



**SUGIE'S NIGHTS** Breadbar's Noriyuki Sugie (left) has hosted pop-up dinners by the likes of (inset, from above left) *Top Chef*'s Michael Voltaggio, private chef Roberto Cortez and Bar 210's Marcel Vigneron.

## So, You Wanna Be a Pop-Up Star?

**Noriyuki Sugie's Hatchi series gives local chefs a stage for creative one-night stands**

| By Lesley Balla | Photography by Mathew Scott |

The rezzies were sold out three weeks in advance. A live band filled the bustling room with Peruvian music. Golden fried corn nuts in paper boats and miniature potato cakes topped with scallops sailed from the kitchen in droves. But the food-blogging elite who'd shown up to taste and photograph chef Ricardo Zarate's creations were not at his downtown resto, Mo-Chica.

The whole scene came together for just a single night at Breadbar at the Westfield Century City mall. Blink, and you definitely missed it.

Zarate was participating in the Hatchi series, monthly guest-chef nights hosted and organized by Breadbar's "chief gastronomy officer," Noriyuki Sugie, 38, who's at the forefront of an ephemeral dining experience that's changing the very definition of the word "restaurant" today.

In this Twitter-enabled moment, chefs have gone mobile, unleashing an all-consuming pop-up dining craze. For a week in May, Ubuntu's former chef, Jeremy Fox, transformed carnivore temple Animal into one of haute vegetarian cuisine. And Ludobites, Ludovic Lefebvre's roving pop-up that's garnered nationwide acclaim, was one of L.A.'s hardest reservations during a recent seven-week stint at downtown sandwich shop Gram and Papa's.

Amid all this, Breadbar has become a connecting force, with Sugie as unofficial conductor. The Japan-born chef, praised for his exquisite fare at Asiate at NYC's Mandarin Oriental Hotel, came to Breadbar in 2008, just after Ludobites first debuted at the original Breadbar on Third Street.

Lefebvre created a foodie sensation, turning co-owner Ali Chalabi's small bakery/café into a gutsy French-American bistro on select nights. For Breadbar's larger and newer Century City location, Sugie created his own pop-up, Crudobar. Crudobar was to run for two weeks; it stayed for six. And Sugie stayed on to curate the monthly Hatchi dinners, which are proving to be a concept kitchen for local chefs, giving them the opportunity to test new menus and approaches without having to deal with the risks of a brick-and-mortar restaurant.

"Hatchi" means "eight" in Japanese, so each menu features eight small plates priced at only \$8. Even mixologists—there's now a monthly cocktail spin-off called Hatchi Mix—can use Breadbar as a testing ground for novel ideas. Says the soft-spoken Sugie: "We see [it] as a stage for culinary talent."

The first Hatchi dinner (each chef designs a menu and theme, and brings in their own people to help execute it) took place in 2009 with Debbie Lee, a former contestant on *The Next Food Network Star*. Last month, she rolled out her own cuisine truck, Ahn-Joo, based on the Seoul 2 Soul Korean/American comfort food concept she'd developed at Breadbar.

It's also been a stopover between gigs, like when *Top Chef* Las Vegas winner Michael Voltaggio cooked to a sold-out crowd after he left The Bazaar but before he went to The Langham. Even those with little professional kitchen experience have taken the spotlight. Saul Cooperstein, an exec with SBE, conceived Deli 210 based on his meltingly good Wagyu beef pastrami. Up next: In July, Makoto Okuwa, exec chef of Manhattan Beach's Sashi, will create his Power of Miso menu. All it takes is passion and a vision, says Sugie: "We see food as art and Breadbar as a gallery." **A**