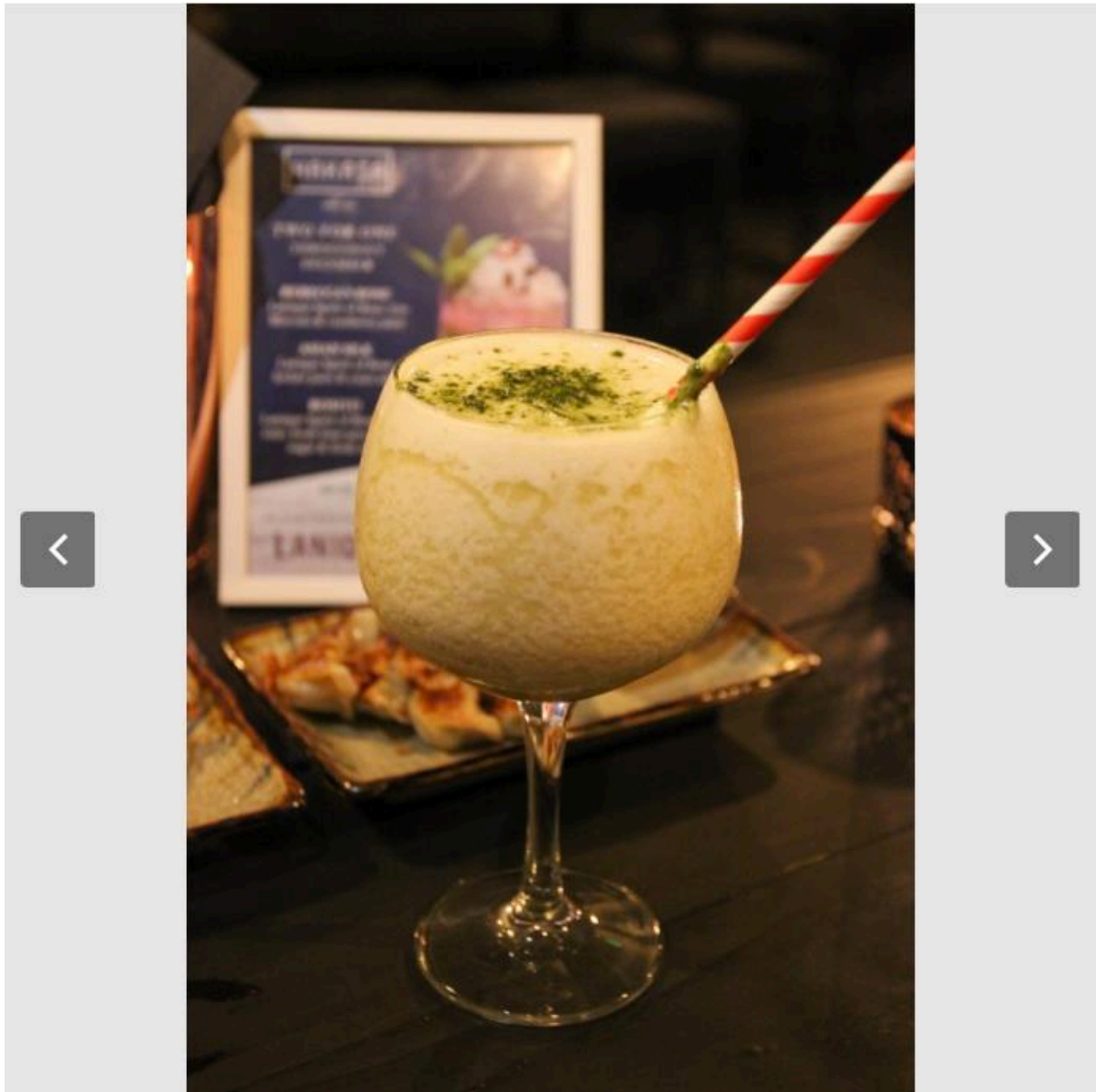


YOU NEED TO CHECK OUT HAKATA RAMEN + BAR'S NEW IZAKAYA



London Bridge is quite the foodie hotspot, boasting Borough Market at the centre of it. More and more hidden gems are popping up around the area as well, one of these being Hakata Ramen + Bar. This much-loved Japanese joint has just opened up a brand new Izakaya bar in their basement, and we went to go check it out.

Izakaya is like the Japanese equivalent of a Spanish tapas bar or Irish pub. An informal drinking spot that serves up small plates, they're the perfect place to enjoy a refreshing tippie or two after a long day at work. The cocktail list has been carefully crafted by the friendly and energetic bar manager Ginger, and each drink boasts a unique Japanese-inspired twist.



We both love Bloody Mary's and have probably consumed at least one in every borough of London, so Mel went for the Kizami Bloody Mary. Featuring the usual suspects of vodka, tomato juice, Tabasco, Worcester Sauce and lemon juice, this savoury drink was given an extra kick with the addition of some wasabi. Kristen decided to mix things up and go for something totally different: the Matcha & Banana Frozen Daiquiri. Blending together an icy mix of fresh banana and matcha syrup with white rum, it tasted like breakfast and was wholly delicious.

You know we would never go anywhere and not sample the food, and Ginger sure spoils us for choice with the selection of dishes he sent out. First came the gyoza, frilled little parcels filled with either chicken, prawn or vegetables. Mel's favourite was the prawn, with juicy chunks of the shellfish inside, while Kristen's was the vegetable, as they were super flavoursome and moreish.



Next came the chicken karaage, or Japanese-style fried chicken for the uninitiated. Perfectly crunchy on the outside and tender on the inside, it was paired with yuzu kosho mayo which provided a creamy freshness to cut through the heaviness of the fried food.

If you haven't had a sando yet, you need to get your butt down to Hakata and try one. Easily one of the best renditions of this dainty Japanese sandwich, the katsu chicken totally blew our minds. It wasn't just the spiced, sauced, crunchy chicken filling; the super soft bread had been smoked with what we assume was cassia bark, but whatever it was, it gave it a ridiculously sweet, burnt vanilla taste that we adored.



The chashu pork hirata (steam bun) was also very worth a mention, as the pork was perfectly cooked with a layer of caramelised, crunchy fat on it, and topped with a slightly smokey, BBQ -style sauce. We finished the meal off with some soy garlic tebasaki (chicken wings) and gochugaru pōkuribu (pork ribs), with the latter being extremely rich but also quite spicy.

All in all, you'd have a very difficult time not enjoying yourself at Hakata. From the delicious and inventive drinks, to the flavoursome and authentic food, to the friendly and personable staff, it's a must-visit in our book.

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