



The World's Thriving Sushi Business
 —The Popularity of Sushi Overseas—
 North, Central, and South America

Hirotaka Matsumoto

While examining the history of sushi provides us with valuable insights, it is also enjoyable to look into the activities of those promoting sushi and the way sushi has spread throughout the world. This article takes a look at the modern globalization of sushi.

Introduction

In April 1975, I opened Takezushi in Manhattan. At that time, there were roughly 150 Japanese restaurants in New York City, primarily serving sukiyaki and tempura. While some may have offered a small sushi bar, none of them specialized in sushi. Americans at that time were still inclined to believe that eating raw fish was barbaric and a custom of those with no culinary skills. Opening a sushi bar in that sort of country may have been a bit reckless. In fact, for the first three months, our only customers were my Japanese acquaintances. An introduction in *New York* magazine, however, turned things around and American customers began pouring in. This was also about the time that Americans started becoming health conscious.

America's Ever Evolving Sushi Culture

The Fusion of Latin and Asian Cuisine

Takeout sushi is so popular in New York City today that sushi sections can be found in many supermarkets and gourmet shops. Sushi bars have even begun employing American sushi chefs. Once an industrial district dominated by warehouse structures, the TriBeCa (Triangle Below Canal Street) neighborhood is now a popular dining area with streets lined with high-end restaurants.



"Spider Roll" created by Nobuyuki Matsuhisa

Just south of TriBeCa lies the financial district once home to the World Trade Center. Nobu, the long-awaited east-coast sister to the famous Matsuhisa restaurant of Beverly Hills, was opened in TriBeCa in 1994.

Serving sushi and other Japanese dishes, Nobu is best known for its trans-Pacific cuisine, so called for its fusion of Asian and Latin cuisines. Nobu's "Ceviche South American-Style" is made from common sushi cuts including lobster, fish, octopus, squid, and clams. "New-Style Sashimi" is thinly sliced grouper served with an olive oil, *ponzu* (citron flavored sauce), and soy sauce dressing, and is seasoned with chili paste rather than the standard *wasabi* (Japanese horse radish). An unforgettable dish that I once had at Matsuhisa was their "Soft-Shell Roll." It was a sushi roll made with soft-shell crab tempura. Today it is known as a "Spider Roll" and has become popular throughout the U.S. Nobu Matsuhisa, the owner/chef of both restaurants created these unique dishes based on his experience in South America.

SushiSamba is a Park Avenue restaurant that also features a fusion of sushi and Latin cuisine. One of its signature "Sashimi Seviche" dishes offers an assortment of four small servings of flounder, yellowtail, tuna, and salmon, each marinated in a different dressing, such as lime juice or *yuzu*

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 Yuroppa o Shokusu* (Gendai Shokan).



SushiSamba's "Maya Roll" on a plate designed by a Chinese designer

(citron)-flavored soy sauce. While SushiSamba's *nigirizushi*, or hand-shaped sushi, is no different from that served in Japan,



Yoko Ogawa works at SushiSamba.

its sushi rolls are unique. For example, the "Inca Roll" is filled with palm hearts and smoked salmon, while the "Maya Roll" is filled with shrimp, avocado, tomato, onion, and cilantro, and is dipped in salsa. Interestingly, although SushiSamba's chefs are all native Japanese, its five owners are Jewish. Further, the 7th Avenue SushiSamba even has a female sushi chef. A feature on female sushi chefs in the June 5, 2002, edition of the New York Times reported that New York

had at least six female sushi chefs at the time.

The Gourmet District of Upper Broadway

While the world associates Broadway with musical theaters, Upper Broadway is known as an upscale residential district abounding with high-end restaurants and gourmet shops. In today's health-conscious U.S., Mediterranean cuisine has become a rage just as Japanese cuisine has. Picholine, a French restaurant in New York, received a three-star rating (Excellent) from the New York Times. It becomes clear just how widely Japanese cuisine has penetrated American food culture when we note that Picholine's menu offers "*hamachi* carpaccio." *Hamachi* is the Japanese word for



Zabar's, a gourmet shop with a long history. Many people can be seen carrying Zabar's purchases in this neighborhood.

yellowtail, but Picholine uses the Japanese word in labeling its dish.

Nearly all of New York's upscale gourmet shops sell sushi. Supermarkets and grocery stores focus on prepared meals, known as home meal replacements (HMRs) in the food service industry. While some stores sell prepared sushi from refrigerated display cases, others feature sushi chefs who fill orders on the spot. Japanese restaurants are often found in areas with a large number of gourmet shops. On comparing prices of Japanese restaurant sushi with those of a neighboring gourmet shop, I discovered that the restaurant charged around \$12–13.00 for a serving of eight pieces of sushi and a small sushi roll. The gourmet shop, on the other hand, charged \$8.40 for six pieces of sushi and two small sushi rolls, \$7.25 for six pieces of sushi, and \$4.79 for four pieces of sushi. From a consumer's point of view, the ability to pick up a pack of sushi along with other groceries and prepared dishes is very convenient, and easier on the wallet.

Another interesting trend has emerged from the sushi boom. More and more Chinese restaurants have begun serving sushi. Space in these restaurants has been converted to sushi bars with Chinese chefs. While Korean restaurants in New York have offered sushi bars with Korean chefs for some time, due in part to Korea's long history with Japan, the same has not been true of Chinese restaurants. It was the business acumen of Chinese restaurateurs that encouraged them to take advantage of the new popularity of sushi.

However, the sushi road has not been an easy one for Chinese restaurants. Most people go to Chinese restaurants not only because the food is delicious, but also because the prices are so attractive. Japanese cuisine, on the other hand, and sushi in particular, is rather expensive. When Empire Szechuan Gourmet added sushi to their menu of Szechuan dishes, it came as little surprise that very few people ordered sushi. Empire Szechuan Gourmet responded by cutting its sushi prices in half.

Ruby Foo's Uptown on 77th Street serves sushi, dim sum, and other Chinese dishes. I encountered an extraordinary dish here, known as "Maki Sushi Dessert." While it looks like a small tuna roll, it's actually shredded coconut that looks like rice rolled in black sesame seeds rather than *nori* seaweed and filled with chocolate. This original *makizushi* was then dipped in a chocolate syrup that looked somewhat like soy sauce, and garnished not with the traditional pickled ginger but with very thin slices of mango marinated in a sugar and cinnamon syrup. I was impressed by the dish, as it seemed like something that would appeal greatly to Americans with their love of both jokes and sweets.



Ruby Foo's extremely sweet "Maki Sushi Dessert"

Sushi for the Health Conscious

Sushi became popular in the U.S. because it is healthy. But there is also a large vegetarian population, for whom sushi is



Robotic fish swim in the tanks above the sushi bar in the 48th Street Haru.

also an option. Haru is a part of the Benihana group that offers “Vegetarian Sushi.” For \$16.00 you can order a serving of seven pieces of sushi, with toppings including *shiitake* mushroom, *kaiware* (*daikon* radish sprouts), tofu, and asparagus, and a

sushi roll. Sushi A-Go-Go at Broadway and 63rd offers eight pieces of sushi with toppings including aloe, *enoki* mushrooms, yam, and *yuba* (tofu skin) for just \$16.00.

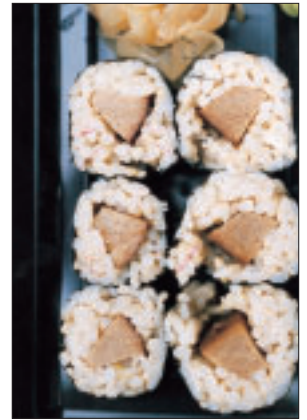
For the truly health conscious, there is Souen in Greenwich Village, serving macrobiotic cuisine. Macrobiotics emphasizes a nearly vegetarian diet based on Japanese foods. Macrobiotics was originally advocated by George Ohsawa, born Yukikazu Sakurazawa, (1893–1966), followed by Michio Kushi. Originally established in 1971 at Broadway and 90th by Takashi Hyodo, Souen is now owned

by Masaaki Yamaguchi. Yamaguchi expanded the restaurant to open another in Greenwich Village in 1981 and still another on 13th Street near 5th Avenue in 1988. In 1989, Yamaguchi closed the original Broadway restaurant. I have heard that John Lennon was a regular customer of the original restaurant as he lived nearby, that Brook Shields dines at the Greenwich Village restaurant, and that Meryl Streep is a customer at the 13th Street Souen restaurant. This must be proof that Souen is popular with musicians and actors who prefer natural foods.



Macrobiotic restaurant Souen

One of Souen’s representative dishes is its “Seitan Roll.” As the most basic and essential ingredient in the Macrobiotics diet is brown rice, all of Souen’s sushi is made from brown rice. Seitan is a meat substitute made from wheat gluten, and seitan dishes are prepared to have a flavor and texture very similar to meat. Other sushi ingredients include seafood such as tuna, shrimp, salmon, and vegetables including carrots, avocados, *ume* (pickled plum) paste, *shiso* (perilla), and cucumber.



Souen’s “Seitan Roll”, made of brown-rice and filled with seitan made from wheat gluten

Sushi and Green Tea

Hot green tea is the standard drink with sushi. In 2001, ITO EN, a Japanese green tea supplier, founded ITO EN (North America) Inc. with headquarters in New York City. The



Outdoor seating at Haru. Since sushi is so healthy, you can eat twice as much!

following year, ITO EN launched its first overseas retail store in a townhouse on New York’s Madison Avenue, home to many of the world’s most prestigious retailers. The tea shop is on the first floor and exhibits glass bottles containing tea-leaf samples along the walls, from floor to ceiling, and a large refrigerator contains the actual product. ITO EN’s tea shop carries seventy-five varieties of green and other teas from China, Taiwan, India, Sri

Lanka, and Japan. Japanese green tea is refrigerated during shipping and stored in a refrigerated warehouse as soon as it is unloaded. Tea from the first harvest of each year is given first-class treatment, as it is shipped by air.

The second floor of ITO EN’s townhouse is a Japanese restaurant named Kai. The lunch menu offers six options, including homemade *soba* (buckwheat) noodles made with green tea leaves as well as assorted sushi. Powdered green tea is served with sushi. Between lunch and dinner, afternoon tea is served for \$6–8.00. The star of the dinner menu is the course dinner, which begins with jasmine tea and ends with cold *soba* noodles and *hojicha* (roasted green tea).

Sushi is ever evolving in New York City. Now, the authentic flavor of sushi’s indispensable partner—green tea—is also available. New York City is not only a melting pot of races, but also of social classes. This melting pot has allowed sushi to evolve in terms of both flavor and price, so that it is appealing and affordable to even those on a limited budget.

Mobile Sushi Bars in Mexico

The United States and Mexico share a close relationship both politically and economically. This relationship continues in terms of cuisine as well. TexMex was born in the U.S., thanks to Mexican influence. Similarly, as sushi began to catch on in the U.S., it also found its way to Mexico in no time at all. In 2001, there were 100 restaurants serving sushi in Mexico City. The sushi and restaurants spanned the full scale in terms of quality. I visited a high-end restaurant called Restaurant Suntory.



Restaurant Suntory's Mexican sushi chef (left), and Japanese head chef, Masahiko Muto (second from left)

There are three Restaurant Suntorys in Mexico alone, and all three are managed by Yoko Kase. I visited the Colonia del Valle Suntory, where the head chef is Masahiko Muto with twenty-two years' experience in Japanese culinary arts. At the



A waitress serving prime-grade assorted sushi (280 pesos) at Restaurant Suntory

sushi bar, I found four Mexican sushi chefs, trained by chefs visiting from Japan and with hands-on training in Japan, displaying excellent skills. My order of special assorted sushi consisted of 10 pieces of sushi, including yellowtail, salmon, crab roe, salmon roe, and local shellfish, as well as a small tuna roll. The price, ¥3,500 at the exchange rate at that time, was higher than that of New York City.

This was because most of

the fish was imported from the U.S.

I also tried the sushi served at a mobile sushi bar. Although *nigirizushi* (hand-shaped sushi) was originally sold from portable street stalls during the Edo period, such establishments are not well regarded today. At around 12:30, Juan Cruz showed up in his Sushi Mobile with a cooler containing all of his sushi makings and a box filled with sushi rice. A little before 1:00, Sushi Mobile began to get busy with customers from nearby offices. All of the customers were Mexican and



Juan Cruz and Sushi Mobile. The string in front of him fills with order slips in no time.

they appeared to be regular customers. Cruz learned his sushi skills from a Japanese chef while working in a Japanese restaurant.

Mexico City rises 2,240 meters (7,349 feet) above sea level, making the cooking of rice difficult. Cruz cooks his rice in a pressure cooker rather than the standard sauce pan, but he still has trouble controlling the pressure. The low atmospheric pressure and thinner air are cause for another concern as well. Many Japanese visitors, not familiar with higher altitudes, find themselves getting sick when they drink alcohol at their usual pace. Restaurant Suntory responds to this dilemma by keeping oxygen tanks on hand and maintaining a contract with a local hospital for ten-minute-or-less ambulance dispatch to the restaurant.

Sushi in Paradise—The Caribbean

The global sushi boom has also been seen on the islands of the Caribbean Sea. I visited the islands of Hispaniola, divided in two by Haiti and the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. The way sushi is eaten on these islands is very interesting. The island of Hispaniola is inhabited by many families who emigrated from Japan after WWII. Samurai is operated by Hideki Tateyama and his wife, Kazuko, the only daughter of an immigrant family. The two met in New York City, where they were both working at a restaurant called Hatsune; Hideki as an apprentice cook and Kazuko as a waitress. At Samurai, I ordered one serving of assorted sushi and paid about ¥1,300



Samurai's Hideki Tateyama (center), and his Dominican waiter and customer



Samurai's Caribbean sushi is not garnished with pickled ginger as ginger is not grown domestically and imported ginger is too expensive.

for one piece each of domestic sea bream, amberjack, shrimp, and squid sushi, two pieces of tuna sushi, and a California roll. An order of assorted deluxe sushi, made of imported fish such as salmon, smoked salmon, salmon roe, and eel costs roughly ¥1,870. The rice used in Samurai's sushi is California rice, and the *nori* seaweed,

wasabi (Japanese horseradish), and other Japanese ingredients, including frozen fish, are supplied every two months by air from Miami.

Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory, has three Japanese restaurants named Yukiko. When ordering at Yukiko, orders are placed à la carte from a slip of paper noting the item and its price, as well as a column for checking the desired items. The owner of these three restaurants is an Argentine and all chefs are Japanese. I ordered seven pieces of sushi (tuna, yellowtail, salmon, mackerel, squid, octopus, and shrimp) and a small tuna roll. All fish is brought in by air from Boston and the prices were almost identical to those of Samurai on Hispaniola. Most of the customers were wealthy Puerto Ricans and tourists were very rare.

The sushi business between these two neighboring islands presented quite a contrast. One was owned by a Japanese striving in a lone battle and using local seafood while the other was a non-Japanese owner operating three restaurants and using seafood brought in from the U.S. mainland.

Sushi for Immigrants in Landlocked Paraguay

Japanese emigration to Paraguay before WWII lasted from 1936 to 1941, with roughly 900 Japanese settling in La Colmena. Emigration resumed in 1953 with arrivals to Chaves, Fram (later renamed La Paz), and Fuji, in the southern part of the country near Encarnación. Mr. Iwao Takimono, owner of the Japanese restaurant New Tokyo, emigrated to Fram in 1955. Although Takimono's primary business is a supermarket, he taught himself cooking and operates his restaurant as a hobby. His culinary skills are surprisingly remarkable. New Tokyo's menu offers one serving of sushi, consisting of twelve pieces (four pieces each of tuna, salmon, and white-meat fish), as well as large and small sushi rolls and *inari-zushi* (pockets of deep-fried tofu



Iwao Takimono enjoys nothing better than serving dishes he has prepared.

filled with sushi rice). Tuna, perch, adult yellowtail, and salmon caught in Chile make the seventeen to eighteen-hour trip each week from Sao Paulo via Takimono's supermarket's refrigerated truck. The rice used at New Tokyo is grown by Japanese farmers in the Iguazu colony. Takimono also sells this rice in his supermarket.

I met a Setsuo Murakami at a currency exchange and he took me to New Tokyo. On the following day, we went to a ceremony celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the Iguazu colony. After the ceremony, tables were set up for a banquet. A great many dishes, prepared over several days by the Iguazu colony's women's group, were laid out on the tables. Among the dishes were sushi, sushi rolls, and *inari-zushi*.

The Sushi Boom in the Beef Country of Argentina

Is there a nation with which cattle and beef have a stronger association than Argentina? The sushi boom has even occurred here! Four years ago, I heard that sushi was served in roughly 70 restaurants, fewer than 20 of which had Japanese owners. The 30,000 Japanese-Argentines must certainly have contributed to this boom, but I was told that the greater influence came from Brazil. The sushi boom found its way to Brazil, where the people embraced it as healthier than beef or pork, and was then passed on to Argentina.



Buenos Aires—birthplace of the tango

I visited Kitayama, one of the few restaurants with a Japanese owner. One serving of medium-grade assorted sushi consisted of one tuna, two salmon, five white-meat fish, and one tuna and mayonnaise sushi, as well as a small tuna roll for ¥1,920. A serving of prime-grade assorted sushi consisted of two tuna, two salmon, three white-meat fish, one salmon roe, and one shrimp sushi, as well as a small tuna roll for ¥2,560. Half of Kitayama's customers were Argentines who must have been wealthy, as they were paying prices similar to those in New York City.

The fish and other ingredients used in Kitayama's sushi were fresher than those used in Paraguay. Sea bream, flounder, bonito, horse mackerel, adult yellowtail, and other local fish are brought into Puerto Buenos Aires (the port of Buenos Aires), while salmon and salmon roe are imported from Chile, and tuna is imported from Brazil and Uruguay. The rice used is medium-grain Argentine rice, a glutinous variety very similar to California rice.

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All photos in this article were taken by the author.