



Paris and London

Based on my own experience operating sushi bars in New York and Belgium, I believe that Europe's sushi boom began roughly ten years after it did in the U.S. As with the U.S., the U.K. used to top the list of countries with bad food. However, as the U.S. morphed into a gourmet nation, the U.K. developed its own gourmet cuisine known as "modern British." Tracing the development of the U.K.'s new food culture reveals significant influence from New York.

Jean-Georges Vongerichten, a famous New York chef, opened Vong in 1995 at Knightsbridge facing Hyde Park in London. The first Vong opened in New York in 1992, featuring French and Thai fusion dishes. Upon opening, the restaurant immedi-



At Wagamama, customers share common tables as if they were in a cafeteria.

ately received rave reviews, including the New York Times' highest review of four stars. Just three years later, Vong made its way to London.

The arrival of such a fashionable ethnic restaurant from New York ignited the restaurant industry of London. However, British-Japanese restaurants (those with no Japanese person managing or preparing food) also had a great impact in inspiring the new trend. Since its first restaurant opened in 1995, Wagamama had expanded to seven restaurants by 2001, primarily in London and one in Dublin, Ireland. Wagamama's menu includes ramen, yakisoba, gyoza (Japanese pot stickers), yakitori, deep-fried port cutlets, and curry. All of the dishes have been modified to suit the British palate. For example, beef ramen, made with ramen noodles served in hot chili soup and topped with steak and coriander, and curry yakisoba, made by flavoring yakisoba with coconut milk, are served.



Wagamama's popular dishes; ramen and yakisoba

Conveyor-belt serving systems are also a part of the landscape in British Japanese restaurants. Although Moshi Moshi Sushi, which opened in 1995 in the Liverpool Street station, was the first to utilize the system, YO! Sushi, opened in 1997 in Soho,

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In the previous issue I reported on sushi in other parts of Asia and Oceania. Some Asian countries have their own versions of sushi quite similar to Japanese *narezushi* (fermented fish sushi). This is considered the earliest form of sushi in Japan, and is still popular today. Fermented fish sushi in Korea is called *sikhae*, and its main ingredients are flounder and millet instead of rice. Unlike Japanese *narezushi*, chili pepper and garlic are also used. Fermented sushi of the Atayals, an aboriginal hill tribe in Taiwan, is somewhat unique in that it uses freshwater fish or, in some cases, raw pork. Myanmar has *nga chin*, which means "sour fish," made by mixing carp, shrimp, or some other seafood with rice and then wrapping it in a large leaf where it undergoes lactic fermentation.

Mechanical sushi chefs and conveyor-belt serving systems are used in many sushi bars and Japanese restaurants in Hong Kong and mainland China (Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou). The sushi culture has been firmly established in these cities, with a wide range of establishments, from elite restaurants to inexpensive restaurants serving sushi. Prominent all-you-can-eat/drink signs are common. The number of Japanese restaurants in Shanghai is growing rapidly and expected to exceed 200 before long. However, when the first Japanese restaurant opened in Shanghai, the Chinese would not eat sashimi or sushi. First impressions of sushi were the talk of the town, and even introduced in local newspapers.

The sushi culture promoted by Japanese companies and local entrepreneurs took root in Thailand and Malaysia some time ago. These countries have also become huge suppliers of fresh sushi fish across Southeast Asia.

Sushi culture is beginning to take root in Australia as well, with more and more Japanese companies moving in. Mr. Shindo, owner of Sushijin, developed sushi rolls that can be eaten on the go, just like hamburgers. Mr. Wakuda, owner-chef of Tetsuya's has impressed gourmets around the world with his creative French and Japanese fusion dishes featuring fresh fish. Both of these men are pioneers of the new sushi culture, and are considered men who have changed Australia's food culture.

We can see that times have indeed changed as Westerners, who used to believe that eating raw fish was a barbaric custom that required no culinary skill, and the Chinese, who used to believe that they would never eat anything uncooked, have become enthusiastic sushi fans.

made the most of the system with a 65-meter long conveyor belt and seating for 125 people. The sight of sushi plates, each topped with its own plastic cover and stacked two high, going around this seemingly endless conveyor belt is truly impressive. YO! Sushi is also known for its automated cart that delivers drinks and the dance music that is always playing.



At YO! Sushi, sushi plates are stacked two high.

Conveyor-belt sushi was introduced to the Parisians by Sushi Noto, which opened in 1998 on the Boulevard de Italiens near the Paris Opéra (Palais Garnier). Sushi Noto's glass windows face the busy street and offer curious passers-by a clear view of the inside of the restaurant. This Paris restaurant was established with joint capital by the company that manages the London Noto restaurant and Asahi Breweries, a major Japanese beer brewer.



An automated drink cart, from which customers help themselves to drinks as it comes by

After Sushi Noto opened, a French owner opened a deluxe conveyor-belt sushi bar serving foie gras sushi and champagne, but was unable to compete with its Japanese counterpart.

Hosting a great number of Japanese tourists, Paris has long had a number of authentic sushi bars, and even the locals prefer these restaurants for the quality of sushi served, to those offer-

ing high-tech services or entertainment. This can also be said of New Yorkers. Of nearly five hundred sushi bars in the city, a maximum of five use the conveyor-belt delivery system.

Europe's First Michelin One-Star Japanese Restaurant

There are many seafood stands selling packaged sushi along with smoked salmon and raw herring sandwiches in Amsterdam's Schiphol airport. Despite the high prices, this packaged sushi is very popular with groups on their way to Japan.



A seafood deli at Schiphol airport.

A shop, named Shirasagi, recently opened in the airport. Shirasagi sells packaged sushi as well, but their sushi is freshly prepared in their own kitchen, which always has two or three Japanese chefs on duty. Though I was curious to know who managed the shop, I was always in a rush to catch a connecting flight. One day, I was finally able to go in. I was served by Mrs. Orie Usami, a beautiful young lady who reminded me of the shirasagi, or egret, for which the restaurant is named. Mrs. Usami told me how she came to work at Shirasagi.



Shirasagi's packaged sushi is prepared in its own kitchen

While attending a cooking school in Japan, the school received notice of job openings at Shirasagi. The still single Mrs. Usami immediately applied and, upon graduation, began working in the first Shirasagi restaurant in The Hague, where she met and married Mr. Mitsuo Usami.

Mr. Usami was later charged with managing the airport shop and the two have been working there together ever since. After hearing the Usami's story, I thought "Lovebirds" would be a more fitting name for the restaurant than Shirasagi!

In 1971, the Hotel Okura opened in Amsterdam, housing the Japanese restaurant, Yamazato. When I first visited Yamazato in 1985, the head chef, Akira Oshima, told me that in 1971,



Hirotaka Matsumoto

Born in Tokyo in 1942. He graduated from the University of Tokyo's Department of Agriculture and worked at Sapporo Breweries Ltd. until 1969, when he moved to New York. After working in the purchasing department of the restaurant Nippon and gaining experience in the wholesale fish business, he opened Takezushi, the first sushi bar in New York, in 1975. Mr. Matsumoto is currently the owner of the Takezushi sushi bar in Belgium, and travels around the world doing research as a food culture expert.

Mr. Matsumoto's published works are *Osushi Chikyu o Mawaru* (Kobunsha), *Oishii Amerika Mitsuketa* (Chikuma Shobo), *New York Takezushi Monogatari* (Asahi Shimbunsha), and *Samurai Shisetsudan Yoroppa o Shokusu* (Gendai Shokan).

Yamazato prepared meals for Japan's Emperor Hirohito and Empress Nagako on a visit to Europe. Much later, I discovered that in 2000 Yamazato prepared a Japanese buffet for visiting Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko.



The lovebirds, Mitsuo and Ori Usami working in the kitchen.



The subdued Japanese-style interior at Yamazato creates a soothing atmosphere.

In 2002, I again visited Yamazato. After seventeen years, I assumed that Mr. Oshima would have returned to Japan. To my surprise, he was still there and looked no older than when we had last met. Mr. Oshima told me that he had long desired to spread authentic Japanese cuisine to other countries, so when he heard that the Hotel Okura was branching into Amsterdam, he volunteered to work at Yamazato with the determination that he would stay there until retirement. Mr. Oshima went on to tell me that while Japanese customers initially accounted for seventy percent of his clientele, with Dutch customers accounting for the remaining thirty percent, the ratio today is just the opposite. These days, Dutch customers make up seventy percent of the clientele. Mr. Oshima was pleased that, at long last, Japanese cuisine has been firmly recognized in the Netherlands.



Head chef Akira Oshima of Yamazato in the Hotel Okura

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In the same year, Yamazato

was awarded a Michelin star, making it the first Japanese restaurant to receive a Michelin star in Europe. Yamazato has maintained its Michelin one-star status every year since; an accomplishment unique to Yamazato in Europe.

Eastern Europe after the Berlin Wall

Wanting to experience even a portion of the Trans-Siberian Railway, I once spent eighteen hours on the train traveling from Brussels to Warsaw, though the trip takes only a few hours by plane. Warsaw's Central Station is surrounded by modern high-rise buildings, and even has a Holiday Inn sign. Just in front of the station, in the LOT Polish Airlines Building, is a Marriott Hotel. I made my journey to this city because I had heard that a conveyor-belt sushi bar had finally been opened in Warsaw. NIPPON-KAN is on the first floor of a new building near the Marriott Hotel. Fortunately I was able to meet Mr. Toshihiro Fukunaga, the owner of NIPPON-KAN, and ask him about the establishment of the sushi bar.



Mr. Fukunaga and two of his lovely waitresses

Mr. Fukunaga used to run a successful modeling agency in Tokyo, which represented the face of a leading Japanese cosmetics company and another model, who represented Japan in a Miss World beauty pageant. Since the mid-1980s, Mr. Fukunaga had spent the majority of his time in South America, recruiting models from Chili and Brazil. In 1989, however, the Cold War ended and Eastern Europe began opening its doors, and Eastern European countries such as the Czech Republic, Poland, and Rumania were known for their beautiful



NIPPON-KAN in Düsseldorf is the oldest Japanese restaurant in Europe.

women. Mr. Fukunaga moved from South America to Warsaw in 1989.

Initially, his modeling business did very well and he was able to recruit a number of models. Before long, however, Japan's economic bubble popped and Mr. Fukunaga's business no longer required that he stay in Warsaw. Still, Mr. Fukunaga had become so fond of the city that he decided to put his cooking skills to work and open a Japanese restaurant. In 1992, he opened a restaurant named Tokio and served dishes that he had prepared himself. A restaurant named Tsubame had been operating since 1990, but the 300 or so Japanese businessmen working in Warsaw were happy to share their patronage



Mr. Ito of Kikaku was the first Japanese sushi chef to work abroad.

between the two restaurants. On my way back from Warsaw, I stopped in Berlin. In the Europacenter, I found a restaurant named Daitokai, with a Japanese manager. He told me that Berlin had seventy Japanese restaurants, including five or six conveyor-belt sushi bars. So, I visited one of these sushi bars, named Sushi Circle, located in a large shopping mall near Potsdamer Platz. Sushi Circle's owner is German.

The first Sushi Circle opened in Frankfurt and had expanded to three bars in a short period of time. The business then continued to expand to Munich, Hamburg, Düsseldorf, and Berlin. After Berlin, I went to Düsseldorf. It is said that when two-time Japanese Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi (served two consecutive terms from 1957 to 1960) visited Düsseldorf, he would have liked to have entertained his German hosts if only there had been a good Japanese restaurant in town. As a result, NIPPON-KAN was established in 1964, making it one of the oldest Japanese restaurants in Europe, along with Takara in Paris.

Düsseldorf's Kikaku restaurant is very popular. Kikaku's owner, Mr. Fumio Ito, is also a sushi chef who came to the city in 1964 with an invitation to work at NIPPON-KAN. After spending seventeen years with NIPPON-KAN, Mr. Ito established his own restaurant, Kikaku. Mr. Ito is known as the first Japanese sushi chef to go abroad. In 1959, at the age of twenty two, Mr. Ito was sent to Hong Kong to work in a new branch of the Nihonbashi Kikaku restaurant that employed him. Mr. Ito no longer makes sushi himself, though he overseas



Ms. Eri Fukatsu of Daitokai has a lovely smile.

kitchen operations everyday.

Daitokai, opened in 1973, is the second oldest Japanese restaurant in Düsseldorf. Daitokai was established jointly by the Daitokai restaurant in Takadanobaba, Tokyo, and Kikkoman. Kikkoman took part in the venture hoping that it would be a good opportunity to promote soy sauce in Europe.

Today, Daitokai branches can be found in cities including Hamburg, Munich, and Berlin. In addition to its specialty, teppanyaki (dishes grilled on a large iron plate), the Düsseldorf Daitokai recently added a sushi bar run by beautiful sushi chef, Ms. Eukatsu.

Even in Lands of Oil and Sand



Yoko is a waitress at Kei. Kei's interior and furniture was made by carpenters from Japan.

The United Arab Emirates (the UAE) is an independent nation, formed in 1971, comprising seven emirates including Dubai and Abu Dhabi, with Abu Dhabi as its capital and largest city. The UAE is Japan's primary source of crude oil, accounting for a third of all crude oil imports. I visited the UAE to see if I could find any sushi in that country.

Upon my arrival at Dubai airport, I immediately caught a shuttle bus to Abu Dhabi, a journey of less than two hours thanks to the eight-lane desert highway with very little traffic and no traffic lights. The Hilton Hotel in Abu Dhabi has a branch of the Japanese chain restaurant, Kei. The Abu Dhabi Hilton's Kei opened in 1981, following the 1980 opening of a Kei in the Meridian Hotel in Kuwait and one in the Hilton Hotel in Bahrain. Opening three restaurants along the Persian Gulf coast in a one-year period supports stories I've heard that the owner is a Japanese businessman who once had strong connections to the Kuwaiti royal family. While lunching in the Abu Dhabi Kei, I met Mr. Harutoku Higuchi, president of Summit Trading Company. The company supplies food to the many Japanese people working on offshore drilling platforms for Abu Dhabi Oil Co., Ltd., and a subsidiary of Cosmo Oil Co., Ltd. in Japan.

Later, I returned to Dubai and visited the Japanese restaurant Miyako in the Hyatt Hotel. Miyako is run by the hotel itself, and the recently appointed head chef, Mr. Nobuharu Furukawa has extensive experience working overseas.

Mr. Furukawa's first job was in the Tokyo Prince Hotel,



Mr. Higuchi of Summit Trading Company in the new Japanese foods section of a local supermarket.

but he has also worked in Vancouver, Düsseldorf, Jakarta, Singapore, Manila, Kuala Lumpur, and Australia, spending an average of two years in each place, four years being his longest stay. In Dubai, Mr. Furukawa purchases fish at the fish market every morning before going to work. I visited the fish market, which is located just five-minute's walk from the hotel.

A large number of trucks loaded with big water tanks were parked at the market, where live fish was sold. Most of the



Head chef Furukawa of Miyako has a long and colorful career overseas

fish, however, were laid out on sheets spread over the concrete floor, with no roof or shade for cover. Mr. Furukawa told me that the fish sold there was not suited for sushi or sashimi, except in the winter. In the summer, when the temperatures can rise to as high as 50° Celsius (122° Fahrenheit), frozen fish imported from Japan is used. At Miyako's sushi bar, which has seating for only five or six, two chefs (one Filipino

and one Nepalese) prepare the sushi. A local fish called *hammour* was truly delicious. This white meat member of the Serranidae family is similar to kelp grouper caught in Japan and has a somewhat tough texture. Sea bream and horse mackerel are also available locally. Tuna is delivered from neighboring Oman and Mediterranean tuna is also available sometimes. All other seafood, including octopus, scallops, arch shell,



The merchants have shade but fish is directly under the scorching desert sun



Despite its appearance, the local fish *hammour* is delicious.

yellowtail snapper, mackerel, and salmon roe are imported frozen from Japan. The rice used is from California. Miyako also serves caviar sushi, as caviar from Iran, just across the Persian Gulf, is inexpensive. I tried Mr. Furukawa's special, caviar chazuke (caviar on rice with hot tea poured over it). Though there was a large quantity of caviar, at US\$92, I have never had such expensive chazuke!

Conveyor-belt sushi bars can also be found in Dubai. TOKYO@THETOWERS, with seating for 250, is a Japanese restaurant in the five-star Emirates Tower Hotel. TOKYO@THETOWERS had a special room set up for conveyor-belt sushi with seating for forty six in 2000. As this restaurant is operated by the hotel itself, which targets upscale clientele, the seats are comfortably arranged with ample space between them, unlike more common conveyor-belt sushi bars. Without the conveyor belt, the room has the atmosphere of a high-class restaurant.



Mr. Furukawa's special, caviar chazuke, comes with a price tag of US\$92.

Sushi at a Major Tuna Port

I made my way all the way to the Cape of Good Hope. The establishment of the sea route around the Cape of Good Hope can be considered epochal in the history of food cultures. Once the Cape of Good Hope route was established, spices, which had previously been prohibitively expensive, could be transported in large quantities to Europe, leading to the advancement of Western cuisines.



A chandelier accents Kotobuki's high ceiling. Mr. Kubokawa sits with an African waiter.

Kotobuki is a Japanese restaurant that opened in Cape Town in 1991. The restaurant uses a renovated old building with high ceilings and a fireplace. With a chandelier hanging over the sushi bar, the interior is a blend of Japanese and Western elements.

Mr. Satoshi Kubokawa, owner of Kotobuki, shared some information about Cape Town sushi and tuna with me.

Cape Town is a base of operations for tuna boats from Japan, and Kotobuki used to be a lively spot with many Japanese fishermen enjoying lively parties to release the stress of long periods spent on the tuna boats. However, the number of tuna boats has decreased, and the Japanese crews have been replaced by Vietnamese and Indonesian crews. Thus, while

there used to be thirty or more Japanese fishermen on each boat, there are now only six or seven. The Japanese fishermen continue to come, but they now dine and drink quietly, unfortunately causing Kotobuki's business to suffer considerably.



Japanese tuna boats in dry dock. Table Mountain can be seen behind them.

Mr. Kubokawa told me that the tuna boats sail from Cape Town to fishing grounds stretching from the southern Indian Ocean to Australia during the months of April through September to catch southern bluefin tuna, and from Canada to Ireland during the rest of the year to catch bluefin tuna. The boats return to Cape Town to unload their catch rather than transporting it directly to Japan, except in rare cases when their catches fill the boat's holds to capacity. Frozen tuna is regularly shipped from Cape Town to Japan in reefers, or refrigerated cargo ships. After a brief stay in Cape Town, just enough time to unload their catches and replenish supplies, the tuna boats head back to the fishing grounds. Periodic maintenance and repairs are taken care of in the Cape Town dockyards, so the Japanese fishermen fly back to Japan to visit their families while the ships are in dry dock.



Minato's sign still indicates that it is a karaoke bar

Minato is a restaurant that Mr. Hatsushiro Muraoka and his wife Chieko run themselves. Although Minato's sign reads, "Japanese Sushi," there is no sushi bar. Mr. Muraoka prepares sushi in the kitchen while his wife prepares tempura and other dishes. Minato's most popular sushi is the dynamite roll, made with still-hot shrimp tempura, avocado, mayonnaise, dried nori seaweed and rice, rolled with the rice on the outside and the nori on the inside. Initially, the Muraokas opened a karaoke bar, but as the number of Japanese fishermen decreased, their business began to fail. They converted their karaoke bar into a sushi restaurant when sushi began gaining

popularity, and they have been successful ever since. Minato opens at 7:00 p.m. and is closed on Saturdays and Sundays. Some days, the door is closed as early as 9:00 p.m. because they have run out of fish!



Minato's sushi doesn't skimp on the good stuff

The Muraokas are not interested in making a lot of money; they just want their customers to enjoy their food and have time to themselves to play golf, one of the things that attracted them to Cape Town. They play everyday, so Minato is only open for dinner. After playing a round of golf, Mr. Muraoka goes to the docks to meet the fishing boats returning with the day's catch. In this way, he is able to buy the freshest fish to serve at his restaurant. Minato is also famous among the locals because Mr. Muraoka is somewhat of a star. He appears in several television commercials, which contributes to the good business enjoyed by Minato.



The Muraokas play golf together in the daytime and cook together at night.

Getting to Know the World's Sushi

In the previous issue, this column reported on soy sauce served with sushi outside of Japan. High-class restaurants serve Japanese soy sauce, with Kikkoman being the most common brand, while less expensive establishments serve soy sauce made in China or Southeast Asia.

So, what about wasabi (Japanese horseradish)? True wasabi is native to Japan and, due to international controls on plant trade, the import and export of wasabi is difficult. Overseas use of genuine wasabi is limited to the most exclusive restaurants. The majority of sushi bars and restaurants use a powdered wasabi mixed with water. One step up from this, in both quality and cost, is wasabi paste, packaged in the same tubes found in Japanese supermarkets.

Pickled ginger used to garnish sushi is imported from Japan or Taiwan. Recently, ginger produced in Mexico and pickled in Los Angeles is available in the U.S. Yet, at a restaurant I visited in Latin America, pickled ginger was not used to garnish sushi plates unless they were the deluxe plates, which were priced to include the cost of the imported pickled ginger.

All photos in this article were taken by the author.