

Japanese Food in Holland: The Global Trend Spreads

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Japanese Food Heads West

The twentieth century was a very turbulent period in the history of Japanese cuisine. Along with economic and technological advancement, accompanied by urbanization and other social changes, Japanese foodways underwent a transition whose importance can be compared to the culinary borrowings from China in earlier times. The manner in which food had been produced, distributed, prepared and consumed in Japan for centuries has altered considerably in the last hundred years, in particular since the economic boom of the 1960s.¹

The twentieth century was in the first place the time in which Japanese cuisine accumulated influences from the West and accommodated itself to the needs of a modernizing society. However, it was also the period when Japanese food began to spread beyond the home isles. This process was initiated by the migration of Japanese people to East and Southeast Asia and South and North America. It intensified from the 1970s onwards, when the Japanese economy started to conquer foreign markets.

The first Japanese restaurant outside Asia opened in San Francisco in 1887, but eventually Los Angeles became the center of Japanese food culture in North America. By the early twentieth century, a Japanese quarter with the name Little Tokyo had developed in Los Angeles' Chinatown, containing about forty Japanese restaurants, next to numerous Japanese butchers and vegetable dealers (Koyama 1985). Similar developments were observed in other areas with large accumulations of Japanese immigrants, such as Hawaii and Brazil (Mori 2000). A characteristic feature of these efficiently operated culinary infrastructures was the fact that they were targeted exclusively at the immigrant Japanese community. It was not until the 1970s that the Japanese restaurants operating in San Francisco, São

Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and other areas with high concentrations of Japanese immigrants began to cater for non-Japanese customers, and that new Japanese restaurants began to open outside these areas.

The ecology movement initiated by the American hippies in the late 1960s was the first step in the global diffusion of Japanese food. The rediscovery of organic foods and a growth of interest in alternative diets, traditional Asian foodways in particular, among Americans provided Japanese cuisine with a spectrum of new possibilities for expansion. The progress of nutritional knowledge, which at about the same time began to recognize the negative impact of heavy, meat-based diets on human health, was another important factor that helped to promote Japanese cuisine in the West. American dietitians began to recommend the low-fat and low-cholesterol Japanese-style diet as one of the healthiest in the world, and this image accompanied the cuisine as it diffused worldwide.

The fashion of eating Japanese food, sushi in particular, that first flourished in California, was within a couple of years picked up by people in large cities of the east coast in the U.S. and gradually spread among the European capitals. By the end of the twentieth century, Japanese food had acquired a firm position in the Western culinary repertoire.

The spread among Europeans of a fashion for dining Japanese-style was fuelled, next to the health aspect, by the worldwide distribution of Japanese electronic products and cars and the rise of Japan's prestige in the global arena. However, the role of the United States in the global diffusion of Japanese cuisine was at least as important. It can safely be assumed that sushi and *teppanyaki*² would have never become so popular in Europe without the added value of being American food fads.



The late Yōichi Hara, owner of the restaurant Yoichi, who passed away on February 12, was a living Japanese treasure. Every evening for the last 20 years, he circulated dressed in kimono among his customers, emanating traditional Japanese hospitality.



Sushi Time and one of the owners.



Advertising poster for the trendy sushi bar Zushi in Amsterdam.



It is very easy to choose your favorite sushi—one of the main attractions of the sushi bar.

Japanese Food Boom Takes off in Holland

The year 2000 was a very special year for the Netherlands and Japan. It marked 400 years of Japanese-Dutch relations that began on April 19, 1600 when the Dutch ship *De Liefde* drifted ashore in Usuki Bay, Kyushu. The Dutch were not the first Westerners to establish contact with Japan, but they eventually turned out to be the only nation to maintain unbroken diplomatic relations with Japan, which have continued ever since. Despite this long relationship, however, until recently Japanese food was practically unknown in the Low Countries. While the fashion for Japanese food was sweeping European capitals in the 1980s, the Dutch remained relatively untouched by the new trend. It has only been a couple of years since sushi bars began mushrooming in Amsterdam and soy sauce and *wasabi*³ came to be sold in supermarkets all over the country.

Until recently, Japanese food belonged to the category of exclusive ethnic cuisine, known and available only to a very small sector of Dutch society. The majority of Japanese restaurants in Holland were set up and run by Japanese, and targeted overwhelmingly at a Japanese clientele. A characteristic feature of these dining establishments were efforts made by the management to create an atmosphere of traditional Japan, with waitresses dressed in kimono and interiors dominated by screens, bonsai plants and calligraphy—items that have come to symbolize Japan abroad. Yoichi, one of the oldest Japanese restaurants in the Netherlands (earlier known under the name of Toga), is such a place. With the interior dominated by red lanterns and bonsai plants, it projects a clichéd image of exotic Japan.

As with many other Japanese restaurants outside Japan, Yoichi was targeted in the first decade of its existence mainly at Japanese expatriates. Then, only one-third of its customers were non-Japanese, while today the ratio has reversed and Westerners constitute more than seventy percent of Yoichi's clients. The

management believes that the popularity of their establishment is due to the fact that it accommodates the tastes of the local people (by offering *tempura*⁴, for example, which is very much liked by the Dutch) and that it closely follows new trends in Japanese cuisine (the sushi-bar at Yoichi, for example, serves California Roll and other modern versions of sushi). However, an important aspect of Yoichi's selling power is the atmosphere of nostalgic exoticism that emanates from the restaurant interior. The place is richly decorated with bonsai, lanterns and other old-fashioned Japanese-style decorations. It also has authentic *tatami*-mat rooms for special reservations.

Despite the growing popularity of Japanese food in the Netherlands, restaurants such as this are rare, increasingly outnumbered by popular *teppanyaki*-style places and modern sushi bars. Generally speaking, Japanese cuisine in Europe is on its way to becoming an eclectic, modern culinary experience rather than the exotic curiosity. Sushi bars, in particular, project a global, futuristic image through the websites that they use to communicate with or attract clients.

The sudden death last February of Yoichi's owner, Yōichi Hara, symbolized the end of an era of Japanese food as ethnic cuisine and the beginning of an era of "global sushi." To be sure, as Theodore Bestor implies, "sushi remains firmly linked in the minds of Japanese and foreigners alike with Japanese cultural identity. Throughout the world, sushi restaurants operated by Koreans, Chinese, or Vietnamese maintain Japanese identities. In sushi bars from Boston to Valencia, a customer's simple greeting in Japanese can throw chefs into a panic (or drive them to the far end of the counter)" (Bestor 2000). The managers of modern sushi bars do not deny the Japanese origin of sushi, but do not exploit it either. In their eyes sushi is a trendy snack with a great potential for global expansion. In this context, the Japanese identity of sushi is thus comparable to the Italian identity of pizza.

The new restaurants that have been mushrooming in Holland in recent years serve Japanese food in a very different setting from one dominated by calligraphy and bonsai. On the one hand, the modern, futuristic interiors of sushi bars create an atmosphere resembling the fashionable, Westernized upper-end restaurants in contemporary Japan. On the other hand, in numerous *teppanyaki* restaurants in the hands of Chinese entrepreneurs, the food is served in semi-Oriental surroundings of red-and-golden kitsch. The Dutch customer is hardly aware of the fact that neither the cuisine nor the setting in which it is served is representative of the Land of the Rising Sun.

The Chinese restaurateurs in the Netherlands already in the early 1990s began to realize that switching to Japanese cuisine, or including *teppanyaki* and sushi in their menus, would give their enterprises a financial boost. With the number of Chinese restaurants in the Netherlands equalling the number of post offices, competition was high and profit low. The prestige factor of Japanese cuisine meant the possibility of adding a higher premium.

The majority of Dutch people still see *teppanyaki* as representative of Japanese cooking. Although the association with sushi is becoming more pronounced, knife-juggling *teppanyaki* chefs seem to leave a strong impression. The fact that the taste of grilled meat and vegetables agrees more with Dutch taste preferences than raw fish on rice is certainly of great importance as well.

Sushi Bar—Japanese Food Goes Global

The sushi bar is now in vogue all over Europe. There is no capital, including those of Eastern Europe, that does not have one. In summer 1999, three were opened almost simultaneously in Amsterdam.

A sushi bar generally implies a sushi restaurant that uses a circulating conveyor belt in order to carry the food to the customer. These bars are a fancy

version of the cheap *kaitenzushi* (literally, rotating sushi) restaurants that since the 1970s have catered in Japan to students and other city folk with little money. The image of *kaitenzushi* in Japan has changed recently from that of a place regarded with little esteem, where a girl from a good family should certainly not be seen, to a family-type of establishment where one can get a quality meal at a comfortable price. Nevertheless, sushi bars in the U.S. and Europe were, from the beginning, very different from their original Japanese versions in the sense that they were trendy and expensive as opposed to convenient and cheap.

London was the place where *kaitenzushi* bars emerged most rapidly in the early 1990s, and it is the British model that is imitated all over Europe. British cooks often train the local personnel in the art of sushi making, equipment and tableware are often British-made, and British enterprises such as Yo-sushi serve as management formulas to be copied. It is even British capital that happens to be invested in sushi bars abroad, as is the case with Zushi.

Zushi, situated in the very center of Amsterdam and owned by Charles Boxhall, who is also the production manager of musician Lionel Richie, follows the British formula entirely. American and London bestsellers, such as California roll and Kamikaze roll (spicy tuna) are the set items on the menu (for details about the menu see www.zushi.nl). The head chef as well as the first two managers have been imported from England. The clientele is very international, as Zushi's location is close to the famous Amsterdam Flower Market and other celebrated tourist spots. Dutch customers seem to be satisfied with this international allure of Zushi, as it adds a global dimension to their dining experience. The futuristic interior and trendy music, carefully selected by the manager, make the atmosphere at this posh bar very different from the oriental nostalgia



Zushi is packed with customers who come to enjoy the “modern version” of sushi.

that emanates from the late Mr. Hara’s establishment.

There are no starters, our menu is moving along right in front of you, so just help yourself from the conveyer belt. Zushi uses five different colored plates, each color denotes a different price. Just stack the empty plates on top of each other after you finish each dish and make your next selection. When you are ready for your bill, call a member of staff who will count the number of plates per color and give you a docket. Simply take the docket to the cash desk when you are ready to leave. (from Zushi’s website)

As the above statement implies, the freedom to choose the amount and sort of food, and the pace in which to consume it, is an important selling point of sushi bars. Along with convenience and simplicity, the fact that the diners eat together around the conveyor belt encourages single customers, who would be reluctant to enter an ordinary restaurant where they are seated at a lonely table.

The emphasis on convenience is even more pronounced at another sushi bar in Amsterdam, with the name Sushi Time, which advertises itself as a perfect place for a healthy and convenient business lunch.

Sushi Time opened on September 1, 1999 in the World Trade Center, a business center situated in the south of Amsterdam. The owners are a young hotel school graduate, Vincent Langendorff, and his friend, Chris Jan van Kooten. Langendorff first worked for three years in the management of the *teppanyaki* restaurant Sazanka at the Hotel Okura in Amsterdam.

Following this, he was engaged in exporting exclusive European foods, such as pesto and olive oil, to Singapore. However, when the Asian economic crisis struck in 1998, Langendorff, then in Singapore, returned to the Netherlands and started a new business. While in Singapore, he was astonished by the popularity of rotating sushi bars there. Singapore has a number of *kaitenzushi* chains, such as Fiesta Sushi, which was founded in 1992 and now operates eight outlets, and Genki Sushi, which started a year later and has grown to six outlets thus far.

Langendorff and van Kooten chose the World Trade Center in Amsterdam as the location for their restaurant simply because as beginning entrepreneurs, they could not afford to rent anything uptown and opening a rotating sushi bar on the outskirts of the city would not make much sense. The World Trade Center, with its many international offices, was a fortunate choice. Sushi, which is often described as a new type of fast food, suits the taste of the busy, professional elite and the sushi bar provides a perfect site for a business lunch.

Thirty to thirty-five percent of Sushi Time’s clients are Japanese; the rest are either Dutch or those of other nationalities who work at the WTC. Those who have tried sushi before introduce newcomers, although, according to Langendorff, ninety percent of his customers were familiar with sushi and rotating bars before their first visit to Sushi Time.

Like many other sushi bars, Sushi Time uses plates of different colors, each color indicating the price. Plates are covered by a plastic transparent hood, which

has a hygienic function as well as preventing the sushi from drying out. Despite the popularity of *kaitenzushi* in Europe, an average plate of sushi in London or Amsterdam moves around for a much longer time than is the case in Tokyo or any other place in Japan.

Sushi Time tries to innovate while placing emphasis on quality. Next to sushi, they also serve *miso* soup, *yakitori*⁵ and other Japanese dishes as daily specialties. The menu consists mainly of traditional types of sushi and American specialties, such as California roll. Langendorff would like to innovate more, but his leading Japanese sushi chef is not easily persuaded to “mess about” with Japanese tradition.

Concluding Remarks

The Dutch have until recently been rather unreceptive to culinary trends. This is the reason why the Japanese food boom hit the Netherlands only in 1999, while the rest of Europe had already been gorging on sushi, *tempura* and *yakitori* for years. Certainly, there are differences in the way Japanese cuisine is recreated in different parts of the continent, so that sushi in Moscow tastes and looks different from that in Paris. However, a characteristic feature that distinguishes the perception of Japanese food all over Europe is the fact that it began as an American food fad.

Japanese food in the U.S. evolved from an immigrant cuisine, while for Europeans it represented a genre completely different from Chinese, Indian, Vietnamese and other sorts of food that could directly be linked to the European colonial past. Japanese food has reached western Europe as an American food trend, and continues to diffuse as a London fashion. This is hardly surprising, considering the fact that the U.K. nowadays functions as the European culinary trend-setter, despite the fact that traditional British cuisine is not regarded as particularly inspiring. This culinary leadership is closely connected with two factors. Firstly, owing to its rich colonial experiences, Great Britain attracts immigrants from all over the world who bring their exotic foodways with them. Thus, the position of London as a cosmopolitan metropolis with a rich multicultural food culture derives from the historical legacy of the British Empire.

By the same token, Great Britain has since the end of the Second World War been a leading mediator of American culture in Europe, from jazz and rock music, to film, television and advertising. With a common language and greater United States investment, Britain not only absorbed more American culture but became more adept than any other country in Europe at transposing and re-transmitting it to more culturally embattled societies (Ellwood 1993).

In fact, American mass cultural forms have always reached specific European countries through other

countries which in turn added their own interpretations and re-interpretations. For example, for the Netherlands in the 1920s and 1930s this took place through Berlin, the New York of that time.

The spread of the fashion for Japanese food in cities across Europe, similar to the fast food fad and other food trends that continuously flow from the other side of Atlantic, demonstrates the strong impact that the United States exerts on European foodways. Japanese restaurants in Germany certainly differ from those in Spain, and the spread of Japanese food in each European country depends greatly on the particular ecological, economical and cultural circumstances that are at play in each area. Nevertheless, as far as the popularization of Japanese food in Europe is concerned, the role of the U.S. as the trend emitter, and the U.K. as its mediator, is unquestionable, regardless of how much the French would prefer to disagree.

(Notes)

1. See the articles on Japanese food in the June, August and December 1999 issues of *Japan Echo* (also available online at www.japanecho.co.jp).
2. Slices of meat and vegetables grilled on an iron hot plate and served with a soy sauce-based sauce.
3. *Wasabia japonica*—a plant from the horseradish family, an indispensable accompaniment to sushi.
4. Seafood and vegetables deep-fried in batter.
5. Bite-size pieces of chicken grilled on a skewer.

Acknowledgment

Fieldwork material used in this article has been based on research projects supported by the Asahi Beer Foundation (1998) and the Japanese Ministry of Education (Project no. 10041094).

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