

sushi history

Sushi originated from the need to preserve fish, an important protein source. Fish were caught in abundance during the monsoon season in the rice-growing region of northern Southeast Asia (today's Thailand). The rains caused rivers to flood rice paddies, allowing fish to swim into the rice fields where they were caught by farmers. Locals pickled and preserved the fish by packing it with cooked rice in wooden barrels for dry season consumption. The cooked rice fermented in the hot and humid climate, producing lactic acid that preserved the fish and provided a sharp, tart flavor. This style of sushi traveled through China and reached Japan some time during the early centuries A.D., though no one is sure of the exact date. In Japan this primitive sushi gradually evolved into today's popular nigiri-zushi (a small ball of sushi rice topped with a slice of seafood) and maki rolls.

seasonality of sushi fish

The varieties of fish served at sushi restaurants in Japan change according to the season. Diners eagerly await their favorite seasonal choices: amaebi (Sweet Shrimp), hirame (halibut), and hotate (scallops) in winter; Mackerel, Sardines, and Skipjack Tuna through summer and autumn. Many people think locally-caught (in-season) wild fish taste better than out-of-season or farmed varieties. Catching fish that are lo-

cally in-season also aids the sustainability of the species by shifting the sushi diners' interest among many species over the course of the year. No single species should be consumed to extinction.

perfect sushi: fish quality, proportion, and temperature

Sushi fish should be the highest quality, undamaged by the catch method, and very fresh. Ideally, fish should be caught by pole and line, transported properly, and slaughtered using ikejime (instantaneous killing), a method that allows the fish to stay fresh longer. Expert sushi chefs are well aware of how and when fish for sushi are slaughtered—and the proper stage for serving it.

A nigiri-zushi should be a one-bite size. The moist and tender rice ball underneath a slice of seafood should weigh about 3/4 ounce—one-third the weight of a large egg. Classically, this is the lunch-time nigiri-zushi size in Japan. For dinner, chefs make smaller rice balls so diners can enjoy many pieces with a variety of fish. A rice ball should be around body temperature, and the raw seafood on top should be refrigerator-cold. All too often, bad sushi consists of cold, dry, hard rice and lukewarm fish. The size of seafood also matters—1 1/4 by 2 3/4 inches is recommended. Oversized fish on top of a rice ball may look like a bargain, but this combination destroys the delicate flavor and temperature balance of sushi rice and fish. A larger portion of seafood usually means lower quality. For sushi, the quality of fish and rice, combined with the chef's skill, are what counts.

To learn more about sushi traditions, fish, and preparation, see Hiroko Shimbo's book, *The Sushi Experience*, or visit www.hirokoskitchen.com.



how to eat sushi

by trevor corson
author of *the story of sushi*

Traditionally, sushi is eaten at the sushi bar without a menu. Sitting at the bar, getting to know the chef, and talking with the chef while you eat are the keys to getting good sushi—and could help our ocean, too.

sushi bar tips

talk with the chef

In Japan, sushi chefs often act like neighborhood bartenders, chatting with customers and giving them personalized service. Shop around—if you find a chef who is friendly and attentive, cultivate a relationship with that chef (hint: it helps to arrive early when the chef is less busy filling table orders). The result could be a more traditional sushi experience, with a wider, more ocean friendly selection of seafood.



ask for advice

What does the chef recommend? Invite suggestions for ingredients that are in-season. If you don't like something, be honest so the chef learns your preferences.

the truth about chopsticks

Don't use them. Ask the chef to squeeze your nigiri-zushi together loosely and then pick the sushi up with your fingers so it won't fall apart. Good sushi should disintegrate on your tongue. Use chopsticks only when eating sashimi—slices of fish without rice—and, if you like, maki rolls.

the truth about soy sauce

The very best chefs actually season each nigiri-zushi perfectly before serving it, using sauces and garnishes they've prepared. Try requesting this from your chef, then skip the soy sauce altogether. If the chef is too busy for this special preparation, add soy sauce yourself but use only a very small amount, and dip the fish side in the sauce, not the rice side, so the sushi won't fall apart.

the truth about wasabi

The chef has already added the proper amount of wasabi inside the sushi. Any more prevents you from tasting the subtle flavors of his carefully selected ingredients.

the truth about ginger

The pickled ginger is a palate cleanser. Eat it between each piece of sushi to enjoy the distinctive flavors of each fish.

ocean friendly tips

tastier and more sustainable

A skilled chef will probably steer you away from more standard selections such as tuna, salmon, Yellowtail, and boiled shrimp and serve toppings that are fresher, more traditional, and more flavorful. Some of the tastiest sushi includes saba (Mackerel), sawara (Spanish Mackerel), and katsuo (Skipjack Tuna), along with amaebi (raw Sweet Shrimp) and squid. These are more sustainable, more authentic, and healthier to eat.

making a difference

When you invite chefs to educate you about sushi, they'll value you as a customer. It may be up to you to educate the chef regarding your concerns about the environment and overfishing. You can encourage your chef to find and feature seafood that has been ranked as sustainably caught. One conversation at a time, sushi customers and sushi chefs can make a difference for the ocean.

For more information on the fascinating world of sushi and its ingredients, see Trevor Corson's book, *The Story of Sushi*, or visit www.storyofsushi.com.