The World's Thriving Sushi Business

The Popularity of Sushi Overseas
The BRICs Part 1

Text and photos by
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This is a follow-up to previous contributions to Food Culture, The World's Thriving Sushi Business in Nos. 12–14 (2006-2007) and The Internationalization of Sushi in No.15 (2007).

I spent the first half of the year 2000 traveling throughout North, Central and South America, Asia, Oceania, Europe, the Middle and Near East, and Africa to collect materials and research for reports. More recently, I have placed my focus on the emerging BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India and China). I visited all four countries, including Brazil, which I had already visited during a previous research trip. These countries will be covered in two separate issues.

(Brazil)

The Asian District Where Sushi Culture Has Prospered

Asian District, São Paulo, Brazil, 2001

The Asian district of Liberdade is lined with Japanese food stores. This was my second visit to São Paulo, and I noticed packs of *nigiri-zushi* (hand-formed blocks of sushi rice with raw fish or other ingredients on top) being sold from refrigerated display cases that I did not see five years earlier in 1996. Back then, there were sushi rolls and *inari-zushi* (pockets of deep-fried tofu filled with sushi rice), but none with raw fish.

Sushi and sashimi are sold by weight.

A "por kilo" shop called Nandemoya that had just opened on my earlier visit had changed its name to Manchinkoku-Shokudo, as the ownership had changed from Japanese to Chinese.

"Por kilo" means "per kilo," and at these restaurants you can select food from a buffet and pay by weight. Unlike all-you-can-eat restaurants, they are economical and discourage waste.

The shop offered salad, *gyouza* dumplings, teriyaki, tempura, fried rice and other dishes commonly seen in Japan. The menu also featured new sushi and sashimi dishes, which were not among the selection five years earlier.

Restaurant Hinode, the oldest among those started by Japanese descents

A Little about the History of Sushi in São Paulo?

I interviewed Dr. Koichi Mori, a researcher at the Center for Japanese-Brazilian Studies, located at the end of Liberdade's main street. Dr. Mori also authored "The Food Situation in Brazil" five years ago. He told me that the first Japanese restaurant in São Paulo was the Uechi Inn, established in 1914, and that they served *inari-zushi* rather than *nigiri-zushi*. It was after the war

(around 1945) when a restaurant near the Lapa District Market, the predecessor of the gigantic CEAGESP wholesale market, began to serve *nigiri-zushi* to Japanese brokers.

I visited the Livraria Takano Bookstore and picked up a tourist map of the city. Since that map contained an advertisement promoting a restaurant called Hinode as "the oldest Japanese restaurant" in town, I decided to visit. I found it had opened 35 years earlier.


Mr. Yahata, who used to run Kokeshi Restaurant

Hinode's owner explained to me, "We were preceded by the Kokeshi and Enomoto Japanese restaurants, but they have since closed, leaving ours as the oldest in town."

Kokeshi had just closed down the previous year. Luckily, I was still able to meet its owner, the 81-year old Hachiro Yahata. Born in Kure in Hiroshima prefecture in 1920, his family moved to Brazil when he was just one year old. He studied at a business school in Noroeste, and worked in the printing department of the Noroeste and Paulista newspapers. In 1965, he quit his job at the newspaper and opened Kokeshi. By that time, there were already three Japanese restaurants that went by the names of Okina-Zushi, Hama-Zushi, and Tokiwa. After the arrival of Kokeshi, Enomoto also entered the picture. I gathered from this that the trailblazing sushi restaurants in São Paulo were Okina-Zushi and Hama-Zushi.


At a morning market, *nigiri-zushi* is made under a canopy.

I asked Mr. Yahata which sushi rice he was using when he got started in the business. Though imported California rice, or japonica varieties harvested in the world's largest rice growing region straddling Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay (Food Culture No. 15) are all easily available now, Mr. Yahata told me these varieties were not easy to come by when he started. Instead, he used Catete rice, a variety created by the IRGA Rice Cultivation Laboratory around 1930 in Rio Grande do Sul (the southernmost state in Brazil and a part of the just mentioned rice growing region). It was made by crossbreeding the conventional indica variety and unhulled rice brought from Japan by immigrants. When cooked in the usual fashion, it was not sticky at all, which is characteristic of the indica variety, but the stickiness peculiar to Japanese rice came out when the cooking method was altered. That cooking method was apparently arrived at after an arduous series of trial and error.

Daughter Opens a Sushi Restaurant

In the 1970s, the Suntory Restaurant from Japan opened in São Paulo. Their first overseas shop in Mexico (described in Food Culture No. 12) was a huge success, and Brazil was chosen as the site of the second shop because the social and business environment was thought to be similar to that of Mexico. All owners of Japanese restaurants until that time had been immigrants from Japan, and almost all customers had been Japanese. Targeting upper class Brazilians, Suntory opened an elegant


Suntory Restaurant started the sushi boom in São Paulo.

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 include Osushi Chikyu o Mawaru (Kobunsha), Oishii Amerika Mitsuketa (Chikuma Shobo), New York Takezushi Monogatari (Asahi Shimbunsha), and Samurai Shisetsudan Yoroppa o Shokusu (Gendai Shokan).

restaurant near Paulista Avenue, one of the most prominent streets in São Paulo. The location was ideal, as Japanese business people would use the restaurant to entertain their Brazilian counterparts. Brazilians who first visited the restaurant with their Japanese associates started to come with their fellow Brazilians as well. This was the beginning of the Japanese food boom. However, at that time, *sukiyaki* and *tempura* were the preferred dishes. Although there was a sushi bar, sushi was not very popular.

The sushi boom in Brazil began in the late 1980s. The American interest in healthy eating was introduced to Brazil, and the image of sushi as a health food became widespread. Next to the Tietê long-distance bus depot, there is a large shopping center called Shopping D, with a food court on the second floor. I went there to visit the Kuroshio Restaurant. Iwao Takimoto, owner of the New Tokyo restaurant in Paraguay (introduced in Food Culture No. 12) had urged me to visit his daughter's restaurant, Kuroshio, in São Paulo when I went there again.

His daughter, Mami, was born in Colonia Fram, and married Kenji Sakamoto, who was working as a computer engineer in São Paulo. Finding his work unchallenging, Kenji decided to quit his job. He talked with a fellow engineer who shared the same feelings, and together they decided to open a sushi restaurant. As they were at the leading edge of a burgeoning interest in Japanese food, the timing was propitious.

At KUROSHIO, Mr. Takimoto's daughter, Mami, and Manuel, the chef

They wanted to try something innovative, and decided to open their restaurant in a shopping center, which was still unprecedented in Brazil in 1994. The restaurant took off and the business thrived. Kenji, however, left the restaurant to open Kuroshio. He brought along a Brazilian named Manuel, who had been a sushi chef at the previous restaurant since its opening. As he was a good chef, Kuroshio thrived. The shopping center was open year round, and Kenji could not handle it alone, so he was joined by his wife, Mami. At first, Mami was against the idea of opening a sushi restaurant, for she had seen firsthand the hardships her father went through in Paraguay. However, now that Kuroshio is thriving, she enjoys working there.

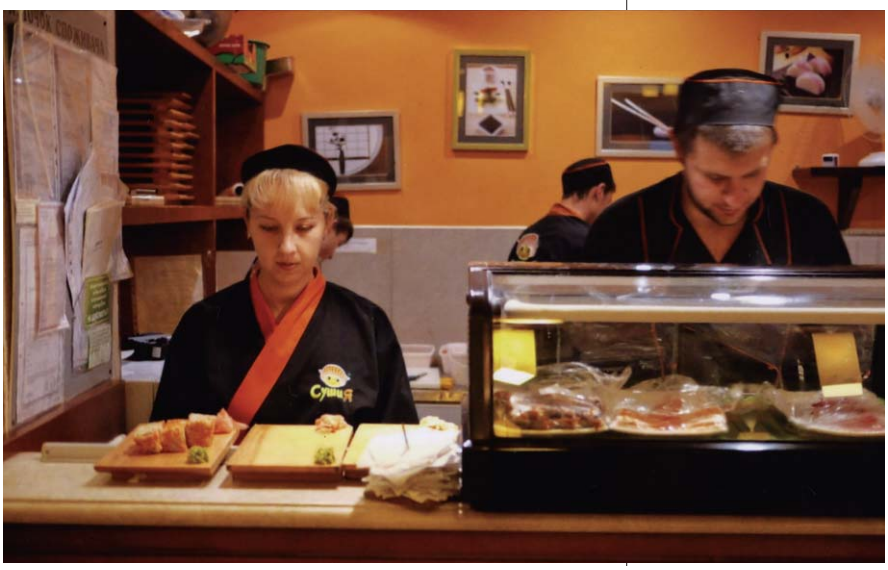
Kuroshio buys fish from a Japanese dealer who purchases it from the CEAGESP market. The market features yellowtail, sea bream, sea bass, olive flounder and horse mackerel caught in the nearby sea, as well as salmon from Chile. The tuna varieties include bigeye and yellowfin, which fishermen catch during their 20-day fishing trips, sailing out of Santos and Rio de Janeiro. As the best quality tuna is exported to the U.S. and Japan, procuring good tuna locally is a hard job, said Kenji. His restaurant's sales peaked around three years ago, mainly because many who had migrated to Japan and returned with some money decided to open sushi restaurants en masse. They all assumed the sushi business would be lucrative. According to Kenji's estimate, as of 2001, the number of restaurants serving sushi in São Paulo would exceed 600, including 350 Japanese restaurants and "por kilo" shops.

(Russia)
Ukraine Instead of Russia

When I got to Warsaw in Poland, I actually wanted to go farther up to Moscow. But I gave up on it because obtaining a visa to Russia was an overly involved process. Still, I really had wanted to see Moscow's sushi boom with my own eyes. I couldn't get that thought out of my head, and I finally came up with the idea to go to Ukraine instead. Ukraine is right next to Russia, and was a part of the Soviet Union until 1991. The flourishing sushi restaurant chains in Moscow triggered a sushi boom in Ukraine as well, and sightseeing in Ukraine didn't require a visa. I thought that if I went to Ukraine, I could also learn something of the sushi situation of Moscow. Then, serendipity struck.

The Kikkoman Institute for International Food Culture offered to introduce Mr. Junichi Sawano of Kikkoman Trading Europe GmbH, who was in

Sushiya in Ukraine. It looks like a family restaurant rather than a sushi restaurant.


At Sushiya's sushi counter, Ukrainian chefs prepare sushi on an elevated stage.

charge of Russia. Since he frequently traveled between Düsseldorf and Moscow, he would be the best person to describe the sushi situation in Moscow. So, I flew to Brussels at the end of September 2010 and called him from Takezushi to obtain information about Ukraine, which was also his territory.

He told me that the restaurants Yakitori, Planeta Sushi, Tanuki, and others had opened chain stores in Ukraine. The biggest local chain store was Sushiya.

Having decided to obtain information about Moscow's sushi situation later after returning from Ukraine, I flew from Brussels to Kiev via Warsaw. I once spent 18 hours on the train traveling from Brussels to Warsaw (Food Culture No. 14), but this time I got there quickly.

I stayed at a hotel near Khreschatic Street, in the busiest part in Kiev, and tried to find a nearby Sushiya restaurant based on directions I received at the hotel. I couldn't find anything resembling a sushi restaurant, although there was one family restaurant. Thinking the sushi restaurant might have become a family restaurant, I tried to investigate further. As the sign was in Cyrillic, I could not make out what it said, and I had a hard time trying to find anyone who could understand English. Finally, a young person came and told me that the restaurant was in fact Sushiya.

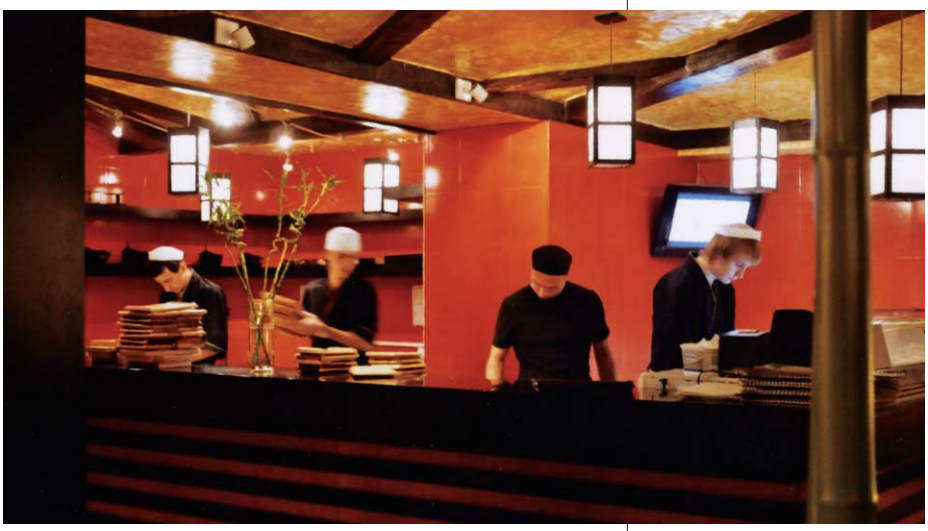
Timidly, I opened the door and was welcomed by a chorus of voices calling out "irasshaimase (welcome)!" Every time a customer enters, the young waitresses all join in this rousing greeting. The interior design was exactly that of a family restaurant. The only difference was that the sushi counter was situated one step higher so that customers could see how sushi was prepared. The Ukrainian sushi chefs were making sushi, but there were no seats in front of the sushi counter. The sushi counter was elevated a bit to provide a show.

The menu had lovely photos of sushi with Cyrillic and English lettering. If the outside sign had been in English as well, it could have saved me some trouble.

The offered variety of *nigiri-zushi* was modest, including mainly tuna, salmon, shrimp, sea bream, scallop, and salmon roe. The reason might be that these ingredients freeze well. The sushi rolls, though, offered plenty of variety, with tuna rolls, cucumber rolls, and many kinds of original rolls such as California roll, Philadelphia roll, Alaska roll, Dragon roll, and deep-fried shrimp roll. The prices were 13 hryvni (one USD = approx. 8 hryvni) for one piece of tuna, 8 hryvni for salmon, and 15 hryvni for salmon roe, which were a bit high. But the prices of rolls were reasonable, ranging from a 13-hryvnia tuna roll to a 75-hryvnia dragon roll. For comparison, a Filet-O-Fish set menu at McDonald's was 40 hryvni at the time. In the restaurant, most of the customers were eating sushi rolls, and none were eating *nigiri-zushi*. They were all locals, with no tourists in sight. It was early evening, and women were enjoying dinner after a day's work. The business appeared to be quite successful.The Kiev tourist magazine at the hotel said that there were a combined seven Sushiya shops in the city.

The Sushi Invasion from Moscow

Four outlets of Moscow's Planeta Sushi chain were introduced in the tourist guidebook. I visited the one on Khreschatic Street, and found no customers there, even though it was lunch time. The menu was priced at 21 hryvni for a piece of tuna, 15 for salmon, and 19 for salmon roe, which were higher prices than those at Sushiya. Could it be because their sushi ingredients were brought to the chain outlets in Kiev all the way from Moscow? With this kind of price range, people would naturally head to the nearby Sushiya instead.


Sushi bar at Murakami


Murakami's charismatic manager

Murakami was right next to Planeta Sushi, in the basement.

The sign outside the restaurant displayed sushi photos with the restaurant name in Japanese lettering, so it was easy to find. The interior was stylish, and similar to that of a nightclub with subdued lighting. Behind the sushi counter, which had no seats, there were 4 to 5 chefs, all Ukrainian.

I ordered one serving each of tuna, salmon, sea bream and flying fish roe. (Actually, I had meant to order salmon roe rather than flying fish roe. Though "ikura" means salmon roe in Japanese, it simply means fish roe in Russian. If they were going to bring me the wrong roe, I wish it had been caviar.) Each dish was a proper *nigiri-zushi*. The cost of the four servings was 50 hryvni, almost the same as at Sushiya. The guidebook showed 7 Murakamis, but there were already more than 10, according to the restaurant manager. He told me that Murakami is the most popular sushi chain in Kiev, even ahead of Sushiya.

The Premier Palace Hotel will always have the distinction of being the first hotel in Ukraine to be awarded 5 stars. The hotel is home to an authentic Japanese restaurant called Sumosan, and this one has seats in front of the sushi counter. The sushi chef was not Japanese, but a Moscow-born Korean-Russian named Mr. Kim.

According to Mr. Kim, there are two other Sumosan restaurants in London and Moscow, both of which are owned (along with the Kiev Sumosan) by a German. They are also located in prominent hotels. Mr. Kim worked in the Moscow restaurant for five years before coming to Kiev five years ago. Two Japanese chefs at the London restaurant take turns teaching Japanese culinary skills to the chefs of the Moscow and Kiev restaurants.


Mr. Kim, sushi chef at Sumosan

As might well be expected, the prices are high. A single serving (one piece) of tuna or salmon is 88 hryvni, and a serving of fatty tuna 127 hryvni. They serve proper caviar for 267 hryvni.

The Moscow restaurant imports Mediterranean or

Boston tuna, some of which is sent to Kiev. Young yellowtail is shipped from Korea to Moscow and Kiev. When the shipping costs of these fish are added to the high cost of the prime hotel location, higher sushi prices are inevitable. Sumosan restaurants stay in business because of the demand for sushi from business customers and foreign tourists, with little dependence on the locals.

1,000 Sushi Restaurants in Moscow

After returning from Kiev to Brussels, I met up with Mr. Sawano at Takezushi. He had come all the way from Düsseldorf, and the trip had taken four hours rather than the usual two, due to heavy traffic. I felt a bit sorry for taking up his day like that. But then again, Takezushi in Belgium uses Kikkoman soy sauce and is a valued customer.

I had obtained some information from newspapers and magazines regarding the sushi boom in Moscow. I read about Russian Prime Minister Putin's particular liking for sushi, revealed by actions such as flying in his private jet to Japan, reserving a whole sushi restaurant in Ginza, enjoying sushi, and then returning to Russia within the same day (and bringing with him a sushi chef for his party in Moscow). It is understandable that media reports focus on such ostentation, but I wanted to know how sushi was seen by the average Muscovite.

First, I thought I should learn a bit of the Cyrillic alphabet, and luckily Mr. Sawano had majored in the Russian language at university. Sushi is written in Cyrillic as "**СУШИ**" where "**С**" is an S sound, "**У**" is pronounced as U, "**Ш**" represents SH, and "**И**" is read as I. The Sushiya sign had an "**Я**" which is pronounced "ya," at the end. "ëiòàü" means Sushiya. And here I thought they had intentionally reversed R to imitate the logo of the TOYSRUS toy store!

What I really wanted to ask Mr. Sawano was whether the 1,000 sushi restaurants in Moscow cited by newspaper articles and other media were representative of the true figure. Some articles more conservatively said there were only 500 restaurants. While 500 might be possible, 1,000 was way too big a number for me to take seriously.

Mr. Sawano replied, "There are only 10 or so authentic Japanese or sushi restaurants. On top of this, Yakitoria and Planeta have 50 shops respectively, Tanuki has 20, and shops similar to them are found everywhere.

In Saint Petersburg, Eurasia has 50 chain shops. Also, some Italian and Chinese restaurants serve sushi. So, with these types of restaurants included, the figure of 1,000 may not be an exaggeration."

Mr. Sawano of Kikkoman. The soy sauce bottles with the Cyrillic label are destined for Russia.

One of the authentic Japanese restaurants is Misato, which is run by the Russian Presidential Palace. The head chef, Mr. Munechika Ban, is the first Japanese chef approved to join the National Chefs Guild, which allows only the most elite chefs to become members. Mr. Sawano told me that Mr. Ban had worked for Seiji prior to Misato. Seiji was opened in 2001, and is the most renowned restaurant in Moscow.

They import fish directly from the Tsukiji fish market in Tokyo. Amazingly enough, at Seiji, there are no fewer than 150 regular customers who customarily spend the equivalent of $1,000 USD a night.

However, the sushi restaurant market seems to have reached a saturation point. Mr. Sawano said, "Kikkoman and the Embassy of Japan have been hosting cooking seminars for Russian chefs. But these days many say that they have had enough of sushi and want to learn about other Japanese dishes." Now, *udon* and *ramen* shops are emerging and aimed at securing a post-sushi position.

This does not mean that the sushi boom has subsided, but that *ramen* shops are increasing in numbers along with sushi restaurants. This is a good thing for Kikkoman because it means more customers for their soy sauce.

The BRIC countries of India and China will be covered in the next issue of Food Culture as Part 2 of this article.