




## Morimoto makes spectacular splash in Napa

Michael Bauer

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Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

Kelsey Lumley (above middle) takes her brother Kyle Lumley (left) for a birthday dinner. Toro tartare, below right, includes wasabi, nori paste and sour cream. Angry Chicken, below left, is meltingly tender.

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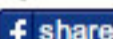
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I went to Morimoto with a bit of trepidation and skepticism. I'm familiar with chef-owner Masaharu Morimoto's wild culinary mind and his around-the-world ticket to culinary zaniness. Would it play in downtown Napa, away from the crowds that flood the upper valley in pursuit of wine tasting and the good life? I wasn't sure.

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Until recently, Napa lagged behind Yountville, St. Helena and even Calistoga, but now it's blossomed with such places as Neela's, Oenotri and Ubuntu. Still, I wondered whether it was ready for something like this - a sometimes esoteric Japanese restaurant from a celebrity chef used to working in New York.

I began to change my mind once I saw the crowds and surveyed the dining room, with its expansive warehouse look and playful touches that dovetail with the food.

The chairs are sleek and modern, as are tabletops and floors, but the designers have also added splashes of bright yellow in a tufted lounge sofa and on the

taxicab-colored French chairs. It doesn't look like other places in Napa; it's modern and vibrant, a cavernous room for 180 diners who don't mind paying more than \$30 for a main course.

Yet the designers are smart enough to subtly reference its location while maintaining the sleek, urban Japanese sensibility. Bleached and gnarled ancient grapevines snake behind the bar and on a wall in the dining room. Large windows open onto the 40-seat patio, the Napa River and beyond, a landscape dotted with warehouses and construction cranes.



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A huge fish photograph greets visitors at Morimoto, which has an interesting wine and sake list as well as great fish.

Photo: Brant Ward / The Chronicle

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