

“Entering the Era of Convenience Sushi: Changes in the Cultural Meaning of a Connoisseur Cuisine”

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Abstract

This paper aims to walk through and analyze the rise of convenience sushi in the United States. The first half of the paper walks through the history of sushi in the Western imagination and the cultural and technological catalysts that were key to its rise in the American palate. The second half of the paper is an analysis of convenience sushi, trying to understand the significance of this new era of sushi. By looking at the narrative just described as well as examining modern-day examples of both convenience and non-convenience sushi, I make the argument that, while sushi has historically been an object of the connoisseur, convenience sushi is a paradoxical object, retaining some of its appeal in feelings of “haute cuisine” while jettisoning many of the very characteristics (craftsmanship, exoticness, gourmet purity) that make the delicacy appealing.

Introduction

When I first tried sushi in Tokyo in the fall of 1977, I thought of myself as an intrepid culinary adventurer who, if he survived the experience, would return to America to tell the incredible, unbelievable tale of the day he ate raw fish on rice balls. Someday, perhaps, I would tell my children. By the time I returned to the States two years later, I found sushi bars in Midtown Manhattan; within a few years, nigiri sushi became the signature forage of the Young Urban Professional. As for my children, they eat sushi three or four times a week. (Jay McInerney, *New York Times*)

Jay McInerney’s reflections on his experience with sushi, noted in his review of Trevor Corson’s *Zen of Fish* and Sasha Issenberg’s *The Sushi Economy*, are telling of the fascinating narrative of sushi’s rise in popularity in the United States. Originating from Japanese traditions of food preservation, sushi has changed from being a repulsive abomination to haute curiosity to Hollywood star. By the end of the 20th century, sushi had become the epitome of “yuppie chow,” a perfect icon of a food that was more than just food; it was a cultural cachet, an instrument for establishing one’s identity as a savvy connoisseur (Bestor, 2008).

However, as we enter the 21st century we are witnessing a new turning point in the narrative of sushi, something which McInerney realized. Once the “signature forage” of the Young Urban Professional, he

saw what was once an exotic delicacy become commonplace—a back-of-the-van snack to be wolfed down by children on the way to soccer practice. This phenomenon is reflective of the greatest sushi trend since the turn of the century: the rise of convenience sushi in the United States. Packed into disposable plastic packages and purchased at the supermarket deli with small Heinz-esque packets of soy sauce and disposable wooden chopsticks, the increasing popularity of sushi as a grab-and-go food signals a new phase in sushi's cultural narrative. Moreover, this new narrative compels us to consider sushi's role as a marker of a consumer's social identity.

This paper will first examine the history of sushi as a cultural artifact, exploring the cultural and technological catalysts that were key to its rise on the American palate. The second half of the paper is an analysis of convenience sushi that sheds light on the significance of this new era of sushi. By looking at the narrative just described, as well as examining modern-day examples of both convenience and non-convenience sushi, I argue that although sushi has historically been an object of the connoisseur, convenience sushi is a paradoxical object which retains only some elements of “haute cuisine” while jettisoning many of the very characteristics (craftsmanship, exoticness, gourmet purity) that initially made the delicacy appealing.

Sushi's Journey to the American Supermarket

Ironically, while the term “sushi” may evoke images of fresh, raw fish in our imagination, the term originated not out of a delight in freshness but from a utilitarian need for preservation. The word “sushi” is derived from the archaic term *suppashi*, meaning “sour”, a reference to the acidic flavors left in salted fish when it is packed with boiled rice in jars and fermented in order to keep the fish edible (Ishige, 2001, pp. 41-42; Issenberg, 2007, p. 63). Sushi, in its currently popular fresh-fish-on-rice-balls form did not appear until the start of the nineteenth century in the large merchant and artisan district of Edo (modern-day Tokyo). However, even this evolution retained echoes of the same processes and flavors of fermentation. This *nigiri-zushi*, also known as *edomae* sushi (literally, “before Edo” or “old-style”), was served by swift sushi chefs sporting traditional *happi* coats and twisted hand towels around their heads, similar to the chefs found in modern-day sushi bars (Ishige, 2001, pp. 227-228). Often sold from street stalls, *nigiri-zushi* was primarily a quick convenience snack. Its popularity continued into the beginning of the 20th century when the spread of ice boxes introduced raw sashimi (rather than fish that was fermented or sauce-soaked) as a sushi topping; this was followed by the rise of electric refrigeration in the 1950s when sushi chefs began to insist their sushi be eaten immediately after its preparation in order to retain its flavor (Issenberg, 2007, pp. 68, 70).

When Westerners were first introduced to the Japanese diet in the nineteenth century, the idea of stomaching raw fish seemed far from

palatable. Anthropologist Theodore Bestor traces the history of Western exposure to Japanese food back to this time, examining early perceptions of Japanese cuisine by looking at travel books from the time period. Bestor (2008) found several English travelers who claimed “nothing but starvation” would force the English traveler to partake in the “fishy and vegetable abominations” to be found in Japan; the recommended remedy for the Western traveler was to bring to Japan a pot of jam (to be spread over rice) and a can of beef extract. Not until after World War II would the worldwide palate begin to accept sushi and other forms of Japanese food. Following Japan’s introduction of its renewed image to the world in the 1964 Olympics, Japanese food finally began to enter the American imagination as a new haute cuisine.

Sasha Issenberg, an American journalist and author of *The Sushi Economy* (2007), also notes that Japanese food was not placed in the same category as other so-called “ethnic” foods popular at the time (such as Chinese and Mexican cuisine) which were considered “curiosities” because of their perceived primitivism. Issenberg argues this was due largely to the aesthetics of Japanese cuisine, a characteristic highly valued by Japanese people that rendered sushi a work of foreign art in Westerners’ eyes (p. 93). Alice Waters of Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California furthermore contributed to the rise of sushi’s popularity with her manifesto for fresh foods in upscale cuisine. The manifesto catapulted sushi onto the plates of Hollywood actors as sushi became a gourmet health food in line with Waters’ culinary vision, or as Issenberg says, as the exotic delicacy became “a diet food without social cost” (pp. 96-97).

The true catalysts to sushi’s growth, however, were the technological innovations in food transportation seen in the second half of the 20th century. Until that time, raw fish could not be consumed more than a few days’ travel from the port of origin. This changed in the 1950s when the creation of long-distance trawlers, onboard processing and freezing facilities, and stackable shipping containers revolutionized sea-based commerce. These new technologies were followed by improvements in refrigeration chemistry and storage in the 1960s, which for the first time made the storage of tuna viable (Issenberg, 2007, p. xiii). The true tipping point for sushi, however, came with the arrival of the Boeing jet’s spacious cargo room, which opened the fish industry to a global market. The first Canadian Bluefin tuna was flown and sold in 1972 at the Tsukiji fish market in Tokyo, the center of the Japanese fish trade at the time.

By the mid-1970s, shortly after sushi’s first flight, “it was common for a Bluefin caught in the Atlantic on a summer Sunday evening to be served for lunch in Tokyo on Wednesday.” (Issenberg, 2007, p. xii) Indeed, the Japanese delicacy quickly became a symbol of the fashionable and the privileged once the sushi trade took to the airways. By the 1980s, sushi was making appearances on Saturday Night Live parodies of the Hollywood lifestyle, in the lunchbox of the prom queen from *The Breakfast Club*, and even on a list of “Things Yuppies Eat for Lunch” in

The Yuppie Handbook (Issenberg, 2007, pp. 98-99). However, sushi shops did not infiltrate every street corner overnight. While sushi certainly gained in popularity (Bestor, 2008), pop culture references to sushi (ranging from recipes in cookbooks to satirical song lyrics) still depicted an American consumer “squeamish about sushi,” an image that continued until the start of the 1990s.

Despite these apprehensions, sushi’s popularity continued to rise, permeating into circles outside the exclusive high-end restaurant and becoming commonplace by the end of the decade (Bestor, 2008). This widespread acceptance of sushi provided the backdrop for a new development in the early 2000s—the shift away from wooden blocks on sushi bar counters and into plastic packaging in supermarket delis. Packaged Facts, a market research group with expertise in US consumer food products, notes that convenience-packaged sushi (sushi sold as a refrigerated grab-and-go product, usually at supermarket delis, college campuses, and other quick-food locations) has experienced one of the most pronounced upward trajectories amongst foods in the fresh prepared food categories (Porjes, 2005, p. 59). While convenience sushi has existed since the end of the 20th century, Packaged Facts argues that its transition into the mainstream palate is marked by either one of two events: the introduction of pre-packaged sushi in Walmart delis in 2007, or the earlier release of a line of pre-packaged sushi in 7-Elevens in 2004 (Weiss, 2010, p. 120). As with previous evolutions in sushi’s global narrative, this transformation into an American convenience product was made possible by parallel developments in food technologies. Okami, Inc., one of the leading producers of retail convenience sushi, pioneered “extended shelf-life sushi” in 2005, an “oxymoronic” fresh food product “that keeps for five to seven days with no discernible loss in quality, flavor or texture” (Porjes, 2007, “Gourmet, Specialty and Premium Foods and Beverages in the US,” p. 249). According to Packaged Facts, frozen sushi technology produces a similar effect:

The patent-pending process—which includes increasing the amino acid level in the product (to enhance the flavor after thawing) and flash-freezing the sushi—retains the sushi’s freshness after it is frozen and preserves its original flavors and desirable texture. Interestingly, after defrosting, the sushi has a refrigerated shelf life of 48 hours, versus freshly made sushi, which can go bad after just four to five hours. (Porjes, 2005, p. 177)

These two technologies allow sushi manufacturers to distribute sushi nationwide (sometimes even worldwide) from a central warehouse. As such, convenience sushi is now being mass-produced and shipped worldwide from locations ranging from the U.S. to China, Mexico, and Korea (Porjes, 2005, p. 177).

Foodservice technologies have not been the sole facilitators of the convenience sushi trend. Packaged Foods reports that media technologies have played an important role in expanding the American palate: exposure to celebrity chefs’ international cooking techniques and availability of

Asian recipes online have all made Americans “not just more open to new flavors—they are demanding them and able to obtain them” (Porjes, 2005, p. 72-73). As Americans have come to seek Asian flavors, sushi has moved from the exotic to the familiar, as evidenced by remarks from L. Timothy Ryan, president of New York’s Culinary Institute of America. In a 2005 interview, Ryan commented on “how astoundingly hot sushi is,” coupling his observation with the prediction that “Generation X will come to consider sushi as its comfort food” (Welzel, 2005). Harkening back to Jay McInerney’s earlier quote, convenience sushi seems to have made this prediction come true. With sushi being sold in the delis of WalMarts, 7-Elevens, and college cafeterias, it is now possible for Americans to get their comfort food sushi fix three to four times a week.

The Paradoxes of Convenience Sushi’s Popularity in America

Before the convenience trend of the past decade, sushi was clearly an exclusive delicacy, something to be sought after not just because of its taste, but because it contributed to the consumer’s self-perceived identity as an elite connoisseur. As a way of framing this claim, I turn to Carlita P. Greene, a scholar who discusses ideas of food as communication tool in her essay “Competing Identities at the Table: Slow Food, Consumption, and the Performance of Social Style.” Arguing that Slow Food Movement participants wish to communicate something about their identities to others, Greene (2011) draws upon the 19th-century idea of the “grand gourmand” as an identity that the Slow Food participant is trying to achieve. Quoting *Gusto: Essential Writings in 19th Century Gastronomy*, Greene describes the gourmand as a figure who “possesses an enlightened sense of taste, the first principle of which lies in an exceptionally delicate palate, developed through extensive experience” (Grimod as cited in Greene, p. 87). In short, the purposeful consumption of “slow foods” has served as a signal to others that the consumer is a gourmand, someone with exclusive and exquisite taste, able to discern and find culinary experiences that others cannot. The idea that one’s identity is rooted in food preferences is not unique to Greene; Canadian health policy expert Paul Fieldhouse, in his book *Food and Nutrition: Customs and Culture*, makes a similar claim. Applying the framework of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs—where human needs are organized into tiers beginning with essential needs (e.g. food, shelter) at the bottom, and working up to higher identity-related tiers (e.g. self-actualization)—Fieldhouse (1995) argues that for those struggling to construct their own identity and fulfill self-actualization needs of the top tier, “Food becomes a personal trademark—a source of personal satisfaction achievement” (p. 23). This “trademark” status of one’s food “is expressed by the innovative use of foods, new recipes and food experimentation...Self-actualizers dare to be different” (p. 23).

Before convenience sushi, the American sushi consumer enacted the idea of food as communication described by Greene and Fieldhouse. The

yuppie or Hollywood actor sitting in the sushi bar used sushi as a “personal trademark” to communicate that he/she was willing to experiment with something different, to enjoy experiences others could not, to establish his identity as a *connoisseur*—one who is well versed in a subject and can act as a critic of taste (Oxford English Dictionary). However, successful use of sushi as a marker of connoisseurship relied on the 20th-century perception sushi as “haute-cuisine”, a culinary subject only few could experience. When convenience sushi arrived, consumers eager to buy a food that would make them “connoisseurs” led to sushi’s rapid growth. Ironically enough, its rapid spread resulted in its decreased exclusivity. That is to say, convenience sushi paradoxically had to evoke connoisseurship sentiments in order to maintain its appeal while losing the qualities that made it connoisseurship-worthy.

While consuming sushi still retains a vestige of the connoisseur, the shift towards convenience sushi actually sacrifices much of the cuisine’s “haute” feel. More accurately, convenience sushi is a collection of paradoxes—despite its manufacturers’ attempts to make it a “gourmet” food product, convenience sushi’s cheap plastic packaging and mass-produced nature move it far away from its connoisseurship roots. To further explain this argument, I turn to two veins of analysis: sushi’s appeals to the pastoral aesthetic, and sushi’s status as an exotic and rare food.

Sushi’s Appeals to the Pastoral Aesthetic

Issenberg (2007) draws comparisons between Japanese samurai and the sushi chef, calling the chef “a lone, knife-wielding guardian of honor and order” (p. x). Unlike many “laboratory”-style kitchens of today, Issenberg argues that the simple unadorned wood of the typical sushi restaurants reflects the “hunter-gatherer austerity” of the sushi experience. Moreover, acceptance of the fish’s purity is alluded to in witnessing first-hand the chef cut the fish with his hands (pp. ix, xi). As Issenberg says, “In an age of factory kitchens and take-a-number service, many find the simple transparency of this culinary transaction refreshing.” (p. xi)

What Issenberg is describing is what I call the pastoral aesthetic of the sushi dining experience—a set of appearances that appeal to the connoisseur’s desire for simplicity and beauty in his food. Recalling Greene’s term, a gourmand in search of a refined sense of taste will go after the most heightened culinary experiences possible. To such a consumer, few opportunities sound more tantalizing than the prospect of tasting a raw ingredient unaffected by chemicals or preservatives or even by the process of cooking. The high-end sushi restaurants that grew in popularity in the 20th century offered this type of experience: patrons of sushi dining bars could trust that the appearance of their fish promised the catch had been recently caught, brought promptly to the chef for preparation, and then placed upon a ball of rice. The aesthetic surrounding this simple process heightened the dining experience. The Japanese

emphasis on details in the presentation of food and the care with which the sushi chef used knife-based age-old techniques to create masterpieces as patrons watched over the sushi counter made sushi feel less like a cooked meal and more like the product of craftsmanship.

For many, the prospect of eating the work of a master craftsman is what makes sushi connoisseurship-worthy. However, convenience sushi seems to fly directly in the face of both the pastoral and craftsmanship aesthetics the cuisine has held historically. As a way of testing this, I recently went to a campus café that sold convenience sushi to sample one of their products. I selected a “Seaside Combo” produced by Advanced Fresh Concepts, the second-largest Asian food manufacturer and largest convenience sushi manufacturer in the US (“The US Market for Asian Food and Beverages,” 2005, p. 105; *AFC Franchise Corp*, 2011). Based on appearances, the rolls stayed rooted (to a degree) in simplicity of presentation, displaying only black *nori*, white rice, and bright red tuna centers. Though there was no master craftsman to whom I could credit the package (the cashier could only tell me that the sushi was delivered by an AFC person who typically brought in shipments daily), there were hints of aesthetic detail in the package, evidenced by a piece of synthetic green grass presumably added to demonstrate that this lunch box still held true to Japanese aesthetics (Appendix B). To the casual consumer, the package was certainly more aesthetically pleasing than its neighbors in the refrigerated compartment. Coupled with its price tag, the package of convenience sushi seemed like a high-end food product. However, reading the label of the package contradicted any illusions of the pastoral aesthetic I had perceived on a first assessment. The label noted that the tuna, shining bright red as a way of advertising its pure taste, had actually been “treated with carbon monoxide to promote color retention” (Appendix A). Despite plastic green grass, the aesthetic of a compostable cardboard tray with the words “Be Green” embossed across the bottom served as a reminder that the package was not a piece of art but rather something to be quickly consumed and then disposed of (Appendix B). As I ate the package’s contents, any hopes for at least purity of taste were shattered when I found a fish scale in the fish. Perhaps a missed fish scale was a minor faux pas for low-quality food that was likely prepared by automated sushi manufacturing lines (Issenberg, 2007, p. xxi), but it would have been an insult to traditional sushi craftsmanship had it been prepared in person (Appendix C). To me, it seemed, AFC had been successful in packaging and placing its product as a high-end grab-and-go good, one that relied on the simple visual appeal of Japanese food to gain the attention of consumers. The packaging proved only to be a veneer, however, and its actual quality and purity were far from the high-end sushi it tried to mimic.

Sushi’s Identity as an Exotic Food

The reason Bestor was able to find an abundance of material on Americans feeling “squeamish about sushi” was because, put simply, sushi was different. One need only look at scholars’ work from past decades to see how radical an Asian-style meal must have appeared at the time, and how much our understanding of the meal has changed since then. Take for example the 1977 work of anthropologist Mary Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal.” In her attempt to break down the universal language of the meal in linguistics terms, Douglas (1977) claims the formula of a “proper meal” is $A + 2B$, where A is a stressed, main course, and B are unstressed courses (p. 43). While Douglas’ formula works perfectly for an American meal of roast, potatoes, and carrots, and while she admits that changes may occur to the formula in other culinary cultures such as France, a ten-piece nigiri dinner set would be utterly baffling to her—a fact that is indicative of how drastically exotic sushi once was to the Western imagination. This is because deciphering sushi requires speaking an entirely different language, both in a literal and a figurative sense. The statement is literal in that there are, in fact, a set of terms in a foreign language only a connoisseur of sushi could know. Take, for example, the menu of Jin Sho Restaurant in Palo Alto, California. While parentheticals give the English translations of most of the sushi menu, some items have only the Japanese words and the English transliteration. Prior knowledge is required to know that 中トロ (chuu-toro) is of slightly lower quality of 大トロ (oo-toro), that both refer to the fatty part of a Bluefin tuna, and that one can expect to pay high prices for what is considered to be the best cut of sushi available (*Jin Sho Palo Alto*). However, sushi fluency in a more figurative sense is required as well. A sushi spread will often come with just one piece each of several fish, and it is up to the diner to know which fish is which when looking at the spread before him (see Appendix D for an example). And recalling Douglas’s formula, one must know the exact “formula” in which to eat the meal—more of a 10A type scheme in Douglas’s terms, where A is each piece of nigiri, pinched with the thumb and middle finger, dipped upside-down in soy sauce and a little wasabi, and consumed in one bite with pickled ginger between pieces to wash the palate (Ishige, 2001, p. 229). To a Westerner, approaching sushi with no expertise and attempting to engage the meal uninformed would be disastrous; should Douglas’s $A + 2B$ formula have been applied to a ten-piece nigiri set, a first-time sushi consumer would have been put off (to say the least) if the ginger and small dab of wasabi were assumed to be the $2B$ component of the meal.

This “exotic” flair of sushi is what made the connoisseur truly a connoisseur—he possessed knowledge of how to approach the sushi dining meal that few others had, an exclusivity of access to a dining experience. This sentiment of exclusivity wrapped up in sushi consumption is not something, though, that is limited to the adventurous early American adopters of Japanese cuisine. Susan Friedberg in her book *Fresh: A Perishable History* (2009) notes that, before refrigeration, access

to seafood was an exclusive luxury. From Athens, through the Romans, British monarchy, and 8th-century China and Japan, access to fresh fish was reserved for port cities and the elite few (p. 239). In fact, *edomae* sushi itself was a specialty available only to Tokyo restaurants when it was first popularized (p. 240). Granted, refrigeration has expanded the horizons of the seafood trade, and saltwater fish served in Tennessee may not now be as big of a surprise. But the fact remains that limitations in geographic access have contributed to the historic status of sushi as an exclusive food. Even now, despite the refrigeration-enabled global fish trade, the ability to find authentically “fresh” restaurant sushi retains an element of rareness; a gourmand can presume his sushi has been cut from locally caught fare in Los Angeles and will have a different taste than that flown overnight into Minneapolis.

The reason this history of exclusivity is significant is because it ties directly into the sushi connoisseur’s goal to self-actualize by “daring to be different” from the normal food consumer. By consuming foods no one else can or knows how to, a connoisseur elevates himself to the realm of exclusive knowledge to which a connoisseur, by definition, must belong (Fieldhouse, 1995, p. 23). However, as with its violation of the pastoral aesthetic as described previously, convenience sushi again poses a paradoxical nature, exemplified by my experience with AFC sushi. Convenience sushi is still somewhat of a “high-class” or “cultured” product in that it requires a level of fluency with the exotic nature of sushi: one must know, for example, how ginger, wasabi, and the little packet of soy sauce are to be consumed with the rolls, and how to pop the edamame beans on the side of the tray into one’s mouth (Appendix B). But AFC clearly takes steps to reduce the barrier of entry for consumers—after all, the label reads “Seaside Combo,” rather than the proper Japanese name of *tekka maki* for the tuna rolls (Appendix A). Convenience sushi by definition acts in direct opposition to exclusive haute cuisine. No longer is fresh fish something to be enjoyed if you visit a port city, or even something to be prepared fresh at a downtown cosmopolitan restaurant; extended shelf life technologies mean sushi can wait on the shelf at your local Albertson’s until someone picks it up (though, in AFC’s defense, their website proudly states their sushi is made daily; *AFC Franchise Corp, 2011*). And with AFC’s Southern Tsunami franchise shops spread amongst a geographically diverse market that includes all parts of the US, sushi is no longer something exotic, no longer a badge of one’s intelligence, cultural refinement, and wealth; rather, anyone anywhere can have sushi (as long as one knows not to eat the green paste), an indication of sushi’s slow drain of “high class” status.

Concluding Thoughts

“Sushi had started as a form of preservation, but it was becoming precisely the opposite: a way of using the infrastructure of modernity to chaperone a

delicate dish around the world.” (Issenberg, 2007, p. 13) Issenberg makes this statement in reference to the first flight of Canadian Bluefin tuna to Tsukiji in 1972, remarking on sushi’s change from a fermented fish food stored for years to a raw, fresh food that literally rode on airplane wings from boat to plate in a timespan of mere hours. Thanks to this “infrastructure of modernity,” sushi in America has evolved from one of the weirdest to one of the most coveted, exclusive foods. However, with the advent of convenience sushi, the cuisine is coming full circle in its cultural journey: having made the journey from 19th-century Edo convenience food to Hollywood stars’ haute cuisine, convenience sushi marks the return of sushi to its original roots. Riding the wave new packaging technologies, convenience sushi is paradoxically using its appeal as high cuisine to become widespread by shedding its exoticness, craftsmanship, and mystique. And as convenience sushi continues growing in popularity, I imagine we will see L. Timothy Ryan’s prediction come true: the American connoisseur’s food will become America’s comfort food.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Photo of Advanced Fresh Concepts “Seaside Combo” (label); personal photo, taken at The Axe & Palm, Stanford, CA on Dec. 7, 2011



Appendix B: Photo of Advanced Fresh Concepts “Seaside Combo” (opened) personal photo, taken at The Axe & Palm, Stanford, CA on Dec. 7, 2011



Appendix C: Photo of fish scale found in tuna of Advanced Fresh Concepts “Seaside Combo”; personal photo, taken at The Axe & Palm, Stanford, CA on Dec. 7, 2011



Appendix D: Photo of Sushi Zanmai lunch nigiri special; personal photo, taken at Sushi Zanmai, Shibuya, Tokyo, Japan in April 2010

