From Ethnic to Food Fashion Forward: Japa

by April Elkjer

Japan is tantalizing the taste buds of the world. From Shanghai to Sweden, Japanese food is quickly becoming a global trend, one that is very familiar to us here in the United States, perhaps "Americanized" to the point where a sushi bar is almost like your local pizza joint, at least on the East and West coasts.

Along with electronics, zen, anime and manga, horror films and (increasingly) fashion, food is one of the many "soft power" charms Japan has in its arsenal. Soft power is a term coined by American international relations scholar Joseph Nye Jr., to describe foreign policy tools that nations can use to influence the behavior or interests of other political bodies.

"A friend of mine [Sasha Issenberg] wrote a book... about the explosion of sushi outside of Japan," said Tokyo-based chef and journalist Yukari Sakamoto. "He said, 'It's funny you can see where the new wealth in the world is by following where the maguro goes,' because in India - and now in China and Dubai, where the new money is - you can see that people have acquired this taste for sushi and there's some status affiliated with it."

This recent global glamour comes in contrast to the first arrival of Japanese food on foreign shores.

"When Japanese immigrants first come to the United States what they took with them were home foods, *ofukuro no aji* or 'a taste of mother,'" said Merry White, professor of anthropology and food studies at Boston University. "The people who brought the food never thought of cooking it for anyone who wasn't Japanese."

In Europe, Japanese food went from ethnic to hip in the last decade, writes Katarzyna J. Cwiertka of the Center for Korean and Japanese Studies, Leiden University in the Netherlands. "For the Japanese by Japanese" style of restaurants of the 70's and 80's gave way to a new pattern of "for Europeans by Asians."

White confirms that this was happening in the United States as well, "you started to see people eat Japanese food after the Post War period. Businessmen would be wined and dined in Japan and then come back and want to have that taste again. People wanted to experience all Japanese food – teriyaki, noodles, tempura – in one restaurant whereas in Japan you have places that just serve sushi or just serve tempura."

In fact, this transition has been so successful that statistics put out by Japan's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) in 2006 estimates the number of Japanese restaurants worldwide at over 20,000, with approximately 10,000 in North America. The total number of Japanese restaurants in the United States has increased by 250 percent in the past 10 years, and the number in the United Kingdom by 300 percent in the past 5 years.

"Benihana...provided the American consumer with an exotic culinary entertainment, without really challenging his taste buds or his wallet."

A useful case study in the evolution of Japanese restaurants outside of Japan is the story of the popular chain Benihana. In 1964, Aoki Hiroaki, better known as Rocky Aoki, opened Benihana, the first Teppanyaki-style restaurant outside of Japan, in New York City. Teppanyaki -- a style of cooking beef, seafood and vegetables on a large griddle in front of customers -- was actually invented in 1945, inspired by the tastes of American GI's and was viewed in Japan as an exclusive and fashionable foreign style of cooking.

"Benihana was basically a steakhouse with a difference – familiar food served in exotic surroundings by Asian-looking people in Japanese dress," asserts Cwiertka. "Aoki provided the American consumer with an exotic culinary entertainment, without really challenging his taste buds or his wallet."

By the late 1970's, Benihana, with its stunt performing chefs, grew into a nationwide chain with more than 30 restaurants and then began to expand internationally in Bangkok, Beirut, Caracus, London, Moscow, Seoul and even Tokyo – not to mention the spawn of imitators around the world.

The other example given by Cwiertka is *kaiten-zushi* (often translated as rotary sushi), the culinary journey of which is summed up by her phrase "from shabby to posh."

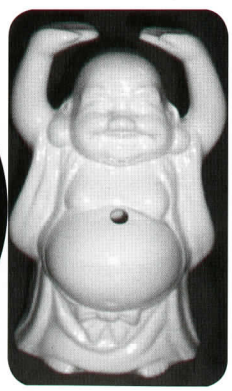
A sushi bar in Europe usually means a circulating conveyor belt carries the sushi: customers sit around the table and are able to pick up whatever sushi catches their eye.



photo by Tamio Spiegel

"Teppanyaki room at Japan Fusion in Shenzhen, China"

"At Benihana, you can drink a cocktail out of a visage of the Boddhisatva, Hotei."



nese Food Takes the Global Stage

Kaiten-zushi bars made sushi available to anybody and became nationally known in Japan after the Osaka Expo of 1970. During the first two to three decades of its existence, kaiten-zushi was held in low regard, the fish did not match the high standards of traditional sushi chefs and it had an aura of cheapness. Despite this, they began to spring up mainly because they were inexpensive, convenient and had a clear and fixed pricing system (unlike traditional sushi-ya).

In Europe, Moshi Moshi was the pioneer of the new kaiten-zushi trend in London, which has operated since 1994 and was started by Caroline Bennett who wanted to imitate the kaiten-zushi restaurants she observed in Japan. Her restaurant was targeted towards Japanese expatriates but London yuppies were the ones who came in droves.

Within two decades, sushi underwent a transition in the United States. According to Cwiertka, "first from an exotic, almost unpalatable ethnic specialty, to haute cuisine of the most rarefied sort. Then, it became a hip and trendy food for the young. Finally, it ended up in supermarkets and take-out corners next to pizza, burritos, bagels and other hallmarks of the contemporary American food culture."

"Sushi was one of these foods that caught people's imaginations. People in the 60's were trying to figure out what to call it for Americans like a 'rice sandwich,'" chuckled White. "But then they figured out they better just call it sushi."

Today, an MAFF study asserts that less than 10% of all Japanese restaurant owners in America are of Japanese descent. Which begs the question, 'what makes a Japanese restaurant 'Japanese?"

Anthropologist White challenges us to open our minds.

"I hate that word [authentic] because there ain't no such thing," she asserts "There's no one food, there's no one time when tradition was fixed and there was no one food that was declared the official version."

According to White, this is due to regional differences and historical changes in sushi.

From an anthropological standpoint this is true. Yet, if you speak to a person who is Japanese or of Japanese descent they may disagree.

In conducting interviews, Sakamoto whose book "Food Sake Tokyo" will be published in 2010, asked well-respected teachers from the Fuji culinary school what they thought of Japanese food outside of Japan. The response, "we've eaten at very nice restaurants in New York, they are doing a good job, they are run by Japanese sous chef, but you can never re-create the ambiance that you have in Japan – the garden, the quiet tatami room but also the service. The waitress who knows when to go in, the way to properly place everything down."

"There is a sense of respect for the customer and of making sure that is a flawless experience," said Sakamoto. "And you just don't have that concept outside of Japan."

The globalization of sushi and Japanese food is not unquestionably good, as it is now threatening global fish populations. But at the same time, does it not signal a shift, an opening up of minds to other possibilities through gastronomic means? If Japan's soft power is the power of attraction then Japanese food is the belle at the ball and the world wants to take her for a turn on the global stage.

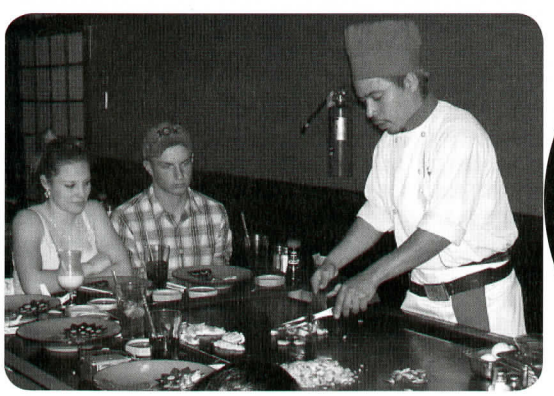
April Elkjer is a print and broadcast writer who covers entertainment, culture food and lifestyles. She writes for The Nichi Bei Times, a Japanese American weekly and is a contributor to APEX Express (KPFA 94.1), a radio show with an Asian Pacific Islander point of view. She can be reached at april@elkjer.net.

Food Evolution Facts

- Sushi has roots in Southeast Asia, where fish from the Mekong were fermented with salt and rice since ancient times. It was likely introduced either from Korea or directly from Southeast Asia in about the 8th century. This kind of sushi is now called 'narezushi' in Japan, and it evolved into the still widely available 'oshizushi.'

- Modern sushi was invented in the early 1800's as a roadside fast food. It was made from fish caught out of the Edo bay and because it was so perishable, nigirizushi was only consumed in the coastal Edo area. Even with its close proximity to the ocean, health concerns endured and it was often marinated or cooked slightly.

- Initially, nigirizushi was served with different condiments depending on the fish and they ranged from hot mustard to ginger to ponzu. Wasabi was strictly used for its antibacterial properties. **(Continued on p. 6)**



"Benihana serves Japanese food tailored to America's pallette as well as it's facsination with the 'exotic far-east'

"Kaiten-zushi, or sushi boats as they are commonly known in America, are largely a blue-collar affair in Japan."



photo by Ben Hamamoto