

food forum

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Sushi

Sushi Toppings and Craftsmanship

This third installment in our series about sushi explores its toppings and how professional sushi chefs acquire their skills.

by Terutoshi Hibino

Serving freshly prepared sushi to diners

The cuisine of sushi has its own specialized vocabulary. For instance, the term *neta* pertains to fish and other toppings placed on sushi rice; *shari* is vinegared sushi rice; *gari* is pickled ginger. While these terms are unique to the world of sushi, they are commonly known and sometimes used in daily life. For example, the Japanese phrase “running out of *neta* for conversation” alludes to *neta* sushi toppings as conversation topics. Its origin derives from when sushi chefs use up all *neta* essential for making sushi during business.

The topic of toppings

The most popular *neta* topping these days is *maguro* tuna, but things were quite different when *nigiri-zushi* first appeared in the 1820s, a time when *maguro* was not so highly esteemed. Two hundred years before refrigeration, the greatest concern for a sushi chef would have been to avoid allowing fresh ingredients to go bad. Fish toppings such as trout,

sea bream, shrimp, squid and others were all routinely seasoned and cured using salt or vinegar, or boiled to prevent spoiling. *Maguro* was considered a poorer quality fish, and very few favored the fatty *maguro toro* that is now in such demand. At that time, the standard way of preserving *maguro* was to marinate it in soy sauce, but as a topping, the soy sauce-steeped fish was sure to stain the white sushi rice it was placed on—something prominent sushi chefs were reluctant to do. Certainly no *maguro*-topped sushi are visible in a well-known painting of *nigiri-zushi* by Japanese artist Kawabata Gyokusho, titled *Yohee Sushi* (ca.1870), referring to the name of a popular sushi shop in the late nineteenth century.

Not until refrigerators became part of the urban scene in the late 1920s and early 1930s were fresh sushi toppings used without curing or boiling. As refrigeration technology advanced, freezing and chilling functions became

available. The quality of toppings also improved and options like *ikura* salmon roe and *uni* sea urchin were added, which would have been unimaginable in earlier times. Refrigeration opened up a whole new era of sushi.

Path of a sushi chef

Traditionally, an aspiring sushi chef would not make sushi from the outset, but would enter into an apprenticeship and start by washing dishes and making deliveries. By accompanying the master chef to the market to select *neta* ingredients, the apprentice would learn to recognize the freshness and quality of fish, and observe the procedures for



Sushi chef slicing *maguro*

dressing, filleting and slicing the toppings. The techniques of cleaning and filleting fish are diverse: they vary from one season to another and depend upon the area where they are caught, as well as the stage of the fish's lifespan. It would be at least three years from the start of an apprenticeship before an aspirant was allowed to fillet fish for the first time. Even then, fish filleted by apprentices would not be served to customers. As part of their lessons, an apprentice would first learn how to use ingredients without waste by cooking leftovers from filleting or slicing *neta* toppings to make soups and meals for the kitchen staff.

The traditional training of an apprentice takes years, as summed up by the saying, “rice cooking for three years, *nigiri*-making for eight years,” meaning that it could take three years until a novice learned to cook rice properly to the satisfaction of the master chef, and only then would the trainee move on to making vinegar seasoning for sushi rice. The apprentice would gradually acquire all the skills for tasks relating to a sushi shop, from communicating with customers and business management, to cleaning and odd jobs. Indeed, the training of a professional master sushi chef has no defined goal or completion date, and continues throughout his lifetime. The craftsmanship of a sushi chef—which arguably could be defined as an art—is difficult to fully explain. Trainees are not formally “taught”; rather, they make their way by picking up skills from the master chef and senior trainees. Techniques are not explained explicitly, leaving the aspirant to discover what must be learned through hands-on experience and close observation—a process referred to as “stealing” the master’s secrets. In recent years, young people are less willing to accept this often difficult-to-understand traditional style of training. It is unsurprising that the number of sushi shops in Japan has decreased by more than half, from 45,105 in 1996¹ to 19,122 in 2021.²



Yohee Sushi, by Kawabata Gyokusho; frontispiece for *Katei Sushi no Tsukekata* (How to make sushi at home), authored by Seizaburo Koizumi. (Tokyo:Okura Shoten,1910). Courtesy of Terutoshi Hibino

The world of a chef

Despite this decrease in the number of sushi shops, the figures for those employed in sushi establishments rose from 219,700 in 1996¹ to 254,523 in 2021.² This phenomenon appears to reflect a shift from small-scale sushi shops with one master chef and one or two trainees to large-scale restaurants where dozens of chefs are making the sushi. More significantly, it also likely signals a simplification of the training process. There are now schools where students are taught how to make *nigiri-zushi*, making it possible to acquire these skills in a short time—for some, in as quickly as one month. There have been cases where younger people, including non-Japanese, have graduated from such schools to successfully open popular shops, some of which have been highly rated in prestigious restaurant guides.

If the making of sushi is defined as simply putting rice and *neta* toppings together, it certainly does not take years to master. A skillful person can pick up the technique in a matter of two weeks and obtain qualifications to work in a *kaiten* conveyor belt-style sushi restaurant. *Kaitenzushi* work does not involve direct contact with customers, so chefs there do not have to acquire skills in understanding and consideration

for individual customers. Yet the traditional Japanese sushi shop is not merely a place to eat sushi; it is a place where the chef serves sushi to customers directly over the counter while engaging in conversation. Through communication and observation, an experienced chef can anticipate and cater to a customer's individual preferences and appetite as the meal progresses, while customers acknowledge and appreciate the chef's thoughtful, intuitive service. From the very moment a customer enters the shop, the chef endeavors to create the best possible dining experience. The training of a sushi chef never ends; for indeed, sushi embodies the fine art of hospitality. ■

¹ Establishment and Enterprise Census 1996 (Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications)

² Economic Census for Business Activity 2021 (Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications)

On the cover Searing *katsuo* fillet on a grill to make *katsuo no tataki*, featured in *Spirit of the Seasons*, page 5; and a variety of *neta* toppings.

Author's profile

Terutoshi Hibino was born in 1960 in Gifu Prefecture. He received his BA and MA degrees from Nagoya University, and his PhD in Japanese Culture from Aichi University. He is currently professor at Aichi Shukutoku University and honorary chairman of the Shimizu Sushi Museum (Shizuoka). His publications include *Sushi no Kao* (Portraits of sushi; 1997); *Sushi no Rekishi o Tazuneru* (Following the history of sushi; 1999); and *Sushi no Jiten* (Encyclopedia of sushi; 2015).

Teppan-Style Tabletop Cooking

Outside Japan, *teppanyaki* cuisine may bring to mind specialty restaurants where steaks and vegetables are prepared on a griddle right in front of diners. (*Teppanyaki* literally means “grilled on an iron plate.”) But in Japan’s culinary culture, many dishes besides meat are made on a *teppan* flat iron griddle. Some popular examples include *yakisoba* stir-fried noodles and *okonomiyaki* Japanese-style pancakes, all traditionally associated as being cooked and sold at festival stalls or in restaurants.

As more Japanese consumers look for variety in home-cooked meals, electric *teppan*-style “hot plate” appliances have become a useful and versatile accessory in many homes, making *teppanyaki* dishes an easy, delicious option. Japanese electric hot plates function as *teppan* griddles, but are made of lighter materials with non-stick coatings for easy handling. They can be placed directly on the table and have separate plate attachments for preparing a variety of foods.

The ease and fun of cooking at the table, along with the appeal of recreating festival foods, caught on in Japanese households when electric hot plates were first introduced here in the early 1960s. As appliance technology advanced, cooking plates became removable from the heating element for easy cleaning; in the 1990s, induction heating (IH) hot plates provided more precise temperature control. These days, various hot plate designs are available to support the preparation of specific dishes: these include the standard flat plates for *teppanyaki* and *yakiniku* Japanese barbeque; pot-shaped plates for cooking *sukiyaki*, *nabe* hot pot or even frying tempura; and *takoyaki* plates with small semi-spherical molds.

Enjoyable tabletop “hot plate” cooking at home



Yakiniku on a hot plate

The pleasure of hot plate cooking lies in its casual tabletop entertainment value where everyone can cook and eat as they please—and the menu is growing. Alongside classic dishes like *yakiniku* and *takoyaki*, electric hot plates are used for making *gyoza*, hamburgers, crepes and stir-fries. And as hot plate cooking thrives, enthusiastic home cooks are sharing innovative Japanese menus on social media, inspired by global favorites like pizza, paella and ajillo—and so the possibilities beyond traditional *teppanyaki* cuisine are limitless. ●



Seafood rice inspired by paella

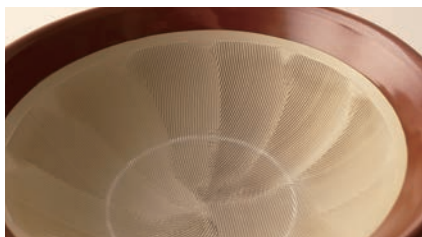


Takoyaki

Grinding

This overview of Japanese culinary methods continues with grinding tools and techniques.

Japanese cuisine calls for a *suribachi* mortar and *surikogi* pestle when grinding ingredients. Japanese *suribachi* are ceramic and are distinguished by a radial pattern of fine, intricate ridges called *kushi-me* which resemble lines drawn by a *kushi* comb. *Surikogi* were traditionally made of wood from the *sansho* Japanese pepper tree, said to have detoxifying effects; but these days, *hinoki* cypress and walnut are also used. The texture of food ground in a *suribachi* is less uniform, and retains a more natural character and quality, than that prepared in a food processor or mill. *Suribachi* are used to grind a variety of foods, such as sesame seeds to elicit their aroma and flavor; sticky yams for a smooth texture; tofu to make paste for mixing with other ingredients; and fish to mash and shape into patties or balls. ◆



Fine grooves of a *suribachi*

Sesame

Sesame is the most common food ground in *suribachi* using a *surikogi*. When ground, the crushed seeds release their full aroma. The classic dish *goma-ae* is prepared by mixing soy sauce and sugar with fresh-ground sesame right in the *suribachi*. This sesame sauce is then used to dress blanched green vegetables.



Sticky Yams

Sticky yams like *yamaimo* and *nagaimo* are first grated by rubbing them directly against the grooves of the *suribachi* in a circular motion, and then ground with a *surikogi* pestle to produce a heavy, velvety texture. Ground yam is called *tororo*, and is seasoned with dashi and soy sauce to pour directly over rice and noodle dishes; *tororo* is also used in making yam soup and *okonomiyaki*.



Spinach *goma-ae* dressed with sesame sauce

Katsuo Bonito



Katsuo no tataki

Katsuo, pictured on the cover, are found in tropical to temperate waters worldwide. Referred to in English as bonito, *katsuo* are widely distributed along Japan's Pacific coast, where the fish follow the Kuroshio current northward in early summer and southward in autumn. There are two peak fishing seasons for *katsuo*: in summer they are called *hatsu-katsuo*, or first bonito; those caught in autumn are *modori-katsuo*, returning bonito. *Hatsu-katsuo* are lean with a lighter flavor, while *modori-katsuo*, having fed on rich plankton and fish before heading south, are fattier and known for their richer taste.

Bonito are a good source of protein, vitamin B and iron, and may be cooked or served as sashimi. One well-known dish is *katsuo no tataki*, seared bonito fillet cut into thick slices. It is served garnished with ginger, thinly sliced garlic and onion, and drizzled with *ponzu* citrus-seasoned soy sauce. Bonito is also boiled, smoked, dried and fermented in order to make *katsuobushi*, which constitutes the basis of the umami-rich dashi stock that underscores Japanese cuisine, and whose delicate shaved flakes are used to top various dishes. ◆

Okonomiyaki Pancakes with Beef Stir-Fry

Serves 4

510 kcal Protein 43.6 g Fat 36.4 g
(per serving)

Okonomiyaki pancakes

- 150 g / 5 oz. cabbage leaves, chopped (6 mm / 1/4 in. squares) total 2 C
- 150 g / 5 oz. *nagaimo* Chinese yam, peeled and grated for total 1/2 C
- 3-4 green onions, finely chopped
- 2 eggs
- 4 T cornstarch
- Salt
- Canola oil

Stir-fry

- 300 g / 10 oz. thinly sliced beef for sukiyaki
- Canola oil
- Salt
- 1 small onion, 150-170 g / 5-6 oz., cut in half lengthwise, thinly sliced crosswise
- 8-10 medium brown mushrooms, thinly sliced
- 1/2 red bell pepper and green bell pepper each, both cut in half lengthwise then in 1.5 cm- / 0.6 in.-thin slices, total 2 C
- 1/2 t chili powder
- 1/2 t cumin powder
- 2 T + 1/2 t tomato paste
- 2 T + 1/2 t Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1 t Dijon mustard
- 1 t flour
- 150 ml / 2/3 C dashi stock (may substitute bouillon or water)
- 2 T sour cream
- Italian parsley for garnish

1 To make the *okonomiyaki* pancake batter, place chopped cabbage and grated yam in a bowl and stir with chopsticks or fork until texture turns thick and sticky (see photo). Stir chopped green onions and eggs into the batter; then add the cornstarch and a pinch of salt to mix well until batter is consistent.



2 Add canola oil to a frying pan and heat. Pour about 80 ml / 1/3 C batter into the pan, spread to 10 cm / 4 in. circle, and cook each side over low-medium heat for about 60-90 seconds or until firm to touch. Remove pancake, set aside and keep warm. Repeat to make 8 pancakes.

3 Cut beef into bite-sized pieces, about 5 cm / 2 in. squares. Heat 1 T oil in a frying pan and cook beef quickly over high heat. Sprinkle lightly with salt, remove from pan and set aside. Wipe grease from the pan with a paper towel.

4 Add 1 T oil to the pan and sauté the onion over medium heat until slightly translucent, then add mushrooms, followed by the bell peppers. When they begin to wilt, return the beef to the pan. Add chili powder and cumin powder then reduce the heat to low.

5 Add tomato paste and soy sauce to the beef and mix well. Stir in the mustard followed by flour and mix well. Immediately add the dashi stock. Heat over medium heat and stir well until thickened. Turn off heat and stir in the sour cream. Add a pinch of salt if needed.

6 Serve the pancakes topped with the stir-fry and garnish with Italian parsley.

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto



Inspired by okonomiyaki Japanese savory pancakes, this dish serves up a harmony of flavors and spices from around the world. The batter holds together thanks to the sticky texture of grated nagaimo to create fluffy and healthy pancakes with minimal additives.



Ganmodoki, also called hirousu, is a classic vegetarian dish served in shojin ryori Buddhist vegetarian cuisine.

Simmered Ganmodoki Deep-Fried Tofu with Vegetables

Serves 6

196 kcal Protein 10.3 g Fat 9.7 g
(per serving)

- 2 blocks medium-firm tofu, total 800 g / 1.8 lb.
- 2 or 3 dried *kikurage* wood ear mushrooms
- 20 g / 0.7 oz. carrot
- 1 or 2 sprigs *mitsuba* Japanese parsley
- 80 g / 2.8 oz. *nagaimo* Chinese yam
- 1 T dried sakura shrimp
- 4 T cornstarch
- Oil
- 6 fresh ginkgo nuts, cooked; if unavailable use canned

Simmering liquid

- 360 ml / 1 ½ C dashi stock
- 1 T granulated sugar
- 2 ⅓ T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 2 T sake
- 1 T Kikkoman Manjo Mirin
- 1 knob ginger, grated

1 Cut tofu into 4 pieces and boil in water for 1-2 minutes, then drain. Wrap tofu in a paper towel, squeeze out excess water lightly and set aside. Soak dried *kikurage* in a bowl of water for 30 minutes then drain. Cut carrot and *kikurage* into thin strips, boil them together briefly and drain. Cut the *mitsuba* into 2 cm / 0.8 in. lengths.

2 Place tofu in the *suribachi* mortar and grind into a smooth paste using a *surikogi* pestle.* Set aside tofu paste in a separate bowl. Wash out the *suribachi*. Peel the yam and grate it using the clean *suribachi* by holding the yam, pressing it directly against the grooves, and grating in a circular motion.

3 Add the tofu paste to the grated yam in the mortar, followed by the dried sakura shrimp, carrots, *kikurage*, *mitsuba* and cornstarch; mix (do not grind) together. Coat hands with oil. Divide the tofu-yam mixture into 6 equal portions and form 6 patties with hands. Insert a ginkgo nut in the center of each (see photo).



4 Preheat oil in a deep-fryer to 120 °C / 250° F. Using a ladle, lower patties one by one gently into the oil and deep-fry for 7-8 minutes or until they become golden brown. Turn the patties a few times during frying. Remove and place on a paper towel.

5 Place the simmering liquid ingredients in a saucepan, heat and bring to just a boil then reduce heat to medium. Add the deep-fried tofu to the saucepan and simmer for about 3 minutes.

6 Serve the tofu patties in individual bowls with a little simmering liquid and garnish with grated ginger.

* See Fundamentals 101 on page 5 for details about *suribachi* mortar and *surikogi* pestle. If unavailable, use a food processor for the tofu and a grater for the yam.

Recipe by Kikkoman Corporation

1 C (U.S. cup) = approx. 240 ml; 1 T = 15 ml; 1 t = 5 ml



Del Monte Asia Brand Video

On Kikkoman Global Official YouTube Channel



Video outtakes

Del Monte Asia Pte Ltd., a Kikkoman Group company, distributes processed food products under the Del Monte brand in Asia and the Oceania region (excluding the Philippines). In September 2024, Del Monte Asia released its promotional brand video on *Kikkoman Global*, the official Kikkoman YouTube channel. The English-language video is captioned in English, Thai and Chinese.

This video aims to promote the company's brand message, "Sun-Filled Goodness from Farm to Table," to Del Monte customers in the region. The message expresses the company's aspiration and commitment to bring smiles to faces with delicious, natural and wholesome produce nurtured by the blessings of the sun. Video imagery includes sunny cornfields, conveying that corn is a main ingredient in food products sold by Del Monte Asia, while presenting people of diverse cultures and ages enjoying Del Monte products.

The Del Monte name premiered in the US in 1886. Del Monte subsequently became one of the world's leading brands for canned fruits and vegetables, and was a well-recognized name in Japan even before the Second World War. In 1990, Kikkoman acquired the permanent trademark and marketing rights to Del Monte processed foods in Japan and the Asia-Oceania region (excluding the Philippines). Since then, Kikkoman has established sales offices and production bases in the region to develop, produce and distribute processed vegetable and fruit products that meet local needs. As a distributor, Del Monte Asia has been providing consumers in this region with a wide array of products for many years, pledging to deliver the best quality products and bring smiles to consumers with a ton of everyday goodness. 🍷

Scan the appropriate QR code to view the video in your preferred language.



English



Thai



Simplified Chinese



Traditional Chinese



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