

Here's to life as it truly is. Where art isn't a picture painted on canvas, but the imprint left on your soul. Where food isn't a seven-course meal served in a restaurant at a five star hotel, but the aroma that gets your taste buds working before the meal's begun. Where music doesn't adorn the shelves of music stores, but leaves you humming it all day long. Here's to life in more colours than the eye can see. Welcome to Jet Life.

## FOOD ART

# Such is sushi

Probably one of the most popular Japanese exports, preparing and eating sushi is, no less, a sophisticated art form

TEXT DEVYANI JAYKAR

Many people are apprehensive about going to a sushi restaurant because they aren't sure of their knowledge about sushi, whether the manner of eating it, matches the earnestness of the chef.

Sushi is among the most carefully prepared food, elevated to an art form, and chefs who prepare sushi and run sushi restaurants need to be highly disciplined. They usually do not have hair on their arms and probably shave them everyday. They never sport a beard, mustache, long hanging eyebrows

or sunglasses as looking enormously plain is of the essence.

Some historians say women have not been welcome behind the sushi counter because female body temperature is higher and not suitable for handling raw fish, as also from a tradition dating back to Samurai times.

Lastly, the counter, which is the centre-piece, is made of one big piece of natural wood. If the wood is not finished, meaning

if it does not have any varnish on the surface, the restaurant is serious about its sushi.

In a good restaurant, they serve sushi directly on the counter (without any plate). Outside of Japan, many sushi places are huge and theatrical, with a dramatic atmosphere. In Japan, sushi places are more private and personal.

### SUSHI ETIQUETTE

Eating sushi is not about flinging yourself with raw

fish. It is an experience - a ritual - that involves all your senses. Serious sushi can only be eaten at the bar because that's the only place where you'll see the colours, inhale the aromas, share the laughter, and taste the food, fully immersed in the ambience. Plan on a one and a half to two hour meal. There are several traditions and protocols involved in ordering and eating sushi.

1. Eat at the sushi bar.
2. Greet the others at the



Nigiri sushi



bar and start a conversation with them; sushi is about community.

3. If you cannot eat at the bar, walk to it and check the quality of the fish before ordering.

4. Greet the *itamae* (sushi chef) even if you don't eat at the bar. He'll recommend special stuff if he recognises you as a regular and/or someone who truly knows how to eat sushi.

5. Remember that *itamae* are not just "cooks". They have traditions dating back to the time of the *samurai*.

6. Order all sushi items from the *itamae*, everything else from the food servers.

7. Order *sashimi* (selection of fresh fish slices) first; ask the chef for his choice of fish.

8. Order one kind of sushi at a time, maximum three, if the bar is busy. That could be *nigiri*, *maki* or *temaki*. Big plates are for the table only.

9. Don't rush through your meal. Eat at McDonald's if you want to eat fast.

10. If you're at the bar and in a bit of a hurry (i.e. have a half hour to eat or so),



11. If you're drinking order a *chirashi*, a small lacquered box with a bed of sushi rice, a bit of sugar, some pickled veggies and a chef's selection of fish and molluscs. This way you'll get all your sushi at once in a single serving and then leave. Eat it with chopsticks.

**Nigiri sushi is a hand formed clump of cold rice stuck together, with a dab of wasabi and a filet of raw fish (sashimi) on top.**

sake, keep in mind that not all sake is heated for consumption. *Nigori* (unfiltered) sake looks like milk; drink it cold. Ask the *itamae* for more exotic drinks like gold sake – with real gold flakes in it!

12. If the sushi is excellent and you're having a good time, offer to buy a drink for the *itamae* and his assistants. Don't offer to buy drinks during lunch; this is an evening tradition.

13. Tips: The *itamae* and rest of the staff are tipped separately unless you pay the bill with a credit card. The bulk of the tip must go to the *itamae*.

**TERMS OF ENJOYMENT**

- The waitress will bring you an *oshibori* (hot towel) as soon as you seat down. Wipe your hands with it before touching the food; some restaurants leave the towel throughout the meal for you to wipe your hands; others take it away before your *sashimi* arrives.
- Your wooden chopsticks will come joined at one end; separate them and feel them lengthwise. Rub them together only if you feel splinters. Never rub high quality, smooth chopsticks; you will insult the restaurant if you do.
- You may eat sushi with your hands or with chopsticks, whatever is more comfortable



Sushi plate

- Use chopsticks to grab morsels from a shared plate, holding the end that you put in your mouth with your fingers so that only the opposite end touches the food. You may use your fingers after depositing the sushi piece on your plate; turn your chopsticks around to grab it if you're using them.

- Some sushi bars have a small canal with thin springs of running water between you and the itamae; use these to rinse your fingers.

- Never ask for a spoon to eat your soup; pick up the bowl with one hand and dig the bits of tofu, seaweed, or mushrooms with your chopsticks as you bring it to your lips. It's perfectly polite to slurp, especially if the soup is hot.

- If the spiciness in your sushi is not enough, lace some with soy sauce for dipping your sushi; this is

done by dabbing a tiny bit of *wasabi* (the bright green dough on your plate) onto a small saucer provided to you next to your bigger plate. Add some soy sauce for dipping. Blend it with your chopsticks. The right ratio of *wasabi* to soy sauce is up to you. *Wasabi* is very strong, stronger than hot

#### ORDER IN ORDER


1. *Sashimi* first.
2. Cooked stuff like *unagi* (grilled fresh water eel), *tamago* (omelette), and/or California rolls.
3. Fresh fish and molluscs (*nigiri* or *maki*).
4. Exotic stuff because it tends to have a stronger flavour.
5. Spicy anything like hand rolls (*temaki*) should be last.
6. Exception: *Fugu* (poisonous blowfish) should be your only course if you eat it - soup may be ordered and enjoyed at any time during the course of your meal.

**Maki rolls are easily the favourite and recommended for beginners who are just dipping their toes in the unknown sushi waters; the cylindrical rolls are made in a variety of styles, with the help of a bamboo mat.**

mustard, so be careful with the amounts.

- Never dip the sushi rice in soy sauce; turn your piece so that only the fish or whatever you have on it touches the sauce.
- Never dip in soy sauce something that already has a sauce or decoration on it, like *unagi* (fresh water eel

served with some Teriyaki sauce and sprinkled with sesame seeds).

- Your plate will have some pickled ginger on it. Eat a little bit of it in between sushi pieces to cleanse your palate. 

REFERENCES:  
Eugene Ciurana.  
Noriko Takiguchi.



Maki rolls