

**Sushi Ubiquity**

In a review of the varied concessions on sale at the two baseball stadiums that opened in New York at the start of the 2009 season, *New York Times* food critic Frank Bruni opens his article with an anecdote of one fan’s bewilderment at the availability of sushi at the new Yankee Stadium. Actually, these days you might be more hard-pressed to find a decent hamburger at a sports arena than you would be to find a California roll (although there is no accounting for the quality of that California roll). The audacity of offering sushi at a ballpark became the target of jokes of a number of late-night comedians when the cuisine first started appearing at concession stands next to hot dogs and hamburgers in the late 1980s; but today no new stadium opens without a wide selection of food concession options, and sushi almost always makes it to the menu. Ballparks are not the only place sushi has made inroads in the United States. Supermarket sushi counters, often managed by national corporations that operate the counters on a franchise basis, can be found across the country. The recent relative ubiquity of sushi is not unique to the United States, as Australia and European, South American, and Asian countries other than Japan have also experienced sushi booms.

Together, the two books reviewed below provide fascinating insights into the gastronomic, economic, and scientific roots of a cuisine that has become increasingly commonplace around the world yet has maintained an identity that most still immediately associate as being uniquely Japanese. Informed by these authors, you will likely find your next trip to a sushi bar (or to a supermarket sushi counter—or even to a ballpark sushi vendor) a much richer experience.

**The Globalization of a Cuisine**

In 1971, a Japan Airlines employee took on the task of finding business opportunities to resolve the airline’s dilemma of unused cargo capacity on return flights to Japan after having shipped full holds of electronics and other exported goods on its outbound trans-Pacific flights. After having pored over voluminous trade statistics, Akira Okazaki concluded that seafood featured the “value and sensitivity to decay” that “perfectly matched the economics of air freight” (Issenberg, p. 5). A subsequent field trip to
Tokyo’s Tsukiji fish market convinced him that tuna’s size and weight made it an ideal candidate to fill the empty cargo holds of Japan Airlines’ trans-Pacific fleet. Until the Meiji era (1868–1912), Japanese consumers considered tuna a lower-quality fish with a fat content more appropriate for cat food than for human consumption. Preferences changed upon the influx of richer, fattier foods during the U.S. occupation of Japan after World War II, and prices rose alongside demand in the years that followed. Fortuitously, bluefin tuna was still grossly undervalued outside Japan in the early 1970s; Okazaki’s colleagues found in their research that sport fishermen in Canada often discarded tuna as garbage after having taken a commemorative photograph next to their giant catch. Hoping to exploit this apparent price arbitrage, Okazaki commenced a risky and expensive project to partner with Canadian fisheries, arrange for ground transport of the caught tuna to John F. Kennedy Airport in New York, and develop a new type of refrigerated container customized for the airline’s fleet of DC-8s that could keep the fish frozen without the unnecessary weight of chunked ice. When the first air-delivered Canadian bluefin was sold at a profit on August 14, 1972, a new era of sushi had dawned. Atlantic fishermen would see the prices paid for their catch rise as much as 10,000 percent in the following two decades.

Sasha Issenberg writes in *The Sushi Economy: Globalization and the Making of a Modern Delicacy* that “a book about what goes into the making of sushi has to really be a narrative about the development of twentieth-century global capitalism,” arguing that prerequisites for the production of good sushi include “historical exposure to business travelers, tourists, and skilled migrants; integration into international labor markets; intercontinental cargo connections; supply-chain expertise; and exposure to the worldly flavor currents of both haute cuisine and fast food” (p. xxiv). In his attempt to trace that narrative, Issenberg, a print journalist whose body of work has focused on political reporting, escorts the reader around the world and back again to introduce a myriad cast of characters and issues that have contributed to and sprung from the rise of sushi’s popularity in Japan and abroad. As the crown jewel of sushi fish, tuna more often than not is the star of this story.

Issenberg organizes his defense for sushi as a case study for globalization into four distinct parts: a section that examines distribution networks that support the sushi business; a section that reviews sushi’s impact on the restaurant industry outside Japan; a section on efforts to catch, raise, and even smuggle tuna for sale to the sushi trade; and a concluding section that considers the future of sushi. Each chapter is staged in a different international locale, with most chapters zigzagging between macro-level background histories of the industry and illustrative micro-level profiles of individuals involved in the sushi business.
In his section on the restaurant industry, Issenberg succinctly recounts the history of Japanese food in Los Angeles, including a description of the beginnings of what became one of the region’s largest sushi-restaurant suppliers in the 1970s and 1980s, Mutual Trading Company. The business originally sourced leftover canned goods (rationed before the end of the 1904–5 Russo-Japanese War) to Japanese immigrants in the United States, becoming a consortium in 1926. Likewise, Issenberg concisely outlines an occupational biography of Nobuyuki Matsuhisa (of the high-end “Nobu” restaurant chain), who, for Issenberg, serves as the archetype of an international chef focused on fusing Japanese tradition with locally sourced and globally influenced tastes.

Issenberg’s coverage of the impact of sushi on commercial fishing features three chapters: one on the boom and bust of New England fisheries following their participation in the supply chain for Japan-bound tuna (including an interesting aside on Reverend Sun Myung Moon and his Unification Church’s entry into the Massachusetts tuna fishing scene via its subsidiary, International Seafoods Corporation); a chapter on tuna ranching in Australia; and a chapter on efforts to thwart international black markets that operate in violation of tuna-fishing quota regimes. Somewhat disappointingly, Issenberg does not give meaningful attention to the consequences of overfishing wild tuna apart from passing references to the diminished catches of Atlantic and Australian fishermen.

In his analysis of the future of the cuisine, Issenberg finds that sushi’s path in China has been not unlike that of other Japanese-branded or Chinese-manufactured goods: whereas Japanese sushi-related companies once turned to China mainly as a location where they could inexpensively locate processing facilities for frozen products, today China has become a source of consumers to whom those Japanese companies increasingly want to market their final product. Issenberg portrays China and other newly emerged economies as the next frontier for the sushi business, noting that “the speed with which a rapidly enriched elite takes to sushi is not a perfect index of the development of a Western-style business culture, but one could do worse in the search for such an economic indicator” (p. 266).

Ichthyology & Rice

Whereas Issenberg leaps from one continent to another in his book, Trevor Corson bases the bulk of his contribution to sushi literature, The Zen of Fish: The Story of Sushi, from Samurai to Supermarket, at a Los Angeles school for aspiring sushi chefs. In this documentary nonfiction work, Corson shadows the students and instructors through a semester at the California Sushi Academy, which shares space with a Japanese restaurant struggling in a competitive market when the story takes place in 2005. The narrative
of the semester is literally only half of the story Corson recounts: Throughout the book, he pairs intriguing anecdotes on the history, culture, and preparation of sushi with the experiences of the students as they progress through their syllabus. Despite the somewhat clichéd use of “Zen” in the title of the hardcover edition, the result is a surprisingly thorough walk-through of all things sushi, placed in helpful and familiar context.²

Corson focuses his attention on one student in particular: Kate Murray, who has the weakest culinary skills of anyone her class. As a novice, Kate provides an apt medium through which Corson can introduce a multitude of trivia about sushi topics, ranging from the tools she will use (e.g., when samurai were no longer permitted to carry swords in the late nineteenth century, the same artisans who crafted those swords turned their attention to forging kitchen knives, which to this day are among the sharpest in the world) to the sushi she prepares using those tools (e.g., ura-maki 裏巻き, or inside-out rolls, are an American invention resulting from an attempt to hide the seaweed used in rolls from customers unaccustomed to the ingredient). Corson also uses Kate to discuss the bias against women on both sides of the sushi bar in Japan: Sushi bars are traditionally male-dominated spaces where female customers are often given the cold shoulder when they sit unaccompanied by men and where female sushi chefs are erroneously rumored to have hands warmer than their male counterparts, thus running the risk of “cooking” the raw ingredients they handle.

The staff and other students at the school conveniently fulfill a number of sushi-themed motifs. The owner of the sushi academy is a native Japanese who, despite not having gone through the regimen of years of training that chefs traditionally endure in Japan, has an ideal combination of respect for the cuisine and showmanship to have thrived in the boom years of sushi in Los Angeles. The school’s main instructor, an Australian, is a staunch advocate of “traditional” Japanese sushi offerings, frequently dismissing the sauces and unconventional ingredients used in sushi dishes popular with American customers. As a Japanese-restaurant consultant, the director of student affairs aims to match graduates of the academy with future employment opportunities—which we learn are increasingly more prevalent in new markets, such as Stillwater, Oklahoma, than in sushi-saturated California.

On the cuisine itself, Corson presents the natural history, biological composition, and flavor characteristics of nearly every ingredient found behind a sushi bar. In the case of sushi rice, Corson walks the reader through a description of the physical structure of rice grains; the milling process; the vitamin-fortification process required by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for most rice; and its preparation as sushi rice, including an enlightening revelation (to a sushi layperson, anyway) about an MSG additive often used as a shortcut in place of the traditionally used
kelp to add flavor to the rice. Corson also explains different degrees of sweetness of sushi rice, highlighting differing regional preferences for sushi sweetness in Japan and the immediate leap in popularity of sweet sushi after World War II. In his description of a sushi chef’s preparation of nigiri握り sushi (hand-squeezed rectangles of rice upon which various toppings are placed), Corson tells of the importance of the density of the rice and how good sushi chefs will tailor their style depending on the customer (e.g., customers who eat nigiri with their hands should be served loosely packed rice, whereas those who use chopsticks should be served a firmer block of rice, lest the nigiri fall apart when picked up).

The book’s real strength is Corson’s skill at making the science of sushi interesting, presenting details in a playful and unintimidating manner for those of us without backgrounds in marine biology. He provides fascinating detail of a number of the most popular sushi toppings, imbuing his descriptions with just enough scientific trivia to capture the fascination of his mass-market target audience yet not give the impression he is watering down his presentations. Throughout the book, he covers topics such as the boiology of tuna (which are, believe it or not, a warm-blooded fish); the composition of various types of muscles in fish and their differing flavor profiles; the antibacterial characteristics of sushi garnishes, such as shredded radish and perilla (shiso紫蘇) leaves; and the (truly fascinating) life-cycle of eels.

Fresh Perspectives on Sushi

Although these books inevitably overlap in their presentation of some material (such as the historical origins of sushi, its rise to popularity in California, and descriptions of the Tsukiji fish market in Tokyo), the difference in approaches that Issenberg and Corson take feels more complementary and enlightening than repetitious. In their chapters on the role of Los Angeles in popularizing sushi in the United States, Issenberg provides a more thorough historical account, whereas Corson’s description benefits from telling the story through the personal experiences of the owner of the California Sushi Academy, who worked at a restaurant popular among Hollywood stars in the 1970s. Although the two books were written for generalist audiences, the thoroughness with which they address and have researched their material is impressive. Both books feature extensive bibliographies of English and Japanese works, with Corson helpfully including both Japanese characters and Romanized spellings in his citations. Corson’s frequent mention of parallels between a Japanese comic book series about a female sushi chef and the challenges faced by the students of the California Sushi Academy are a particularly effective use of creative reference material.

The utility of either The Sushi Economy or The Zen of Fish in the college classroom would likely be limited to inclusion as supplemental reading on
a syllabus for a course on Japanese supply-chain management or a general introduction to Japanese culture and customs. Issenberg, for example, provides a user-friendly introduction to the workings of the Tsukiji fish market, but his approach lacks the depth or academic rigor provided in Theodore Bestor’s work that focuses exclusively on the market.

Were I to limit my recommendation to only one of these books, I would opt for Corson’s more lighthearted approach to sushi. While Issenberg’s argument of sushi-as-globalization and his account of the commoditization of the cuisine are well-founded, his tendency to over-exaggerate his thesis (e.g., “More than any other food, possibly more than any other commodity, to eat sushi is to display an access to advanced trade networks, of full engagement in world commerce,” p. 267) detracts from the very interesting collection of supporting evidence he presents. Corson, on the other hand, is playful yet deceptively educational in his presentation of his material; throughout The Zen of Fish, I felt inspired to rush to a sushi bar to compare what I would see and taste to what Corson had described in detail. Both of these books provide readers with an abundance of interesting facts they can share with dining companions on an outing to a Japanese restaurant, but Corson’s scope and approach ultimately seem better suited to the limitations of a mass-market book with a generalist audience in mind.

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