



Toro Tartare with Morel,
Adam Tortosa, Robin,
San Francisco. **RECIPE,**
plateonline.com.



ADAM TORTOSA

RESTAURANT	Robin
LOCATION	SAN FRANCISCO



ALBERT LAW

by Liz Grossman

Adam

Tortosa is used to tough bosses. When he was studying under Katsuya Uechi, the master sushi chef sent him home with a box of vegetables to cut every night for three years before he could move on to tuna. And while working at San Francisco's 1760, the hostile environment almost made him throw in the kitchen towel for good. "Historically, kitchens weren't the most friendly places to work in," he recalls. "My bosses in the past had that same attitude just because that's what their bosses did—that's all they knew. There was much more of a military dictatorship than a fun workplace."

Today as chef/owner of Robin, Tortosa insists on fun over f-bombs among his staff, who were gearing up for a go-kart outing the day we talked and each receive \$150 every month to spend on self-care and dining out. "The first time I worked in a management position, I copied and pasted that

[old] style of leadership," says Tortosa. "It didn't make work enjoyable for me or anyone around me. It was effective at the time and I was able to learn from it, but it's changed for the better. But I also realize that by not having that bad experience, I would not be in this position I'm in today."

The whole work-life balance thing appears to be paying off for Tortosa, as his staff (most of whom helped open Robin last year) consistently turns out an exquisite, daily changing omakase menu of fish flown in from Japan, local ingredients (from Santa Barbara uni to Half Moon Bay wasabi), and unexpected nigiri combinations that both enhance and highlight the seafood served to a soundtrack of staff-selected hip-hop playlists. King salmon is topped with confit tomato, whipped tofu, and Thai basil; fluke gets kissed with Granny Smith apples, wasabi, and lime; the housemade potato chip with sticky rice receives a delicate dollop of ramp aioli and

smoked caviar; and melted bacon butter is poured over Hokkaido uni topped with pickled wasabi stems. Even with heavy nods to Japanese influences on the menu, Tortosa notes, "This is not exact Japanese cuisine. I'll never even scratch the surface, to be honest." Regular trips to Japan help him delve deeper into the cuisine and meet his purveyors (a recent visit to his Osaka-based sesame seed producer inspired the sesame and togarashi soft serve on his menu), but he still feels like he has a lot to master, from the menu to management. "Cooking and making delicious food is obviously very hard, but it's something I've been doing for 10 years and what I've always wanted to do. But managing people is something that's relatively new to me," he says. "I just want a restaurant where everyone wants to come into work and is happy to work there, and wants to have their friends work there and come in and eat there, too."