

SEAWORTHY

THE EVOLUTION OF SUSHI

Think outside the bento box.

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As with all foods, it seems like the more you know about sushi, the more authentic and gentler on the planet your experience can be.

But the story of sushi goes back, way back before sushi was served as raw fish. According to authors Trevor Corson (*The Story of Sushi*) and Hiroko Shimbo (*The Sushi Experience*), sushi dates back to the early centuries A.D., prior to refrigeration. When such preparation techniques were necessary not for impressing your date on a Friday night but for preserving fish. During the monsoon season, fish made their way from river systems into rice paddies in the inland regions of Southeast Asia (today's Thailand). In order to preserve this important protein source for the drier months, rice farmers would pack the salted and pickled fish with rice, allowing them to ferment.

Like all good stories, sushi's tale has a bit of intrigue: Shimbo points out that it is unknown how or when this type of preserved fish migrated to Japan, though the earliest written references to sushi appear in the eighth century A.D.

Gradually sushi evolved, and in the 14th century the fermentation time was decreased with the use of rice vinegar and rice wine as preserving agents. By the middle of the 19th century, sushi became street food in Edo (today's Tokyo). Just like hot dogs in New York today, pickled fish and rice were assembled on the spot and eaten as a quick bite for the busy city dweller.

You likely wouldn't recognize these ancient iterations of *nigiri*, the simple combination of fish and a hand-formed clump of seasoned rice, as it wasn't until after World War II, when refrigeration and freezing equipment were modernized, that raw fish was served as sushi. Chefs in L.A. further transformed this dish and in the 1960s gave it an American twist when they created the California roll.

As any online search for restaurants in America's major cities will reveal, sushi is now widely available in our national cuisine. The NPD Group, a market research firm, calculated that 61 billion restaurant meals were served nationwide last year, and 225 million of them included sushi.

Where does the future of sushi lie? Consider your own sushi experience. Do you order the same roll every time you treat yourself to this delicacy? Do you consider the geography of your meal and the season?

Sometimes we forget that, in all its exotic grandeur, sushi has an origin beyond the distant shores of Japan. The slices of fish that grace your sashimi plate or balance delicately on the rice of your *nigiri* came from living creatures in the water. They were born and died and hopefully enjoyed a chance to reproduce somewhere in between.

But there's no need to stash your chopsticks for good, as there are a number of species that you can eat with confidence knowing your seafood was caught or farmed in a way that had minimal



impact on fish populations or surrounding habitat.

Though bluefin tuna used to roam the waters just off Long Island in such great schools they reminded me of buffalo on blue prairies, the fishery is all but destroyed by overfishing. Even yellowfin and albacore tuna are now showing signs of depletion in the Atlantic. Striped bass and summer flounder have been locally recruited to do sushi duty for several years. Striped bass (*suzuki*) are a great and local success story, with population numbers rebounded from low levels after strong management was put in place in the 1980s. Summer flounder, locally called fluke, are also recovering due to stringent management and are again common. Both have a mild flavor, making them delicious in *nigiri* or in preparations that include spices.

Pass on *tako*, as octopus populations are declining due to heavy fishing pressure. Instead, try squid (*ika*). Squid can be caught in local waters—Montauk is one of the nation's largest squid ports—and since they reproduce quickly, this is a sushi dish that can be enjoyed without the side of guilt.

Eating local is a tradition that extends to classical sushi chefs in Japan, according to Shimbo. Rather than ordering the same roll anytime you enjoy sushi, customers there tend to ask the chef what's the fresh catch of the day, and order that.

Try considering new species for your sushi. One place to start

is by using a sustainable seafood guide, like the one produced by the Blue Ocean Institute, to learn more about the impact of your fish choices, where your fish comes from or the history and etiquette of eating it.

Talking with your sushi chef is the next step in broadening your sushi horizons. In addition to hearing the story of your sushi—*What port did this fish come in to? Is this fish traditionally eaten in Japan? What is the recommended preparation for this type of fish?*—you can let your chef know if there are species that you would like to try but don't see offered. Perhaps there is a local species that hasn't made its way onto the menu yet because the chef thinks there won't be any demand for the dish. Starting the conversation could help ensure that the story of sushi continues to evolve for millennia to come.

Perhaps the next evolution in sushi will involve a sense of time and place and a feeling that your choices are helping ensure teeming oceans. 🍣

Carl Safina lives in Amagansett and directs the Blue Ocean Institute, a global ocean conservation group he founded. Blue Ocean Institute recently released a Guide to Ocean Friendly Sushi to enable better understanding of sushi and where it comes from. Check out blueocean.org/sushi to find out how to order your own guide. Katherine McLaughlin is the seafood program director at Blue Ocean Institute.