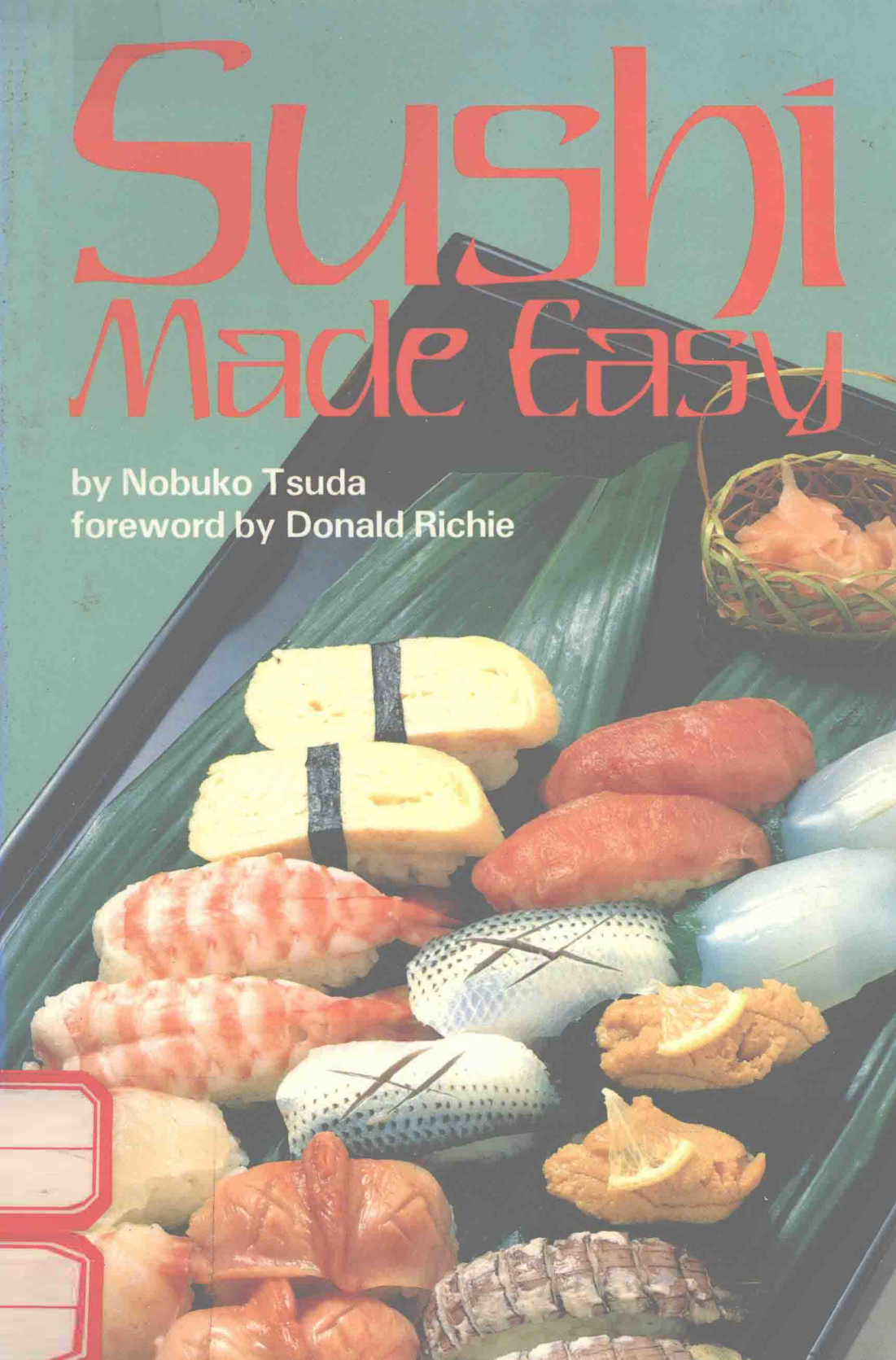
Sushi Made Easy

by Nobuko Tsuda
foreword by Donald Richie



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SUSHI MADE EASY

Foreword

Japan, an archipelago surrounded by seas, is a great fish-eating nation. Almost none of the foods coming from the ocean is considered inedible, and some of these—squid, octopus, and the many varieties of ocean fish—are eaten in enormous quantities. Seaweed, various shellfish, sea urchin, shrimp and prawn—all are eaten, but the national favorites are those meaty fish found in the Pacific: tuna, mackerel, bonito, sea bream.

These are prepared in an enormous variety of ways. They are boiled and broiled, steamed and grilled, pickled and fried, dried, and served fresh. Among all these, however, the most popular method of presentation is the last—fresh, that is, raw.

Fresh seafood is served in two major manners. Sliced and appropriately decorated, served in a bowl or on a dish, it is called sashimi and is often the first course of a typical Japanese meal. An even more popular method, however, is when it covers fingerfuls of rice and is a meal in itself. This is sushi.

One of Japan's most representative foods, sushi is now known around the world. Most large cities in America and Europe have sushi shops and the dish has been described in *The New York Times.*

Here is Craig Claiborne's definition: "An assortment of small morsels of freshest raw fish and seafood pressed into cold rice lightly seasoned with vinegar." This is a perfectly servicable description so far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. Sushi, a delight to the eye as well as a revelation to the tongue, is also an engrossing culinary happening that those who have tasted will not soon forget.

It was not always such, and, as is the case with so many beloved foods, its beginnings are somewhat unappetizing. Originally, it appears that what we now know as sushi was merely preserved fish. Rice was packed round the uncut fillets and was then thrown away before the aging flesh was eaten. There is, however, a more elegant accounting of the origin of sushi from the same period. The *Nihon*

Shoki, an official history of Japan compiled at the beginning of the eighth century, says that the twelfth-generation emperor, Keiko, was served raw clams dressed with vinegar and liked them so much that he made the inventor, Mutsukari no Mikoto, his head chef. Thus, it is said, did early Japan establish its predilection for fresh seafood.

Nonetheless, fish preservation continued, and it is from this combination of seafood and rice that the present-day sushi evolved. Over the centuries layers of fish and layers of rice in a jar with a stone on top turned into a food itself. The resultant fermentation gives the sharp sweet taste that vinegared rice now approximates, and the whole is still called *nare-zushi** and still eaten, rice and all, in the country.

This dish became in turn what is still known as Osaka-style sushi and remains very popular in that city. Fresh seafood is put into a shallow mold, rice is added, and the whole is pressed. The result is a kind of large pie that is then cut into bite-sized pieces.

The kind of sushi with which the world is now familiar, the more popular Edo-style of finger-formed *nigiri-zushi* described by Craig Claiborne, is a rather late development, having been originated in Tokyo (then Edo) in the early nineteenth century. There is no fermenting, no pressing into molds, no waiting. Whatever its fast-food origins—it was said to have originated to facilitate Kabuki customers, famished but not wanting to miss the beginning of the third act—it has now become the supreme type of sushi.

(It should perhaps be noted that here, as elsewhere so often in Japan, the name gives little clue to either origin or history. Sushi is written with two characters, but the characters themselves vary, though their pronunciation remains the same. *Su,* meaning "vinegar" is sometimes seen but this is apparently a very late variant. More often the *su* is *ju* (in its Chinese reading), which can mean "long life" or something equally felicitous. The *shi* is most often the Chinese reading of the Japanese character *tsuka,* which can mean "to control" or "to arrange." However, Japanese being Japanese, "arranging for a long life" would not be the proper translation of sushi. In the event, though *kanji* character readings of the name are sometimes seen, most often the sound is simply rendered in the syllabic *kana* form, which has no more meaning attached than to the separate letters of our alphabet. Thus is the difficult task of "reading" characters often solved. It may thus be said that sushi has no translation.)

*Sushi is pronounced zushi when suffixed to other words.

Having come into its own, nigiri-zushi proliferated into a number of forms, all now available at the sushi shop and most capable of being made at home as well—and all in addition to the finger-formed bite-sized standard.

In one variation, a square of seaweed is swiftly coated with rice, something is put in the middle, *wasabi* (Japanese horseradish) is added, and the whole is rolled into a long cylinder that is then cut into pieces or eaten as is. If pickled dried gourd is used inside, the result is called *nori maki;* if cucumber, *kappa maki;* if strips of fresh tuna, *tekka maki;* if omelet and seafood mixed, *datè maki,* and so on.

Or, the seaweed is rolled on the bias to make an ice-cream-cone-shaped sushi called *temaki-zushi.* Or, vinegared rice is packed into a bag of fried tofu, and the result is *inari-zushi.* Or, the rice is wrapped in dwarf bamboo leaves and called *sasa maki-zushi.* Or, a favorite to make at home, seafood is shredded over a bowlful of vinegared rice, and the dish is called *chirashi-zushi.* And there are many other variations as well.

Sushi proper, that is, nigiri-zushi, comes in the widest of choices. In order of their probable popularity there are: tuna (*maguro*), the marbled underside of the tuna (*toro*), the half-marbled side section of the tuna (*chu toro*), sea urchin (*uni*), boiled or live shrimp (*ebi*), sea bream (*tai*), squid (*ika*), ark shell (*akagai*), young yellowtail (*hamachi*), adult yellowtail (*buri*), octopus (*tako*), salmon roe (*ikura*), conger eel (*anago*), abalone (*awabi*), and many other seasonal fishes and shellfish, ending up with the only nonseafood item in the lot—*tamago yaki,* a bit of thick, sweet omelet on rice. There are, in addition, regional specialties, some of which use fresh-water fish. There is the slightly bitter *funa-zushi* from Shiga Prefecture, which uses the carplike *funa,* the fish said originally preserved back in the old days when the rice was thrown away. Toyama has *masu-zushi* made with trout, and Kyoto in the summertime has *ayu-zushi,* fresh fillets of the small, salmonlike *ayu* on rice.

All of these varieties and many more are popular. In fact, sushi has been called the most popular food in Japan. In Tokyo alone there are between ten and fifteen thousand sushi shops—in all of Japan there may be one hundred thousand such establishments. In addition, sushi is often served in the home as a special treat. If we conservatively estimate the number of families in Japan as twenty-five million and if each serves sushi once a week, we then have a tremendous amount of it being consumed.

There is thus no specialized clientele for sushi, as there is in the

West, where, though popular, it is by no means yet a national food. Everyone likes it, and the amount eaten is determined only by the amount of money one has to spend on it, because, for a national passion, it is surprisingly expensive.

Despite (or because of) its expense, however, a mystique has grown up around sushi. Though the masses may gorge on just any old fresh fish with rice, the sushi aficionado (a character somewhat like the connoisseur of French cuisine or of wines) picks and chooses, both subject to and at the same time contributing to the many stipulations that create the sushi mystique.

He knows, for example, that seafood raw should be eaten only at its freshest. Thus he himself has it only for the midday meal or earlier and much deplores those who sup on sushi or, worse, have it as a late-night snack. By this time, as the connoisseur well knows, the seafood is no longer fresh enough to please the discerning palate.

The discerning palate also knows the very best sushi shop—the one no one else knows about. He knows what fish are in season and consequently freshest. He also knows the master and always asks his advice. How is the tuna today? Had he better stick with maguro, or might he venture the chu toro, or is today one of those fine days when he may go all the way with toro itself? Master and connoisseur discuss the possibilities and then, with gravity and responsibility, make the choice.

This sushi *tsu* (a word denoting a person of extreme knowledgeability) will also, of course, know the proper language, since the sushi mystique insists upon a separate vocabulary. In addition to knowing all the proper names of the various varieties, he will also know that one does not call soy sauce *shoyu* but rather *murasaki;* that ginger is in the sushi shop not called *shoga* but *gari;* that wasabi is *sabi* (or even *namida*—tears—because this native horseradish is so piquant); that tea is not *ocha* but *agari;* and that when he asks for the bill he does not call for the usual *kanjo* or the ordinary *dempyo* but the much more elegant *oaiso.*

For every tsu, of course, there are hundreds of ordinary sushi-lovers who consume this favored delicacy anyplace, at any hour of the day or night, if they can afford it. Sushi, being comparatively expensive, however, is not an everyday treat.

The expense varies. At the sushi shop where you order each variety as you want it the cost is greatest. If, however, you order a predetermined selection, a *moriawase,* then the price declines, if only because it does not contain much, or any, expensive salmon roe or

marbled underside of tuna. Rather, it contains what is seasonal and hence less expensive. Sushi is a seasonal food, and its cost depends upon what is available (and what is not). Winter fish (herring) are cheap enough in February but very expensive in August, for example. The moriawase are relatively less expensive because they are largely made of those seafoods presently in season.

Most sushi shops, even the best, make a large part of their profit from these moriawase, because it is these that constitute the takeout orders and such must comprise at least half of the shop's business. If you want to have people over to the house and want to serve a gracious snack, you call up the corner sushi shop and order several moriawase. In a very short time the boy on his bike appears with the order nicely packed in lacquer trays or boxes (to be returned later) along with murasaki, gari, and even chopsticks (though the tsu always uses his fingers—but then a tsu would not be eating a moriawase).

Or the lady of the house may decide to make her own. This is the least expensive of all sushi. She buys the seafood at the local store, where the fishmonger cuts it properly for her. Back home she prepares the vinegared rice, assembles the other ingredients, and does it all herself.

Such homemade sushi tastes very good indeed, but the hostess always makes apologies for it. The sushi mystique demands that it be made by an expert, and, indeed, sushi-making is an intricate art. More often she will settle for chirashi-zushi, all the ingredients sprinkled over a large bowl of vinegared rice, a single-dish meal to which everyone helps himself. This is delicious and filling and takes little skill to make, and the mystique is not applicable.

A visit to the sushi shop itself will indicate the degree of skill necessary and perhaps the reason why the sushi *itamae* are given the same kind of reverential regard that the West accords, say, French chefs.

The sense of occasion that distinguishes sushi-eating begins as soon as one walks into the shop. Behind a long counter of immaculate white cypress is a glass-cased, ice-cooled array of seafood, all unmistakably fresh and some alive. This colorful decor, both pristine and crisp, offers the eye an overture of delights to come. Behind it stands the sushi itamae and his assistants, all in cleanest white, ready to perform one's bidding.

After an apprentice has brought a cup of piping hot tea, a dish for the murasaki, a moist *oshibori* hand towel, and pinches of gari with which to refresh the mouth between bites, one is ready to order.

Some prefer an hors d'oeuvre of freshly cut sashimi accompanied by beer and/or hot or iced sakè. Others want to begin directly with sushi. The itamae, upon hearing the order, gets busy with fingers and knives, and the performance begins.

Deft and skillful, each stroke swift and precise, he cuts and slices, scoops a double fingerful of rice, adds a bit of sabi and swiftly forms the oblong ball, seafood now firmly in place. A piece of sushi thus properly done has, it is said, all the grains of rice facing in the same direction. Acquiring this technique, say the masters, requires many years.

Two such "fingers" of sushi constitute an order. To eat them one may use the chopsticks provided, but the more knowledgeable do not. They pick up the piece with the fingers, turn it over, dip the seafood side lightly into the soy sauce, and then convey it to the mouth. Marveling at the succulent freshness, one then regards the itamae at work on the next order, in due time calling out one's own.

Becoming a full-fledged sushi itamae and owning eventually one's own shop is a long and exacting process. One might think that slicing up fish and putting the pieces on rice fingers was a simple enough procedure, but not at all.

The apprentice often begins at the sushi shop as soon as he finishes secondary school, that is, when he is seventeen or so. He washes up and carries the takeout orders for a number of years, and then he is allowed to help with the daily making of rice.

This is itself a skill. Good sushi rice must be glossy and have a certain chewiness to it. It is thus cooked with less water than ordinary rice and the water is hot to begin with. After the proper amount of seasoned vinegar has been added, the cooked rice is put into a large, shallow wooden tub made of Japanese cypress and is spread with wooden paddles, since anything made of metal might make the vinegar react. It is then tossed and again spread, cooling all the while. The techniques involved are not simple, and the apprentice ought spend a number of years learning them.

In the meantime he has been observing the master at work. Cutting seafood for sushi is more an art than a craft. One's technique at the carving table must be impeccable, to be sure, but each piece of tuna is different from any other, and its grain and consistency must be observed before it is cut. It is here that the art comes in. Watching the itamae at work, cutting and slicing swiftly and unerringly with his number of knives, one might think only a certain dexterity is required. Not in the slightest. Between each lightning stroke there is calculation, deliberation, choice.

All of this the apprentice, now an assistant, must observe. Later, he will himself practice. Finally, he will receive his license from the itamae and be ready to appear on his own as a full-fledged *sushi-ya.* In due course he may expect either to continue with the master or to open his own shop.

This method of learning is one shared with other Japanese arts. Apprentices to the woodcarver, to the Kabuki actor, to the metal-worker, and to the stonecutter undergo similar training. Watch and imitate—this is how a Japanese art is learned. One understands eventually not only the techniques but also the all-important attitude of the master toward his discipline. It is the attitude that makes the master—and also contributes considerably toward the mystique of sushi.

At any rate, it is said that the tsu, ferreting out new sushi shops, looks first at the apprentices. If they are alert and busy, watchful and obliging, if they put out more hot tea without being asked, at the same time keeping a learning eye on the shop master, then the chances are that the attitude of the place is proper and that good sushi may be the outcome.

How then can the non-tsu, knowing nothing of any of this, pick the proper place to enjoy this not inexpensive delicacy? He can begin by making it a rule never to have sushi in a place that does not serve only it. Sushi in ordinary restaurants, cafeterias, and the like is always bad—the only bad sushi one runs the risk of eating in Japan. Therefore, always repair to the sushi shop. But which, among the thousands available?

The Japanese, of course, would never approach the problem in this fashion. They would instead go to a sophisticated friend and ask his opinion. Then, after some consideration, the friend would name a shop that had his trust and probably his patronage. Better, he might take the inquiring friend there himself and introduce him. Indeed, to the best shops of all, as to the best bars, an introduction is necessary.

If one has no knowledgeable friends, then trial and error is the only solution. In general an old shop is better than a new one, and a small shop is better than a large one. There is also one other consideration—price. Any sushi shop in Japan serves very good sushi, but really extraordinary sushi costs. One way of determining the potential price is to observe the sushi shop sign or window. Inexpensive places, those listing the prices, are well worth the visit, and those serving the finest and the most expensive sushi list no prices at all.

The oaiso, the bill, is another important element entering into the

sushi mystique. Though perhaps beginning as a fast food, it has now become—at the best places—the most expensive cuisine in Japan. A meal at a first-class sushi shop costs twice as much as a full steak dinner, and everyone knows how expensive beef is in Japan.

The reason is, of course, that the best shops serve the best fish, and the days are now long gone when tuna frolicked in Tokyo Bay. Nowadays a fresh tuna at Tokyo's Tsukiji fish market can cost thousands of dollars, and enough of the marbled underside of a tuna to make four servings costs well over twenty-five dollars. And these prices are wholesale—without overhead and profit added.

So, be prepared for something special when the itamae totes up the bill. (This, as befitting his near sacerdotal status, he does with expected panache: he has memorized just what every one of his twenty-some customers has had and with calculator swiftness writes the amount on a small slip of paper that he discreetly hands over.) A hundred dollars a person is quite ordinary. In a really fine shop the bill can come to much more. One can also, however, eat fairly well for twenty-five dollars, but do not expect superb marbled tuna.

The first-class shops serve only freshly caught seafood. Other shops serve seafood flown into Japan, usually frozen: sea urchins from Los Angeles, prawns from Mexico, squid from Africa, herring and tuna from the Atlantic. Some tastes survive the journey. Others do not.

This means that the master and his assistants must be expert shoppers as well. The itamae goes to the fish market himself, early in the morning, and makes the earliest and best choices. He takes only the finest portions of the day's catch and rejects far more than he purchases. He will know exactly which fishmonger, among the hundreds in the entire market, to go to for which seafood. He will probably not take part in the fish auctions held daily, because he will already have made his purchase privately earlier.

Finally, loaded down, he and his assistants will return to the shop and begin the day's work, preparing for the early morning tsu who wants his breakfast straight from the sea.

There is in Japan at present a general concern about the price of sushi and the (un)availability of materials. One representative recently said: "With raw material costing so much, the traditional sushi industry cannot survive." This representative, to be sure, was connected with the traditional sushi shop's greatest rival, a vast fast-food chain devoted to sushi. This outfit, Japan's largest and far outdistancing such petty foreign rivals as McDonald's, Mister

Donut, and Colonel Sanders, has almost two thousand sushi outlets in Japan, and last year it showed a profit of almost sixty-three billion yen.

Its "secret," says the representative, is to use the best possible Japanese ingredients (they do not define "possible") coupled with American merchandizing and marketing techniques. Buying in massive bulk, they are able to charge less per item, and mechanization cuts down on expensive labor. And, as for the apprentice system and the making of nigiri-zushi, well, "anyone can learn to make sushi in ten days." So much for the tsu.

So much as well for the ambience, the skill, the dedication, the technique, and the art of sushi-making at its best. Still, the majority of sushi shops in Japan are as yet privately owned, and they seem nearly always to be filled. At least a part of the population remains willing to pay high prices in return for the complete sushi experience: taste, sight, decor, performance, bill, and all. So long as such customers survive, so will the art of sushi.

As for the taste and savor of sushi, it is always good and (since you cannot eat mystiques) easy enough to enjoy even at home. First, you go to the fish market....

Donald Richie

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