture after helping launch Katsuya Brentwood, Chaya Brasserie Beverly Hills and, most recently, downtown’s Takami Sushi & Robata Restaurant and Elevate Lounge.

The quartet quickly realized they had the right chemistry.

“We knew it was going to be a great partnership when we started going surfing at 6 in the morning together,” Harris said.

Benson said he would like to open more restaurants in the future, though he’ll have to see how Sashi fares first. The opening was attended by such television personalities as Kourtney Kardashian and Christopher Knight. And the owners hope that employees from nearby independent film studio Raleigh Studios will become regulars.

Restaurant consultant William H. Bender of W.H. Bender & Associates said a restaurant’s brand identity is important to its longevity and that having a noted chef such as Okuwa will be crucial.

Bender said the former real estate guys did something else important: They focused on location, location, location. The restaurant is housed in Manhattan Beach’s Metlox Plaza, which is also home to boutique hotel Shade.

“They have a good demographic with income and education living in that area,” he said. “I think that will be a definite draw for that type of restaurant.”