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JAPANFOUNDATION

すし
SUSHI

The Japan Foundation Traveling Exhibition

I Love Sushi

Foreword

Established in 1972, the Japan Foundation creates global opportunities to cultivate friendship and ties between Japan and the world through culture, language, and dialogue. The Foundation operates programs in the fields of arts and cultural exchange, Japanese-language education overseas, and Japanese studies and intellectual exchange. As a new cultural exchange program, we are delighted to present a touring exhibition “I Love Sushi” that focuses on sushi, the most popular Japanese cuisine around the world.

In 2013, UNESCO inscribed *washoku*—Japanese cuisine—on its Intangible Cultural Heritage list, and sushi is the archetypal example. Sushi is a refined and healthy food that looks good and tastes good, and it has already become a familiar item on menus worldwide. From its roots in Southeast Asia or Southern China, sushi reached Japan over a thousand years ago. Since then, sushi has radically changed, taking advantage of the abundance of natural resources found in and around the islands of Japan, of the application of knowledge and ideas to sushi, and of the never-ending Japanese drive to try good-tasting foods at the earliest opportunity. The type of sushi that first comes to mind for most people today is *nigiri-zushi*, which emerged about two hundred years ago in Edo, the city that we now know as Tokyo.

Sushi has now spread outside Japan’s borders, and is enjoyed around the world. But although it has become a familiar food, many people have only discovered a few of its attractions. This exhibition aims to provide an in-depth visual guide to the appeal of sushi. It includes the chance to learn about how Japan took in sushi in its original form, how it modified sushi to suit the natural environment, culture, and lifestyles of individual areas. It also introduces today’s vibrant sushi culture, and it encourages us to think about the potential of sushi as a food for the future in the light of contemporary food issues. The exhibition includes a simulation of a visit to a sushi shop in Japan. People who know little about sushi will greatly enjoy the exhibition, and keen fans of sushi will find it fascinating too. And we very much hope that through sushi, the exhibition will also communicate something about the history and customs of Japan.

Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to Hibino Terutoshi for his supervision of the preparations for this exhibition, and to all the other individuals and entities whose unstinting efforts have made the exhibition a success.

The Japan Foundation

Introduction

Ito Masanobu
Executive Program Director, The Japan Foundation

Thanks to the confluence of cold and warm currents, the coastal waters of the Japanese archipelago teem with fish and other marine life that have long sustained and enriched the diet of the Japanese people. There was little or no custom of eating meat, and until Western cuisine took root, fish were the main source of dietary protein. Sushi, particularly *nigiri-zushi*, is a marriage of this key food resource with rice, the mainstay of the Japanese diet. A third element, vinegar, served as the matchmaker. Given the minimal preparation it entails, *nigiri-zushi* is arguably the ultimate fast food, and it now has legions of fans throughout the world.

Over the past fifty years, the Japan Foundation has staged a great many exhibitions introducing the arts and culture of Japan to overseas audiences. In addition to fine arts and handicrafts, these exhibitions have covered such fields as architecture, design, archaeological artifacts, photography, manga, illustration, and Japanese dolls, but the Foundation has rarely if ever put on an exhibition focused squarely on food. Such neglect despite the keen interest in Japanese cuisine (*washoku*) worldwide was no doubt due to a feeling that no amount of visual improvisation could properly communicate the taste. We tended to think that trying some genuine Japanese dishes would convey the culinary experience far more effectively. However, the fact is that in Japan, people go out of their way to make food visually attractive, so much so that they are often said to “eat with their eyes,” and we came to realize that the care and sensibilities shown in arranging and presenting Japanese cuisine made it more than an ideal subject for an exhibition.

The world of *washoku* is, however, so vast that doing justice to its extraordinary diversity in a compact traveling exhibition would be almost impossible. It was for this reason that we decided to focus on sushi as an exemplary genre of Japanese cuisine,

Sushi menu board

and we have done our best to present at least some of the allure of sushi in this exhibition. One thing I would like to say up front is that while I too love sushi, we are not in the least interested in putting sushi on a pedestal as the world’s most exquisite food. In my view, it is both pointless and impossible to rank foods in order of their appeal. After all, for most of us, nothing can match the meals we shared with our family and friends while growing up in our hometowns—surely the best food in the world.

Mention of the word ‘sushi’ no doubt conjures up images of *nigiri-zushi* in the minds of most people, but *nigiri-zushi* is actually a newcomer to the genre, invented only 200 years ago. In contrast, the overall history of sushi in Japan stretches back well over 1,000 years. As such, the sushi envisaged by so many people throughout the world is but one variation on an original theme that was very unlike present-day *nigiri-zushi*. Moreover, even though sushi is the best-known example of Japanese cuisine, Japan is not its birthplace. It is thought to have originated in Southeast Asia or Southern China, and to have been introduced to Japan in the eighth century at the latest. At that time, sushi was a food preserved through fermentation. At first, people only ate the fish, discarding the rice, but in time, they came to eat the rice as well. The fermentation period gradually shortened, and once vinegar came to be added, various types of sushi emerged. *Nigiri-zushi* appeared in the nineteenth century, starting out as an inexpensive fast food prepared in advance for selling at street stalls.

After arriving in Japan, sushi underwent various changes during the centuries of exposure to the country’s culture, nature, and way of life before it finally assumed the novel form of *nigiri-zushi*. This evolution is reminiscent of the way Japan has since ancient times subsumed so many foreign elements—rice cultivation, Chinese characters, Buddhism, various arts—into its traditional culture. Interestingly, sushi owes its evolution not to the nobility or samurai class, but rather to the common people, who were always looking for ways of creating tasty dishes that could

be prepared as quickly and easily as possible; the knowledge and ingenuity they developed as a result was what drove the evolution of sushi.

With sushi now almost as popular overseas as it is in Japan, we have designed this exhibition both to explore various fascinating aspects of the genre itself, and to provide some glimpses of the history and culture of Japan that have contributed to the evolution of sushi.

We have included an exhibit to provide visitors with a simulated experience of a sushi restaurant that both passionate sushi fans and the merely curious will hopefully enjoy. When you take a seat, a sushi chef appears, makes *nigiri-zushi*, and places it in front of you. Tuna comes first, followed by kohada, squid, and other delights, serving a total of eight different types of sushi altogether. Each piece of sushi looks delicious, but is soon replaced by the next. As the video continues, you may find it stimulating your appetite. I can only offer my sincere apologies to anyone who finds this too tantalizing, but we hope it will give you some idea of the atmosphere of a typical Japanese sushi restaurant. If it leaves your taste buds thirsting for the real thing, I recommend going on to a local sushi restaurant. I suspect you will find the sushi even more delicious for having taken in the exhibition. And if there are no sushi restaurants in your neighborhood, I hope you will be able to visit Japan in the near future to give sushi a try.

Nigiri-zushi (lean tuna)

I: Introducing Sushi

Introducing Sushi

Hibino Terutoshi
Authority on local sushi traditions

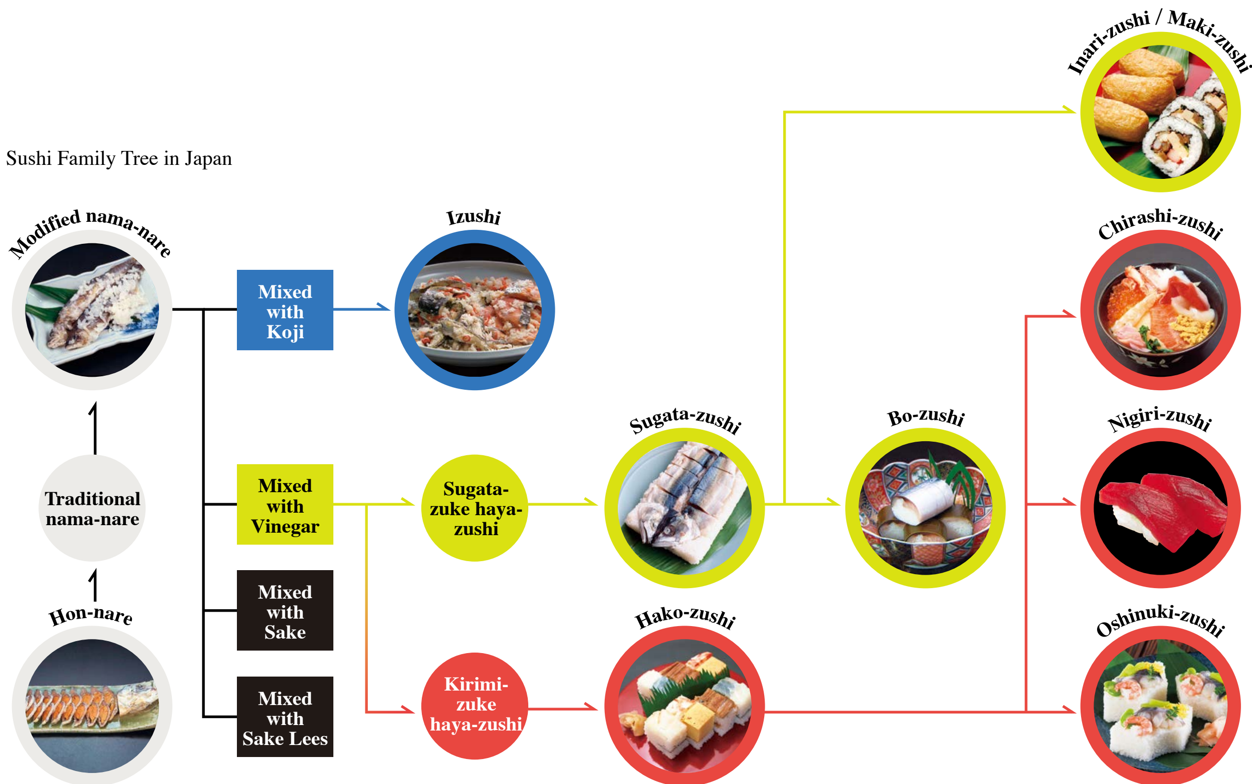
Worldwide, sushi is probably the best known example of *washoku* (traditional Japanese cuisine). But how many people know that sushi did not originate in Japan? Two thousand years ago, China already had a character for writing sushi, and some scholars suggest that sushi came from even further away, in Southeast Asia. Nobody knows for certain when or how sushi came to Japan, but the Chinese writing system was transmitted to Japan, and even the oldest documents, written in the eighth century, include the word for sushi. At the very least, we can say that sushi was already in Japan by the eighth century.

The sushi in those days was very different to the sushi we know today. It was made by placing salted fish in a wooden tub or bucket with cooked rice and leaving it to mature for several months. Today's sushi uses vinegared rice, but not a drop of vinegar was added when making this early sushi. Nevertheless, it developed a sour flavor as a result of the rice fermenting. In Japan, fermented sushi is now called *nare-zushi* (the "zushi" in compound words like *nare-zushi* means the same as "sushi"), and this sort of fully-fermented sushi is referred to as *hon-nare*—the form of sushi that crossed the seas to Japan well over a millennium ago. Interestingly, although sushi probably reached Japan via China, and there are records of it being produced in China in substantial quantities, it is no longer to be found there. For examples of sushi like the food that first came to Japan, we have to look to continental Southeast Asian, where it is still produced in areas such as the Mekong and Irrawaddy river basins.

Ayu-zushi
(nama-nare)

Compared with the sushi produced in those areas, Japan's sushi uses a lot more rice. But surprisingly, the steamed rice used in large amounts in Japan's early sushi was not eaten. In those days, sushi was seen as a way of preparing fish, and the fish was what counted. The rice was a tool, used only to enhance the flavor of the fish. About seven centuries ago, however, Japan's *mottainai* philosophy—the cultural abhorrence of waste—came into play.

Sushi Family Tree in Japan



Until that point, sushi had been a cuisine for the upper classes. In preparing it, the use of rice had been permitted as a tool for imparting sourness to the fish. But, when sushi reached the general public, people felt that it didn't make sense to throw away so much rice. To enable the rice to be eaten along with the fish, a new *nama-nare* (lightly fermented) sushi developed, contrasting with the fully-matured hon-nare.

Making nama-nare substantially reduced the time for preparing sushi, but it didn't overcome the universal human desire for food to be ready faster. Nevertheless, the desirable sourness would not develop without a fermentation period. Nama-nare used only fish, rice, and salt, but people experimented by adding other ingredients. One such ingredient was *koji*, a malt-like starter used to accelerate the fermentation, so that the sourness developed more quickly. This resulted in *izushi* fermented sushi, which is still available today. Other people experimented with adding *sake* (rice wine). But people soon noticed that when left alone, the sake soured, turning into vinegar. Before long, people were mixing vinegar directly into the sushi. That was 500–600 years ago.

Bara-zushi

At first, the vinegar was added to shorten the fermentation period, but over time, the proportion of vinegar was increased. Only the traditional types of sushi that had been fermented—hon-nare and nama-nare—were considered to be the real thing, and recipe books at the time described sushi made with vinegar or other ingredients as *sushi-modoki* (mock sushi). Eventually, though, sushi made by seasoning the rice with vinegar became the mainstream, and a prominent doctor publishing a book in about 1800 wrote "the fermented types of sushi may be the real thing, but I've never seen them."

That was a time when the number of types of sushi was growing. Sushi had only referred to fish stuffed with sushi rice, or slices of larger fish with sushi rice placed underneath them, but variations emerged, including *bo-zushi*, where fish with its head and tail trimmed off is pressed onto rice to make

sticks of sushi that can be sliced, *maki-zushi,* where the fish and rice are rolled up together, *inari-zushi*, where sushi rice is served in a deep-fried tofu pouch, and *chirashi-zushi*, where the fish is scattered on top of the rice instead of being pressed into a specific shape. Eventually, *nigiri-zushi* emerged in about 1830. It was invented by a merchant in a downtown neighborhood of Edo, present-day Tokyo, who produced a form of sushi that was visually similar to what most people today envisage when they think of sushi. This early nigiri-zushi differed from today's equivalent in that each individual piece was very cheap. The pieces were perhaps about three times the size, too, and the fish was robustly-flavored, typically using boiled, grilled, or vinegared fish.

This nigiri-zushi was a dish that anyone could afford. It rapidly gained popularity in Edo, and eventually became popular nationwide. But in about 1850, soon after the appearance of nigiri-zushi, the price of sushi began to rise. Expensive sushi restaurants appeared, selling sushi at prices that were well out of the range of ordinary people. Surprisingly, instead of reacting against those high-end establishments, the masses held them in great esteem.

The size of pieces of sushi settled on the current standard in the years following World War II. That was also when electric refrigerators became readily available, making it easier for sushi restaurants to use fresh fish for their sushi. In the 1960s, Japan's economy grew rapidly, and business flourished. Nigiri-zushi went increasingly up-market, reborn as a luxury item. Today, however, nigiri-zushi is available to suit all budgets, ranging from superb gourmet nigiri-zushi down to very inexpensive options. In contrast to nigiri-zushi, however, the various types of sushi that people used to make at home are at risk of dying out.

Sushi and Tuna

Pacific bluefin tuna
KAIYODO Co., Ltd

Many Japanese would say that tuna is the king of nigiri-zushi. Surprisingly, tuna—known in Japan as *maguro*—arrived late on the scene, and did not come into significant use for sushi until the nineteenth century. Tuna had been shunned because of its greasiness, and it was a cheap ingredient. However, when it was used for nigiri-zushi, the situation changed and it became more popular. Edo people enjoyed its lean red meat, and often pickled it in soy sauce to preserve its freshness, calling the pickled tuna *zuke*. The fatty part of the tuna—called *toro*—was avoided because it spoiled easily, so it was often boiled or discarded. Today's generation would find that incredibly wasteful. People only began eating toro raw after refrigeration technology improved in the 1960s. After that, demand for toro and fresh tuna soon soared, and it became an indispensable part of sushi. Pacific bluefin tuna (*kuromaguro* or *honmaguro*) gained a reputation for high quality, and it is seen as the top fish for nigiri-zushi. Nakahara Ippo, writing about a sushi shop that serves Edo-mae nigiri-zushi, said that "of all the different types of nigiri-zushi, tuna is the only one that really hits the spot." That is a sentiment that a large number of people would agree with.

Japan is the world's largest consumer, but people of other countries also enjoy tuna. The current boom in demand for sushi and other types of Japanese cuisine is raising global consumption of this fish, so we face the challenge of how to establish appropriate measures and management systems that will enable us to restore and preserve resources, and will ensure that they can be used sustainably. Today, about 70 percent of Japan's pacific bluefin tuna production consists of farmed fish, and the trend for full life cycle aquaculture is growing.

II: Sushi in the Edo Period

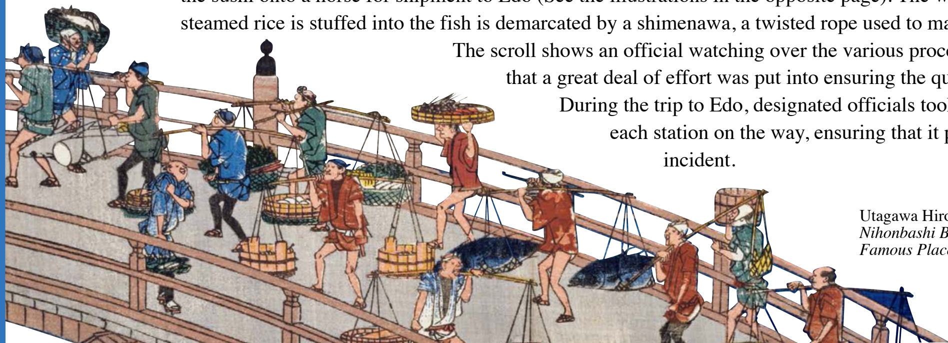
Sushi in the Edo Period

Hibino Terutoshi
Authority on local sushi traditions

Japan's society became much more egalitarian after World War II, with a relatively equitable distribution of incomes and wealth, but historically, it had strict class divisions. The Edo Period—beginning when the capital moved to present-day Tokyo—was no exception, but it was also the period when sushi underwent major transformations. The biggest change was that the fermentation process disappeared, along with the long period required for the sushi to mature, as people adopted vinegar to provide the sour flavor once produced by fermentation.

At the beginning of the Edo Period at the start of the 1600s, sushi was still a fermented dish, produced by traditional methods. The fermentation process required at least a month, and often several months. In a period when goods were transported slowly on foot, or sometimes on pack-horses, sushi became an ideal product for feudal lords to present to the shogunate in Edo as part of their annual tributes (effectively tax payments). The long transportation period could be used for the fermentation process. In about 1620, the tributes required from each feudal clan were systematized, including the presentation of many different sorts of sushi to the shogun's household.

A colored picture scroll depicting the production of ayu-zushi for use as tributes by the Owari clan (based in present-day Aichi Prefecture) depicts each of the processes involved, from catching the ayu (sweetfish) to loading the sushi onto a horse for shipment to Edo (See the illustrations in the opposite page). The workplace where the steamed rice is stuffed into the fish is demarcated by a shimenawa, a twisted rope used to mark the location as sacred. The scroll shows an official watching over the various processes, and it is clear that a great deal of effort was put into ensuring the quality of the ayu-zushi. During the trip to Edo, designated officials took charge of the sushi at each station on the way, ensuring that it passed through without incident.



Utagawa Hiroshige
Nihonbashi Bridge, from Famous Places in Edo (detail)

Artist unknown, *Handscroll of Nagara River Ayu Sushi*

3. Cooling the steamed rice with a fan, then watering it

2. Salting the fish

1. Fishing with cormorants to catch the ayu (sweetfish)

7. Loading onto a horse ready to go to Edo

6. Closing the tubs and securing with bamboo

5. Arranging the sushi in wooden tubs and covering with bamboo grass

4. Stuffing the fish with the rice. Workers wear masks.

Once the system for tributes had been established, it became difficult to make changes. With ayu-zushi, the specific date by which the tribute had to be presented was fixed. That date had to be adhered to, and issues such as being unable to catch the fish were not allowed to disrupt the schedule. The shogun had to have ayu-zushi on his table on a particular day, so the officials charged with managing the items for the menu made their preparations months in advance. Excuses were out of the question. Official records of exactly what the shogun had for his lunch on which day of which year still exist today.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi
Takeout Sushi, from Women in a Benkei-checked Fabrics
1844

As you can imagine, the rigor and stress of that system mean that for most food items requested, the officials would be likely to ask for the same as the previous year. Sushi was no exception, and even if the local producers were to ask how the shogun would like his sushi this year, the official would be sure to reply “the same as last year.” That went on year after year. All the way to the end of the Edo Period in the 1860s, the sushi presented was produced in exactly the same as that produced at the start, over two centuries earlier. And of course, the old-fashioned sushi was the only sushi that the shogun and the daimyos knew.

That didn’t apply to the common people. They had no restrictions about what they could eat or when they could eat it. And there was no one to get angry if they simplified things or took shortcuts. From the 1600s to the 1800s, the sushi that they ate underwent a bewildering transformation, changing from nama-nare fermented sushi to nigiri-zushi. That transformation is an excellent example of how people kept simplifying things and taking short cuts. The changes are described in more detail in the Introducing Sushi section.

The exquisite nigiri-zushi culture resplendent with color, beauty, and characteristics of the seasons did not develop to meet the taste of the shoguns, or the taste of the daimyos, the court nobles, or the aristocracy. It was produced by the common people.

The paintings and other art that were part of the culture of the common people also flourished at the beginning of the 1800s. The

popularity of ukiyo-e came not from the themes addressed by each of the ukiyo-e artists, but from the way that their works provided snapshots one after another of daily life. Those paintings are now valuable historical documents because they recorded things that people didn't usually give much thought to. The paintings of food and cuisine fall into that category. Virtually all the sushi that appears in ukiyo-e paintings is nigiri-zushi. There are only a few examples, but they show that like their taste in paintings, the commoners had a taste for food with colorful combinations and bold compositions.

At about the same time, *joruri* puppet shows and *kabuki* theater became popular with mass audiences. With kabuki in particular, in addition to enjoying the content of the plays, the audiences became fans of the actors, and both the plays and the actors became favorite themes for ukiyo-e paintings. *Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees*, written in the mid-1700s, was one of the most popular kabuki plays, and the audience excitement is at its highest when the popular character Gonta appears in the sushi shop scene. The owners of the shop are hiding Yasuke, who is actually a general of the defeated Heike clan running from the Minamoto clan authorities, when their son, Gonta, appears. He takes the severed head of Yasuke's retainer, along with stand-ins for Yasuke's wife and son, with the intention of handing them over to the Minamoto clan, but things do not go to plan. To find out what happened, you need to watch the play.

What concerns us here is that Gonta's container for the severed head is a wooden bucket designed for fermenting sushi. Consequently, Gonta holding a sushi bucket appears in pictures of this play (see p. 20). Notably, the bucket is not related to nigiri-zushi, but a deep bucket of the type used for fermenting the old-fashioned nama-nare sushi. Even though the common people of Edo no longer ate nare-zushi, they knew it well enough for the bucket to have a place as a prop in this popular play.

Sushi Depicted in Ukiyo-e Art

Hinohara Kenji
Chief Curator of Ōta Memorial Museum of Art

Ukiyo-e art was produced for the general populace from the latter half of the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. Most ukiyo-e works were mass-produced using woodblock printing techniques and sold at the inexpensive price of between about 500 and 1,000 yen (approx. between $4 and $8) per print. Ukiyo-e became a popular diversion, mainly depicting topics with general appeal, such as lively tourist spots, beautiful women, and popular kabuki actors.

Ryūryūkyo Shinsai
Sushi and New Year's Sake
c. 1810

How then was sushi depicted in ukiyo-e art? Firstly, ukiyo-e scenes portraying lively locations and events sometimes include stalls that sold sushi. The most famous work of this kind is probably *Takanawa 26th Night Revelers, from Famous Places in the Eastern Capital* (No.21) by Utagawa Hiroshige. This depicts the annual event of *Nijuroku Ya Machi* in which people celebrated the rising moon on the night of July 26. It shows many sightseers gathering on the coast to view the rising moon, as well as various stalls lined up offering the crowd items such as fruit, grilled squid, *tempura*, *soba* noodles, *dango* dumplings, and sweet *shiruko* porridge. Among them is a sushi stall. Lots of nigiri-zushi is lined up on display on the stands, and sightseers likely snacked on sushi in place of their evening meal on this occasion. This clearly shows that sushi was a popular fast food of the day that was convenient for ordinary people to buy and enjoy, much like the other street foods on offer.

Sushi also appears frequently in ukiyo-e depicting beautiful women in everyday situations. Good examples that clearly

convey the characteristics of sushi are three works by Utagawa Kuniyoshi—*Sushi, from The Universe of Women (Shinramanzō)* (No. 23), *Takeout Sushi, from Women in Benkei-checked Fabrics* (No. 24), and *Fukagawa Susaki Benten, from Seven Gods of Good Fortune, Benten of the Eastern Capital* (No. 25). These prints reveal details from the period when they were created, such as the sushi toppings (*neta*), the way the pieces of sushi are shaped (*nigirikata*), and how they are arranged on the plate (*morikata*).

Depictions of sushi and sushi stalls in ukiyo-e works like these are surprisingly rare compared to the huge number of ukiyo-e prints that were produced overall. Furthermore, there are almost no ukiyo-e prints that focus on the sushi itself. *Sushi and New Year's Sake* (No. 22) is an exception. This is also the case for other popular foods besides sushi, such as *soba* noodles, *tempura*, or eel (*unagi*). Ukiyo-e art depicted things that were the object of the general populace's yearning and fascination, so common, everyday things like food did not attract as much attention. Nevertheless, ukiyo-e prints are a valuable resource for learning about sushi at a time before the invention of photography. While it might not be much to go on, ukiyo-e provides hints to help us imagine how sushi became a familiar part of people's lives.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi
Sushi, from The Universe of Women
c. 1843

Utagawa Toyokuni, *Osato and Gonta*

Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees

Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees is a kabuki play popular with audiences since the Edo Period. The third act of the play, “The Sushi Shop,” is set at Tsurube Sushi in Yoshino, Nara Prefecture. Koremori, a general of the defeated Heike clan, was hiding from the Minamoto clan at the sushi shop, disguised as a servant, Yasuke. The sushi chef hides a recently-acquired severed head in a wooden bucket, planning to convince the authorities that the head belonged to Koremori, but it disappears from the bucket. Gonta, the chef’s wayward son, emerges to announce that he has beheaded Koremori, and wants a reward for handing over Koremori’s head, along with Koremori’s wife and son. His father is livid with Gonta for his treachery, and after the officials leave, stabs him. The dying Gonta explains that he had not actually beheaded Koremori/Yasuke. He had been trying to help his father save the Koremori family by using the severed head he found in the bucket and by disguising his own wife and child to take the place of Koremori’s!

That is broadly how the story goes. What is most relevant here is the wooden bucket used for hiding the severed head—a deep bucket of the type used for fermenting sushi. The ukiyo-e paintings in this exhibition featuring *Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees* all include the bucket (Nos. 34-36). Kabuki and sushi were both popular with the people of Edo. Linking them both with ukiyo-e, the art that was also popular with the Edo public, demonstrates the maturity of Edo culture.

The sushi shop that was the model for Tsurube Sushi still operates in Nara Prefecture, and is now called Yasuke. Established 800 years ago, it is probably the oldest sushi shop in Japan. It no longer produces the tsurube-zushi that used to be sent as a tribute to Kyoto Sento Imperial Palace, but its menu includes a contemporary interpretation of ayu-zushi.

Toyohara Kunichica, *Igami no Gonta* (detail)

Hanaya Yohei and Yohe Sushi

The originator of nigiri-zushi is often said to be Hanaya Yohei (1799–1858, also known as Koizumi Yohei), but he was probably not the first to use the format. He may not have been the inventor, but he was definitely the first to make it a commercial success. It is realistic to say that it was Hanaya Yohei who perfected nigiri-zushi.

Edo-born Yohei tried his hand at many different types of business before starting with nigiri-zushi, which could use fresh materials, be rapidly produced, and be sold at low prices. He initially walked around selling his wares at times and places where numbers of people gathered. He then set up a sushi stall, which was a big hit. At the time, there were many laborers in Edo, typically men whose families had remained in their rural hometowns. Nigiri-zushi was simple and inexpensive, providing the laborers with a satisfying meal. Riding the wave, in 1824 Yohei opened a permanent sushi shop, calling it Yohei Sushi. In contrast to the sushi stalls, which provided unpretentious meals to ordinary people, Yohei Sushi went upmarket, spurred by rivals such as Matsugazushi. The sushi being served was sumptuous enough to infringe Edo laws banning luxury, and Yohei was jailed for a while. After his release, his sushi shop went from strength to strength.

Kawabata Gyokusho, *Yohei Sushi*

This co-existence of high-end restaurants and street stalls can still be seen today, albeit in a slightly different form. Today, sushi can be enjoyed not only at exclusive restaurants, but also at the inexpensive kaiten sushi restaurants that have inherited the vitality of Edo street stalls.

Utagawa Hiroshige, *Takanawa 26th Night Revelers, from Famous Places in the Eastern Capital* (detail) 1841-42

極
佐野喜
極
佐野喜

Sushi Today

Hibino Terutoshi
Authority on local sushi traditions

Today, the sushi that is most familiar in Japan is probably nigiri-zushi served at a kaiten sushi (conveyor belt sushi) restaurant. In the 1920s, long after the end of the Edo Period, high-end gourmet nigiri-zushi and inexpensive nigiri-zushi were both still available. Some of the least expensive sushi shops at that time were street food vendors and pop-up food stalls, but their numbers steadily decreased as concerns for hygiene and road safety led to restrictions and bans. By the time World War II came to an end, there was virtually nowhere selling cheap sushi. This state of affairs continued until the second half of the 1960s when a new approach emerged in Osaka. Individual nigiri-zushi servings were placed on separate plates, so that restaurant customers could chose whichever dishes they wanted. Prices were standardized so that each plate cost the same, making it was easy to see how much you were going to be charged. Better still, a conveyor belt carried the plates around the shop so that everyone got to see what was on offer and had fun choosing. A branch at the Expo 70 put kaiten sushi in front of people from all over Japan and all around the world. The idea spread, and the purchasing power of large chains pushed prices further down.

Kaiten sushi greatly changed nigiri-zushi's image of being a high-end dish. Children were enthralled by the procession of plates, and kaiten sushi became a popular choice when families ate out. Kaiten sushi restaurants also added new items to their nigiri-zushi menus, and some restaurants now serve sweets and even ramen noodles as well. But the high-end luxury sushi shops still do good business. In short, today we have returned to a situation where both luxury sushi and inexpensive sushi are available.

The story is different for sushi made at home. Unlike sushi as a commercial product, home-made sushi is at risk of disappearing altogether from ordinary homes. Examples that are still found in specific localities include izushi in

Hokkaido, hatahata-zushi in Akita Prefecture, funa-zushi in Shiga Prefecture, sanma-zushi and mehari-zushi in Mie and Nara prefectures, and saba no sugata-zushi in Kochi Prefecture. There are still people making these dishes at home, although their numbers are decreasing. Some of the dishes are available as commercial products, too. Their rarity occasionally attracts media attention, helping to make them commercially viable. That's fine as far as it goes.

A much bigger issue is faced by the local variations on sushi made independently by individuals out of the sight of the media. Sushi dishes like that are a highly valuable part of Japan's heritage, but the people who make them are often completely unaware of their value. Unless someone tells them that "you're probably the only person in Japan who can make sushi like this," the world will never know about that particular form of sushi. Moreover, when the individual's life comes to an end, that unique sushi will also disappear forever, as a precious technique that was never recorded. And once a particular taste disappears, any attempts to bring it back are fraught with difficulties.

Japan is blessed with a rich natural environment and distinct seasons. It also has a plentiful supply of fish of many different types, and a large variety of edible wild plants. Each of them has at some time been used in Japanese cuisine, and the bountiful supply of fish is behind Japan's wealth of sushi. Nigiri-zushi is wonderful, but there are other types of sushi, too, and each of the different types has its own attractions. Everyone should explore some of the other types of sushi, enjoy the variety of sushi that is available, and discover which sorts of sushi they are fond of.

Sushi has been part of Japanese cuisine for at least one thousand several hundred years. During that period, the mainstream sushi has changed from fermented sushi such as hon-nare and nama-nare to newer forms. Nevertheless, the emergence of new sushi varieties has never completely replaced the older forms. That's why sushi comes in so many different shapes. Even today, we can still eat sushi prepared in the same way as it was many centuries ago.

People will sometimes tell you that a particular source is the best for tuna or for other specific fish. Others will say that to eat nigiri-zushi "you should use your fingers, not chopsticks," or "people in the know dip the *neta* (the fish or other topping) in the soy sauce, not the rice." But the truth is that when nigiri-zushi was first invented, the fish was flavored, so there was no soy sauce to dip it in. Tuna was not very popular. And using technical terms like neta was the province of the sushi chefs, not the customers, as "people in the know" should be well aware. In addition, whether to use your fingers or chopsticks depends on where you are eating—it used to be said that you should pick up your sushi with a bare hand when seated at a counter, but with chopsticks when sitting on a tatami mat. But that was only at times when there was a sushi chef deliberately preparing the sushi differently according to where in the restaurant you sit. At ordinary sushi shops it makes no difference. Nevertheless, people often try to make it sound as though little intricacies are more significant than they actually are.

You may hear it said that in expensive-looking sushi shops, you can't tell how much you will be charged until afterwards, or that in any sushi shop, that you may annoy the chef with your lack of knowledge if you ask questions or don't know what sequence to place your orders in. And people may imply that you have to be go through all those hoops before you can really appreciate sushi. But these are all myths. For some reason, nigiri-zushi seems to attract a lot of odd myths.

The truth is that sushi is just a type of food. What to eat first, and how many pieces to eat are up to each individual. The staff of a sushi shop are never going to get angry with a customer, whatever. Perhaps the only thing you need to avoid is wearing strong perfume or other fragrances, but that sort of etiquette applies to other places, too, not just sushi shops.

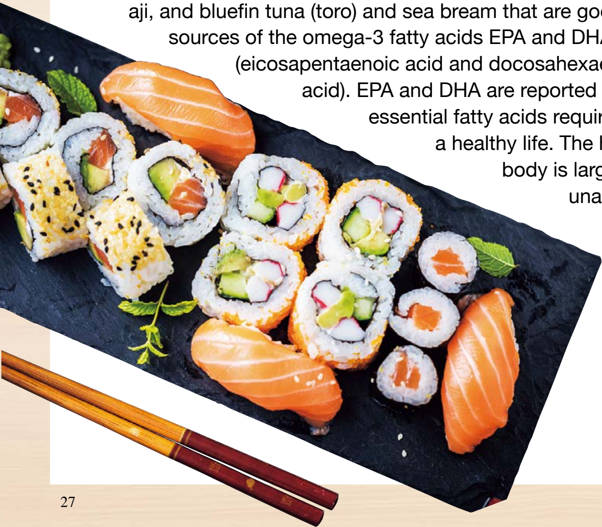
Above all, sushi is a cuisine that respects freedom of choice and is meant to be enjoyed. That's why there are so many different types of sushi. If you eat nigiri-zushi one day, then how about trying another type of sushi next time. That's what sushi's all about. Sushi is not about restrictions or narrow conventions.

Nigiri-zushi — the healthy choice

Nigiri-zushi is now available worldwide. Its image as a healthy food with low calories has played a substantial part in its popularity growth, particularly in Western nations, China, and other countries that did not have a tradition of eating raw fish.

In general, seafood is less fatty than meats, and it is a rich source of vitamins. Fish often used for sushi include blue-backed fish such as sardines, mackerel and aji, and bluefin tuna (toro) and sea bream that are good sources of the omega-3 fatty acids EPA and DHA (eicosapentaenoic acid and docosahexaenoic acid). EPA and DHA are reported to be essential fatty acids required for a healthy life. The human body is largely unable to synthesize them, but they can be consumed from the oil in fish. EPA helps to keep blood healthy, and is known to lower triglyceride levels, whereas DHA is said to play an important role in building brain and nerve cells. Nigiri-zushi basically provides such healthy fish in fresh form, combined with steamed rice flavored with vinegar. Vinegar is said to facilitate fatigue recovery and help keep blood pressure down. Taken together, these properties justify nigiri-zushi's reputation as a healthy food. Moreover, it is notable for having a very good balance between nutritional elements: proteins, fats, and carbohydrates.

Some of the foods used in sushi have high levels of calories and sugars, so choosing a well balanced selection of *neta*/ingredients is important. Vinegar stimulates the appetite, so care is required to avoid overeating. Note also that adding too much soy sauce can result in excessive salt intake.



Sushi Consumption Trends in Japan

Japan has more than 20,000 sushi restaurants, and the size of the market was about 1.5 trillion yen (about $12.5 billion) in 2017 (according to Japan food service industry sales trend statistics published by the Japan Foodservice Association). Sushi restaurants can be broadly categorized into traditional sushi shops where guests are seated at a counter and a chef produces the sushi to order, and kaiten sushi shops. The number of staff employed by traditional sushi shops is small, and continues to decrease, while the number of kaiten sushi shops, particularly shops operated by the major chains, is increasing.

An online survey of men and women aged 20 to 69 years (Rakuten Insight, 2018. Sample size: 10,754) showed that three-quarters of respondents had used a sushi restaurant within the past three years. About 40 percent of them visited a kaiten sushi restaurant monthly or more frequently, but about 50 percent had not visited a traditional sushi shop in the past three years. Figures for use of kaiten sushi shops showed little difference between men and women, but for traditional sushi shops, the figures for men were higher. Users of traditional sushi shops prioritized the richness of ingredients and the price as factors for their choice of restaurant, and a high proportion paid 3,000 yen (about $25) or more for an evening meal.

The decline in the number of traditional sushi shops in Japan does not seem to be due to fall in demand. Rather, the main reasons for the decline seem to be growth in the availability of sushi through different channels and in the variety of services. Many people now eat sushi at home. “Sushi to go” is no longer the preserve of sushi shops. It can also be bought at convenience stores, supermarkets, and the food sections of department stores, and there are home delivery services, too. What was once a luxury cuisine eaten only on special occasions is now much more common, and sushi has become a regular feature in everyday diets.

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Pacific bluefin tuna
2021
figure, FRP
Produced by: KAIYODO Co., Ltd.

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panel

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Nare-zushi (hon-nare)
2021
food sample, resin

5
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2021
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Courtesy of Okada Daisuke, Sumeshiya

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2021
food sample, resin

7
Izushi of Hokkaido
2021
food sample, resin

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Saba bo-zushi
2021
food sample, resin

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food sample, resin

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National Diet Library

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1896 / 2022
ōban, nishiki-e
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Hasegawa Sadanobu

Fukumoto Sushi, from Beauties of Naniwa and Famous Products (reproduction)

c.1866 / 2022
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Igami no Gonta (right, played by Matsumoto Koshiro) , and Osato (left, played by Iwai Hanshiro) in the kabuki "Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees" (reproduced in 2022)

performed in 1815
ōban diptych, nishiki-e
The Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum, Waseda University

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1863 / 2022
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n. d. / 2022
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2021
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Yohei Sushi (copy), frontispiece from“Home Cooking with Vinegar” (Okura, 1910)

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blowup of frontispiece
Private Collection

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Seafood figures

2021
13 figures, resin

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Kaiten sushi

2021
sushi conveyor, plates, food samples, fishing flag

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Sushi installation

2021
930 food samples by 31 kinds of sushi ingredients, resin

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Sushi experience

2022
2 monitors, table and 2 chairs
video (7 min. 53 sec.)
Video Production: Nissha Printing Communications, Inc.

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Global sushi, local sushi

2022~
panel

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Tour of Sushi History

2021
video (8 min. 30 sec.)
Production: NHK Educational Corporation

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The Story of Sushi from Edo

2021
video (6 min. 35 sec.)
Production: NHK Educational Corporation

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The World of Nigirizushi

2021
video (7 min. 46 sec.)
Production: NHK Educational Corporation

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Evolving Sushi

2021
video (7 min. 26 sec.)
Production: NHK Educational Corporation

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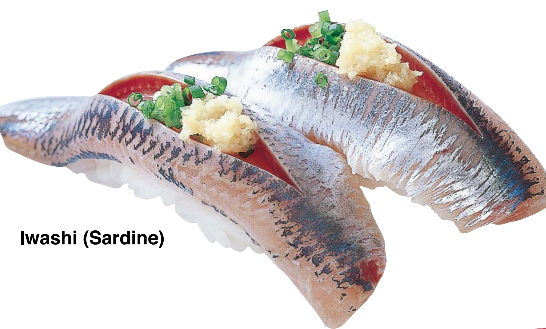
Local Sushi Bringing People Together

2021
video (10 min. 20 sec.)
Production: NHK Educational Corporation


Iwashi (Sardine)

Buri (Yellowtail)

Kohada
(Dotted gizzard shad)

Kampachi
(Greater amberjack)

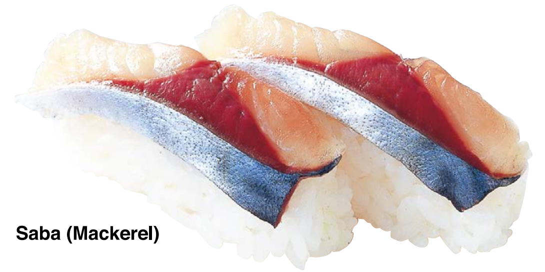
Sake
(Chum salmon)

Hotategai
(Scallop)

Amaebi
(Sweet lobster)

Aji
(Horse mackerel)

Maguro (Lean tuna)


Saba (Mackerel)

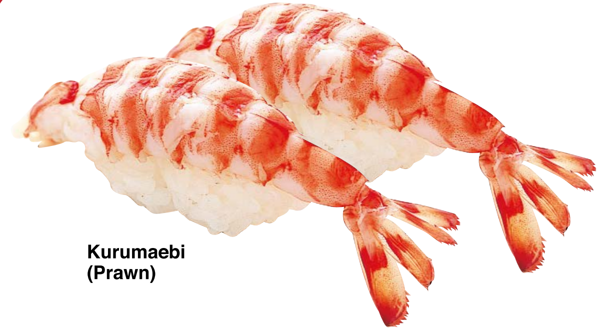
Uni
(Sea urchIn)

Anago (Conger eel)

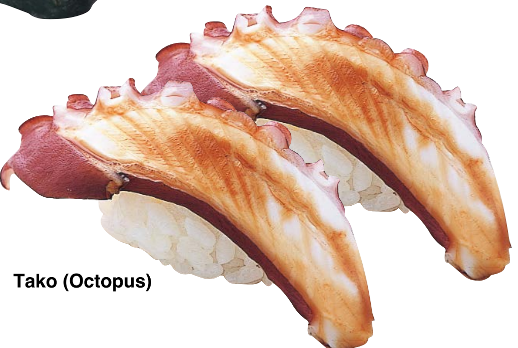
Katsuo (Bonito)

Ikura (Roe)

Akagai (Ark shell)


Kurumaebi
(Prawn)

Shima-aji
(Striped jack)


Tako (Octopus)

Awabi
(Abalone)

Madai
(Red sea bream)

Hirame
(Flatfish)

Surumeika
(Japanese flying squid)