

I | California Roll

Recall that it was not that long ago, despite its lofty status in the current US culinary scene, that sushi, synonymous with raw fish to most Americans, was a frequent object of derision, ridicule, and, above all, dread. When the *Ladies' Home Journal* introduced Japanese cuisine to American women in 1929, the magazine discreetly dodged the subject, fearful that it might disturb the genteel constitution of its female readership. "There have been purposely omitted," the article ran, "any recipes using the delicate and raw tuna fish which is sliced wafer thin and served iced with attractive garnishes." The magazine did, however, offer the tenuous assurance that raw fish "might not sound so entirely delicious as they are in reality."¹

In countless films, TV shows, commercials, and popular American discourse in general sushi was routinely represented as nothing more than slimy, smelly, and spoiled orts of raw octopus, squid, or some other bizarre sea creature, more suitable for fish bait than a blue-plate special. One notable example from my cinematic salad days is *The Breakfast Club*, John Hughes' 1985 meditation on white, middle-class, suburban teenage angst. When the "rich girl" Claire Standish (played by Molly Ringwald) takes out a box of sushi for lunch (signifying her snootiness), the other high-schoolers serving detention with her look on with a mixture of trepidation and disgust. The "rebel" John Bender (played by Judd Nelson) asks what "that" is. Standish responds that it is sushi, "rice, raw fish, and seaweed," to which Bender remarks, "You won't accept a guy's tongue in your mouth and you're going to eat that?" Another example comes via television: in a 2001 advertisement for 10-10-220, a long-distance phone service, a pair of football stars, Terry Bradshaw and Doug Flutie, sits at a sushi bar. "Man,



Claire Standish (Molly Ringwald) eats sushi for lunch. Frame enlargement from *The Breakfast Club* (1985).

I'm hungry," declares Bradshaw. When the sushi chef places pieces of *nigirizushi* in front of them, Bradshaw, the Hall of Fame quarterback who won four Super Bowl titles with the Pittsburgh Steelers during the 1970s, and Flutie, who was awarded the Heisman Trophy in 1984 as a quarterback for Boston College, look down at their plates with trepidation. Seeing their nonplussed expressions, a young woman seated next to them tells them it is sushi. "Sootchi? Where I come from we call that stuff bait," barks an incredulous, pronunciation-challenged Bradshaw. At the end of the commercial Bradshaw leans over to the sushi chef and adds sotto voce, as if he is bestowing confidential sage advice, "Hey, you forgot to cook this."

You've Come a Long Way, Baby

Sushi once possessed the ultimate "yuk!" factor, grossing out grown-up Americans the way spinach might repulse a finicky child or head cheese a vegan. As anyone who has recently purchased a pre-prepared box of sushi from a local supermarket might attest, the popularity and prestige of Japa-

nese food, and sushi in particular, have soared since the 1980s, leading to the shrine-like status of restaurants such as Nobu and Masa in New York City, and transforming chefs like Masaharu Morimoto into culinary rock stars. The novelist Jay McInerney recounts how when he first braved sushi while visiting Tokyo back in 1977, he saw himself 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 ball.” He would tell his children about it “someday,” he thought. Little did he realize that within a couple of years sushi bars would mushroom in Manhattan and nigirizushi would soon “become the signature forage of the Young Urban Professional.” McInerney’s children eventually became so undaunted by sushi that they began to eat it three or four times a week, having developed the habit while living in Nashville, Tennessee, of all places.² But perhaps the ultimate symbol of sushi’s triumph over America’s Puritan palate might be a 2006 episode of HBO’s *The Sopranos*, in which Tony Soprano, the brutal but oddly endearing mob boss, not once but twice in a single episode dines on a plate of artistically arranged *tekka-maki* at a posh Japanese restaurant somewhere, I imagine, not far from the New Jersey Turnpike and the Bada Bing!

Sushi is a rare example—or a *raw* example, rather—of a foreign dish that has, within the relatively short span of my adult life, undergone a thorough reputation makeover. Initially regarded as dubious, it has now gone mainstream, and, remarkably, it did so while retaining most of its exotic aura. Indeed, considering the hostile reception sushi received during its early years in the United States, who could have predicted this remarkable reversal of fortune? In fact, I can think of no other dish so thoroughly identified with another nation’s gastronomy that shares this backstory of culinary rags to riches. Sushi in America is symbolic of a bilateral culinary redemption, a two-way reminder of how far both sushi and American foodways have come.

On the one hand, sushi has altered itself in form and substance to better assimilate into the norms of US gastronomy, principally in the form of California roll and countless other elaborate and imaginative avocado-centered *makizushi*, such as Philadelphia roll (typically made of salmon, asparagus, cream cheese, and avocado), dragon roll (eel, crab, cucumber, and avocado), spider roll (soft-shell crab, cucumber, and avocado), and rainbow roll (California roll wrapped in five different types of raw fish).³ On the other hand, American diners have learned to better embrace the



A shopper looking over an assortment of pre-made sushi at Wegmans Market in Johnson City, New York. Photo by the author.

exotic palate—so much so that in 2006 the Japanese minister of agriculture, forestry, and fisheries calculated that there were already “9000 Japanese restaurants in the US alone, with their number increasing at a rate of 8.5 per cent a year.”⁴

In *The United States of Arugula: How We Became a Gourmet Nation*, David Kamp contends that during the 1980s at least three factors merged to increase sushi’s popularity in the United States, signaling Japanese food’s coming of age: James Clavell’s novel *Shogun* became a hit television miniseries (starring Richard Chamberlain and Toshiro Mifune), “which spurred a faddist mania for all things Japanese”; “diet-conscious Americans” began to see sushi as a healthy, pure, clean, and organic alternative to the overly processed, deleterious foods that dominated the American foodscape; and “status-conscious Americans” began to increase their con-

sumption of raw fish because it seemed “hip” and “cool.”⁵ But while the cosmopolitan crowd may have altered the status of sushi from outlandish victual to food fad to haute cuisine to mass-market fare, all within a couple decades, its legacy as one of the most mocked, if not feared, foreign foods has not entirely been erased.

The popularity of frozen fish sticks, McDonald’s Filet-O-Fish, and the Red Lobster restaurant chain notwithstanding, to mainstream America seafood was and to a great degree still is caught with a can opener, not chopsticks. It is something gathered not from the oceans, seas, and other waterways but pulled from the pantry and freezer. The actress-singer Jessica Simpson’s much lampooned question about whether tuna was fish or chicken reveals the extent to which much of landlocked Middle America still experiences anxiety over the idea of eating fish—even cooked fish. (In a 2003 episode of MTV’s reality show *Newlyweds: Nick and Jessica*, Simpson expresses confusion over the moniker “Chicken of the Sea,” thinking it read either Chicken “by” or “of” the Sea.) This attitude was on full display even in a presumably high-end gourmand environment like the Bravo network’s *Top Chef*. In the “Eastern Promise” episode of the 2006–2007 season, a contestant (Mia Gaines-Alt of Oakdale, California) gags histrionically when told by the host Padma Lakshmi (aka Ex-Mrs. Salman Rushdie) that the day’s challenge involved handling raw fish to create a scrumptious sushi meal. Be that as it may, considering where it once was a mere decade or two ago, sushi, at least in the United States, has come a long way.

Row over California Roll

If the thought of raw fish, despite sushi’s prominent place in the current American food scene, makes your stomach heave, there is, of course, California roll, the most commonly consumed form of sushi in the United States, if not the entire Western Hemisphere. Typically prepared using crabmeat (usually imitation), avocado (the signature ingredient), cucumber (at times carrot), mayonnaise (from a jar), and rolled “inside out” so as to hide the nori from the view of diners turned off by the idea of seaweed, California roll is not only benign enough for the gastronomically squeamish, but also for finicky children and expectant mothers, the latter of whom are medically advised in the United States to abstain from consuming raw fish.⁶

If tortilla chips, tomato salsa, guacamole, and nachos can be said to be “entry points for Mexican food for a lot of Americans,” as Rick Bayless, the famed Chicago-based Mexican cuisine restaurateur, has observed,⁷ then California roll, along with tempura, teriyaki, and, of course, instant ramen, are the gateway dishes for Americans wishing to venture into the daunting world of Japanese cuisine. “For Caucasians,” writes David Kamp, “the California roll proved to be an ideal gateway drug to the hard stuff; once you got over the weirdness of a cold piece of something-or-other brushed with wasabi and rolled in vinegar-seasoned rice and seaweed, it wasn’t so crazy to try sushi made with uncooked scallops or slices of velvety, high-quality raw tuna.”⁸

After all, what is there not to like about California roll? First and foremost, it is delicious—or at least a large segment of the world’s sushi-eating population thinks it is. Second, like a Big Mac and unlike, say, tuna tartare or ceviche, California roll is gastronomically anodyne; it is eater friendly and universally appealing. For the novice epicurean not yet swayed by the hoopla surrounding raw fish (or raw-like, in the case of ceviche, where the seafood is technically “cooked” not over heat but in acid), California roll minimizes most of the dangers—psychological or otherwise—associated with uncooked fish while maintaining the thrill of the exotic. Indeed, if McDonald’s were to ever put sushi on its menu, it certainly would start with California roll, which, one could argue, is sushi with training wheels. Representing the training wheels in this admittedly flimsy analogy is the absence of raw fish, which, as stated earlier, is synonymous with sushi in the United States. (In Japan, sushi is not so much about raw fish as it is about seasoned rice—more on this later.)

This is perhaps why most self-appointed sushi mavens treat California roll as the bane of their avocation, a fishbone in their throats. Often made in the United States by Korean, Chinese, Filipino, Thai, and at times Mexican, hands, this dubious concoction befits more the all-you-can-eat pavilion of a Chinese buffet just off the interstate than a dignified sushi shop in Osaka, Japan, the sushi pundits say. California roll is emblematic of an ancient, once-noble Japanese product that has been “Americanized,” a multipronged euphemism for “mass produced,” “compromised,” and “vulgarized.” In short, California roll is said to embody culinary apocrypha and ersatz gastronomy in our increasingly globalized, technologized, corporatized, and standardized world, where indigenous foods near and far have begun to go the way of the samurai, to exist only as fodder for muse-

ums, Hollywood, and other theme park ventures. (California roll! Hardly are those words out when a vapid image out of Fast Food Nation troubles our tongues. Surely the sushi apocalypse is at hand. Surely the end of real food is at hand. And what rough beast, the sushi cognoscenti ask, its hour come round at last, slouches toward Benihana to be born?)

California roll's reputation as a dubious variety of sushi stems largely from the fact that it is seen as ersatz, imitative, and artificial—in a word, fake—both on the level of individual ingredients used and as an assembled dish. A key ingredient that is incriminated is crabmeat, since what most often passes for crabmeat in California roll is not really made of crab but minced fish, or what the Japanese calls *surimi* (which in Japanese means “formed fish”). Composed of fish scrap, such as pollock, that is minced to a gelatinous paste, washed, pressed (to remove the water), salted and seasoned, shaped, and boiled until solidified,⁹ *surimi* is what often stands in place of crabmeat in garden-variety California roll. And the inclusion of avocado and mayonnaise, both of which are strongly associated with American food, makes California roll appear not merely imitative but brands it as an American—to wit, crass—imitation at that. Moreover, the absence of raw fish, which gives sushi the aura of adventure and danger, adds to the sense of dubiousness. Take that away and most of sushi's exoticness, if not essence, is subdued. Consequently, California roll is construed as a symbol of counterfeit and therefore second-rate gastronomy. More so than that, to serious sushi devotees it is no less a harbinger of the end of real or whole food as we know it.

But is it really? Is California roll a sign of the culinary apocalypse, a regrettable consequence of Americanization of the world, as its critics declare it to be? Or is it simply a great culinary invention, a paragon of fusion cuisine, an ingenious amalgamation of sumptuous ingredients that cannot but taste good? Is this, moreover, simply a question of taste (both gustatory and aesthetic) or is it something much more?

The Global Pantry

Pantry item one: “They’re calling it a soy sauce smackdown,” began a 2002 *San Francisco Chronicle* article. “In one corner, led by the Japanese, are the soy sauce traditionalists,” who tout their “centuries-old method of fermenting soybeans.” Standing across the ring are the Americans, who support a

newer soy sauce made not with soybeans, but with “a quick recipe that combines hydrolyzed vegetable protein, caramel coloring and corn syrup.” The wrangle started years earlier when Japanese officials proposed to the Codex Alimentarius Commission, a United Nations–backed food arbiter that regulates standards for the international food trade, that brands such as La Choy and Chun King, both owned by the US industry goliath ConAgra Foods, be barred from using the term “soy sauce” when exporting their nonbrewed, nonsoy products overseas. True soy sauce, at a minimum, ought to contain soy, the Japanese contingent argued.¹⁰

To the US soy sauce producers and members of the International Hydrolyzed Protein Council, the actions of the Japanese were nothing less than a declaration of war. “All we want is for the standard for soy sauce to be all-inclusive,” said a Codex delegate for the United States. “We have people who make naturally brewed and the hydrolyzed. We just have to make sure that the product is safe and compatible, that’s all.” The US soy sauce makers have a good reason for taking on this fight. While nonbrewed, hydrolyzed soy sauces ruled America thirty years ago, today, Kikkoman, a Japanese brand, dominates the US market.¹¹

In asking the Codex to rule in their favor, the Japanese soy sauce lobby wanted to make sure Japan kept its market share in not only the United States but around the world, where the nonbrewed variety is primed to compete against the traditionally brewed soy sauces for new customers. In framing this story, the *San Francisco Chronicle* article pitted Japanese tradition against American modification of that tradition. Question: does it matter that soy sauce did not originate in Japan but in China during the Zhou dynasty (1134–246 BC)?¹² And what if the technique of producing the nonfermented, so-called American version made with hydrolyzed vegetable protein was invented not in the United States but in Japan, with Kikkoman and not ConAgra playing an important role both in the production and marketing of it as early as the 1920s?¹³

Pantry item two: in Mexico “the red-hot chili pepper is under attack from abroad,” declared a 2005 story in *USA Today*. As it has done with other exports such as cheap shoes, China has flooded the Mexican market with Chinese-grown *chile de árbol*, which now accounts for a full third of all such chiles consumed in Mexico. While the Chinese- and Mexican-grown chiles appear visually identical, Mexican chile sellers insist that dried Mexican chiles are superior in taste and better suited for cooking Mexican dishes such as salsas and *moles*, and thus often charge up to 20

percent more for them. Mexican consumers, however, seem to neither notice nor care, as they more often choose the less expensive Chinese chiles. This has prompted Mexican lawmakers to urge protection for Mexican chile farmers. “If we don’t pay attention, the cultivation of this crop could disappear in just a few years,” warned a representative from Zacatecas, a state where cultivation of domestic chiles is a vital economic resource.¹⁴

What makes this situation especially galling to Mexican officials is the knowledge that pre-Columbian America is the origin of the chile. For untold millions of years before the arrival of humans, different varieties of chiles (genus *Capsicum*) grew wild in South America. In all probability, the plant was first domesticated in the Bolivian highlands before spreading to the Peruvian highlands.¹⁵ According to Dave DeWitt’s *The Chile Pepper Encyclopedia*, chiles have been part of the human diet in the Yucatán Peninsula and southern Mexico since 7500 BC, “and thus their usage predates the two great Central American civilizations, the Maya and the Aztecs.” The development of the Olmec culture (1000 BC) and Monte Albán culture of Oaxaca (500 BC) included the culinary use of chiles.¹⁶ This raises a question: are Mexican chiles superior to Chinese chiles by virtue of their origin? That is to say, by being indigenous to the Americas? If a case can be made that they are, can similar cases be made with any and all other edible matter, say, coffee (most likely West African origin), potato (South America), or Buffalo wings (upstate New York)?

Pantry item three: In October 2005 a team of Chinese scientists published in the journal *Nature* a surprising discovery made while excavating an archaeological site in northwestern China on the upper reaches of the Yellow River. “Noodles have been a popular staple food in many parts of the world for at least 2,000 years,” began the article, prior to presenting a startling announcement—the unearthing of a “prehistoric sample of noodles contained in a well-preserved, sealed earthenware bowl discovered in the Late Neolithic archaeological site of Lajian.” Based on their analysis of the remains, the scientists concluded that the ancient bowl of noodles, made of millet and resembling “the La-Mian noodle, a traditional Chinese noodle that is made by repeatedly pulling and stretching the dough by hand,” dates back four thousand years.¹⁷

It did not take long for news of the discovery to travel far and wide. That same day, news outlets from New York to San Francisco, from Taipei to Glasgow, from Sydney to Bahrain, from Calcutta to Detroit, in unison declared China the victor and Italy the loser. Under the headline “Use

Your Noodle, Of Course the Chinese Served it First,” the *Brisbane Courier Mail* declared, “A wrangle lasting decades as to which culture gave birth to the noodle has finally been settled—and the winner is China.” “Old Noodle Settles Pasta Row,” announced Australia’s Special Broadcasting Service. “Chinese take away the credit for inventing noodles,” proclaimed the UK’s *Independent*, while the *Sun* suggested that the archaeological find is “possible proof for the argument that China invented pasta before Italy.”¹⁸

The *Los Angeles Times*, meanwhile, printed the victory proclamations of two well-known Chinese American food personalities—Ming Tsai, the owner-chef of Blue Ginger restaurant in Wellesley, Massachusetts, and Martin Yan, perhaps the most beloved Chinese cook in America. “I can’t imagine a more conclusive piece of evidence than this,” Tsai is quoted as saying. “This definitely proves that the Chinese were making noodles way before the Italian Marco Polo came,” said Martin Yan. “I take pride in that, even though I have a lot of Italian friends.”¹⁹

Sushi Religiosity

The case against California roll appears as ironclad as the case for Japanese soy sauce, Mexican chile de árbol, and Chinese noodles. It rests on a single, all-encompassing premise: sushi originated in Japan. Among the most enduring myths Americans, and Westerners in general, have about Japan and Japanese people is that they are unrivaled in terms of cultural punctiliousness, and nowhere is this more evident than in the discourse surrounding comestibles, including beverages (e.g., tea, sake) and food, especially sushi. “Japanese cuisine is world renowned for meticulous presentation and refinement in presentation,” begins the entry on Japan in Alan Davidson’s *The Oxford Companion to Food*.²⁰ M. F. K. Fisher, the literary dame of American gastronomy, describes Japanese cuisine as “inextricably meshed with aesthetics, with religion, with tradition and history,” and the Japanese people as “austere by nature” and “basically more aware . . . of the functional beauty of a bowl or plate” than your average American.²¹ According to Michael Ashkenazi and Jeanne Jacob, authors of *The Essence of Japanese Cuisine: An Essay on Food and Culture*, the Japanese people consider food a “part of a complex, interrelated artistic tradition.” Food is “clearly intermeshed into other threads of expressive endeavour,” they

argue, making it “possible to draw associations between other Japanese art forms and food, which illuminate the choices Japanese have made about their food and its presentation.”²²

Reputedly, chief among the culinary choices made by the Japanese is taking sushi—its history, artistry, and tradition—seriously, if not ascetically. To Ashkenazi and Jacob, sushi “exemplifies, perhaps more than any other Japanese dish, the cultural ability to find the essence of an activity, or object.” They place sushi in the category of Japanese arts, alongside “dance, ink-brush painting, calligraphy, flower arrangement,” positing that “minimalism of expression is the height of art” and that sushi, more than any other Japanese art form, embodies the essence of minimalism.²³

Indeed, the degree to which a sushi eatery in Japan faithfully adheres to what is commonly perceived as a “proper” sushi creation is said to either make or break that establishment.²⁴ Moreover, highly regarded sushi chefs—or sushi artisans, rather—undergo years of apprenticeship, learning their crafts under the tutelage of venerable sushi masters. Theodore Bestor, author of *Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World*, an ethnographic account of the famed Japanese fish emporium, cites a “folklore of artisanal apprenticeship” that has a sushi chef devoting “ten years as an apprentice, the first two just learning how to cook rice, before even beginning to wield a knife.”²⁵ Ashkenazi and Jacob believe that a good sushi chef is an “artist” and report that it takes “at least five years to master the basics of the craft.”²⁶

Kinjiro Omae and Yuzuru Tachibana, authors of *The Book of Sushi*, break down a typical apprenticeship timetable in the following fashion: the first two years of a “young man aspiring to become an *itamae-san* are delegated to routine kitchen chores and making deliveries.” (Figuratively, *itamae-san* refers to someone who is the master of his own establishment; literally, it means someone standing before the cutting board.) The next two years are devoted to proper rice making, a task that demands such a careful study that a “Japanese housewife who prepares this staple food daily” could not possibly live up to the precise standard expected of the sushi apprentice. Finally, the following three or four years are devoted to learning “the ins and outs of buying and preparing fish.” This brings the total number of years spent training to seven or eight. And it is only at this point that a properly trained apprentice can begin to embark on a career as a sushi chef—in other words, to stand before the cutting board of his own

establishment.²⁷ Thus in Japan a young man with dreams of becoming a sushi chef knows exactly the road before him, a road “firmly established in the culture of the sushi bar as the code that bound a samurai.”²⁸ Or so it is said.

A young woman, of course, dares not dream such a dream. The art historian Linda Nochlin once asked, “Why have there been no great women artists?”²⁹ Taking her cue, we can just as easily ask: why have there not been any women sushi chefs, great or otherwise? “Because—some men say—women’s hands are warmer than men’s and hence adversely affect the flavor of raw seafood.”³⁰ A woman’s basal temperature, according to sushi mythology, is a shade higher than a man’s and thus might compromise the freshness of the ingredients if she were to put her hands on them.³¹ (This notion persists despite the fact that a 1998 peer-reviewed study published in the medical journal *The Lancet* found men’s hands to be on average warmer than women’s.³² That said, even if a woman’s hands were a fraction of a Fahrenheit warmer, would that really make any difference?) Others claim that since sushi is prepared with bare hands, “it would be intolerable for the fragrance of cosmetics on a woman’s hand to be transmitted to the food.”³³ (Never mind that a woman can just as easily choose not to use such products as men can.) Some, meanwhile, offer a more bluntly chauvinistic rationale, contenting that “the area behind the sushi bar is sacred space and would be defiled by the presence of a woman.”³⁴

And there is yet another rationale for the absence of female sushi chefs: knives, it is said, are “boy’s toys.”³⁵ The sushi knife, like the samurai sword, is regarded by sushi traditionalists as no mere kitchen utensil but a sacred symbol of masculine Japanese pride and manly honor. Naomichi Ishige, author of *History and Culture of Japanese Food*, referring to the samurai as “Japan’s warrior of the past,” notes that a “sword embodied the samurai’s soul: it represented the character of its owner.” Ishige then opines that the “Japanese kitchen knife” is the “equivalent of the samurai’s sword.” Superior versions of both are handmade and engraved with the name of the bladesmith, and the wielder of both treats his blade with the utmost care and respect. In a professional kitchen, the pots, pans, and other kitchen utensils usually belong to the establishment. The knife, however, “is the private possession of the one who uses it” and moves with him if he were to take another job. And it is often the “top chef” of a kitchen who wields the knife (hence the moniker *itamae*) and upon him is bestowed not only the highest rank, prestige, and respect, but also the task of “artis-



Professional kitchen knives on display at Korin, a Japanese knives and kitchen supply store in New York City. Photo by Shara Richter.

tically slicing *sashimi*, the preparation of which requires no cooking as such but demands the highest skill.”³⁶

There is, however, an important difference between the samurai sword and the kitchen knife: while the former is a holy relic, an artifact of a mythologized past fetishized by the likes of Yukio Mishima and Tom Cruise playing dress-up as the “last samurai,” the latter is believed to be very much a living force, the most essential implement of the sushi chef, the closest facsimile that contemporary Japan has to a sword-wielding warrior. (The samurai-sushi connection is brazenly touted in Trevor Corson’s 2007 book on sushi, *The Zen of Fish: The Story of Sushi from Samurai to Supermarket*.) In Japan the cult of the blade is said to be exclusively a male domain, be it on the battlefield or behind the sushi bar. What this testosteronic legend camouflages is the material fact that sushi making is highly coveted because, relative to other professions in the food industry, it is better paid and has a higher status.³⁷ It is seen as “one of the last occupations that still maintains the proud manliness of the Edo workman.”³⁸ Thus women who insist on pursuing the profession against these chauvinistic odds “simply

leave Japan for America.”³⁹ Once there, they, like most other US-based sushi chefs, are doomed to an ignominious career, fated to churn out roll after roll of—you guessed it—California rolls.

California roll, like the notion of female and non-Japanese sushi chefs, demeans sushi’s sacrosanct legacy, the sushi purists charge. In keeping with the inherited relationship between notions of purity and sanctity, no cuisine is couched more lavishly in the language of religiosity than Japanese and no dish more so than sushi, which is discursively positioned as a symbol of Japanese culinary impeccability. French cuisine at times comes close, but it is perhaps more accurate to describe the critical genuflection before the presence of such revered restaurants as *Le Meurice* in Paris or *Le Bernardin* in New York City as aristocratic or regal more than religious. The reverence shown to *Sukiyabashi Jiro*, a sushi establishment in Tokyo and the subject of a 2011 documentary film, *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, on the other hand, can only be described as spiritual—in an exaggerated Zen sort of way.

For an archetypal if not stereotypical example of how not only the food but the entire experience of eating Japanese food can be draped in the language of piety, consider the *New York Times* review of Sushi Yasuda published in 2011. In it, the food critic Eric Asimov refers to the Manhattan Japanese restaurant as a “standout shrine.” He reports that the owners “staked the restaurant’s reputation on a pure, uncompromised expression of the traditional art of sushi making” and that they “succeeded brilliantly” in this regard. “The effect is to be transported to a calm sanctuary where one may experience sushi artistically, pleurably and, dare I say, spiritually,” he opined—and without a shred of irony. A slice of *kanpachi* that he places in his mouth is described as “supremely pure” and the sea urchin so “intense, complex, and subtle and soulful it sends shivers” down his spine. “For a moment nothing exists but me and the sushi,” gushes Asimov—again absent of all irony. The last item he tries, an omelet, is described as “perfect” in flavor and “beautiful to observe.” He ends the review with a bold claim that defines sushi eating as a religious experience above all, while characterizing American influence as the primary defiler of that experience: “With its devotion to sushi in its purist form, unalloyed with other Japanese cuisines with American twists, Yasuda occupies a singular position in New York’s sushi landscape.”⁴⁰

Asimov does not say it outright, but for an expression of sushi in its *impurist* form, alloyed with vulgar American twists, we are asked to look

no further than the California roll. He strongly implies this idea when he remarks that at Yasuda “the creative liberties taken with sushi are a world away” (in Japan, it is assumed) where avocado is “an unknown,” as are jalapeño and mayonnaise.⁴¹ This disdain for avocado as a sushi ingredient is aptly encapsulated in a 2008 *Wall Street Journal* profile of three American sushi establishments—Sushi Nozawa in Los Angeles, Sasabune in New York City, and Sawa Sushi in Sunnyvale, California. If you find yourself sitting at the sushi bar at one of these venerable restaurants, the article warns, “Don’t try to order—the chef will decide what you eat. Use extra soy sauce at your own risk. And don’t ask for a California roll. You might get kicked out.” Referring admiringly to the head sushi chefs of these establishments as “sushi bullies” and “sushi dictators,” the article notes that each has his own set of pet peeves, which includes patrons who use too much soy sauce, disassemble a piece of sushi, ask for miso soup or extra rice, or linger at the sushi bar too long. And they all “loathe the ubiquitous California roll.” Why? “Not only is it a newfangled American invention that combines avocado and cucumber, but it usually contains imitation crab—anathema to chefs who have spent so much of their energy and money securing pristine seafood,” according to the article. Asking for it could result in customers—including “Hollywood bigwigs”—being ejected from the premises. Sawa Sushi even has a ban on California roll because the concoction is believed to epitomize the very opposite of what is considered “authentic” sushi.⁴²

The Profane Fruit

When it comes to the sheer number of questions generated about the etiquette of consumption, it seems no other single dish, foreign or otherwise, comes close to rivaling sushi. Can I use my fingers or must I use chopsticks? (Either, according to most sushi mavens.) Am I supposed to mix the wasabi with the soy sauce to form a slurry into which sushi pieces are dipped? (No.) What do I do with the pickled ginger—eat it before, with, or after the sushi? (Between bites of sushi as a palate cleanser.) When eating nigirizushi, do I dip the rice side or the fish side into the soy sauce? (The fish side.) When putting it into my mouth, which side faces up? (Most mavens say fish side up, but a select few insist on fish side down.) Am I supposed to put the whole thing in my mouth at once or am I allowed to eat it

in two or three bites? (All at once; if the piece is too large to eat in a single bite, your sushi chef needs to go back to sushi school.) Is it better to drink beer (Yes), sake (No, since it is also made of rice), wine (Why would you?), or tea? (Yes.) Can I have a Diet Coke with it instead? (Sigh.) To serious sushi aficionados, these are not trivial or rhetorical questions. They are, rather, imperative, and each has a correct answer.

But does it, really? As is often the case with activities that are severely rule driven, such as, say, grammatical usage, answers to questions about propriety often vary depending on which so-called expert is consulted. Question: is it okay to end a sentence with a preposition, split an infinitive, or begin a sentence with “however”? Answer: it depends on which grammarian you ask. In this regard, sushi eating is among the most prescriptive of all restaurant experiences. And it can also seem the most intimidating, especially for a sushi tyro sitting at a sushi bar for the very first time. Given the religiosity of sushi discourse, perhaps this is to be expected. In fact, it appears the intimidation factor is something serious sushi eaters not only expect but desire—and the more high end the sushi establishment, the more intense the desire for the intimidation factor. (Hence the requisite admiration for and excessive kowtowing to sushi chefs who behave in the most autocratic and draconian manner.) A major element of sushi is getting it right, of knowing how it is supposed to be done and doing it properly, not only by the sushi artisans but also by the patrons themselves. This, however, applies only to proper sushi creations. When it comes to California roll, given that the concoction itself is seen as a violation of sushi’s innate spiritual integrity, do these rules even matter?

As a culinary symbol that stands as the most serious transgressor of sushi purity and propriety, avocado is without rival. Ashkenazi and Jacob recount the response of one Japanese sushi chef to the question of avocado, California roll’s signature ingredient: “What *is* that? And why put it on sushi?”⁴³ What avocados are, of course, besides no longer being an unknown in Japan, is the bulbous fruit of a tree that belongs to the laurel family. Unlike other laurel plants, such as cinnamon and bay tree, which have Old World origins, avocados (*Persea americana*) are New World, meaning it did not exist outside the Americas prior to Columbus. The fruit is best characterized by its “unctuous oily flesh, a trait shared only with the olive and the coconut in the edible plant world,” according to Sophie Coe, author of *America’s First Cuisines*, a book that surveys pre-Columbian food cultures.⁴⁴



Avocado plant. Painting by Pierre-Joseph Redouté (1759–1840).

Due largely to the use of avocado (dubbed sushi’s “eternal interloper” by a *New York Times* restaurant critic in 2012)⁴⁵ as a primary ingredient, California roll is described by *The Dictionary of American Food and Drink* as a form of sushi created for the “American palate” and offers “carifornia” as an alternate spelling.⁴⁶ In *Why We Eat What We Eat: How Columbus Changed the Way the World Eats*, Raymond Sokolov describes California roll as an “American-Japanese neologism,” while Katarzyna Cwiertka, author of *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power and National Identity*, calls it an “American standard.”⁴⁷ And in the words of a Japanese ministry of foreign affairs official, California roll is an American “imitation” of Japanese food, but it is a “good thing” because “imitation is the sincerest flattery.”⁴⁸ In each of these instances (with Cwiertka being the possible exception), “American” is not merely meant as a descriptor but also a pejorative.⁴⁹

In this global era there is perhaps no greater insult to the perceived integrity of indigenous cultural expressions than to designate something as “American” or to describe it as having undergone a process of “Americanization.” For example, in much of equatorial cuisines that rely

heavily on chiles and other piquant spices, to say that a dish has been Americanized equates it to being “watered down,” its heat shamelessly subdued in order to cater to what is understood as a craven American taste. Since the mid-twentieth century, and today more than ever, a legion of detractors has regarded the United States as the leading agent of cultural imperialism, a system of exploitation that relies not so much on explicit military or political coercion, but instead on the hegemonic transmission of cultural forms—popular culture in particular—under the aegis of powerful corporations, with Disney, Microsoft, Coca-Cola, and McDonald’s leading the way.⁵⁰ In this regard, as Youchi Shimemura has observed, globalization is assumed to be “another name for world dominance by American capitalists,” which inevitably leads to, in the view of more radical critics, the eventual erosion of “local and regional cultures and spreading American consumer goods and the American way of life to every corner of the world.”⁵¹ Donald Pease, meanwhile, points to the “relationship between recent changes in the understanding of U.S. diplomatic history and the emergent interest in the importance of imperialism to cultural constructions in general and for critical multiculturalism’s understanding of race, class, and gender as culturally constructed categories.” As a result, “the concept of U.S. imperialism has itself become the subject of political and scholarly debates,” he writes.⁵²

Thus to label sushi, which Alan Davidson considers “perhaps the best known internationally of all Japanese specialties,”⁵³ as “American” is a not-so-secret code for implying that some sacred cultural convention has been desecrated as a result of US hegemony. The alternative possibility, that California roll might be an American product that has been Japanized, is a concept that cannot be sustained in the current discussion of cultural imperialism, since the hegemonic flow is primarily seen as unidirectional—from a more powerful source to a weaker destination. This is the case even in the face of Japan’s brawny economic standing on the world stage; it is, after all, the third largest economy in the world according to most measures (and only recently surpassed by China as the second largest after the United States). When the United States appears in the picture, the cultural materials associated with all other nations, even relatively privileged ones such as Japan and France (the ninth largest economy in the world), appear to teeter on the brink of permanent defilement or extinction. The general consensus is that California roll is, at best, pseudo-Japanese and, at worst, not Japanese at all, that this New World

product fails the litmus test of sushi authenticity, that it is American at the core. This is despite the fact that, as Sonoko Kondo puts it in *The Poetical Pursuit of Food: Japanese Recipes for American Cooks*, the recipe had, as early as the 1980s, “reached the shores of Japan, becoming a favorite with all sushi lovers.”⁵⁴

Pretty to Think So

If California roll cannot be considered authentic sushi, what does authenticity on a plate look like? What makes a dish—or an entire cuisine, for that matter—authentic? If vindaloo, must the protein be pork, not lamb, using none other than Kashmiri chiles, without the addition of potatoes, prepared by an actual Goan in Margao, and not a Bangladeshi short-order cook on Manhattan’s East Sixth Street? If *bulgogi*, must it be closer to the version prepared by the expert chefs at the Shilla Hotel’s Sorabol Restaurant in Seoul, South Korea, with thinly sliced rib eye marinated in rice wine and Nashi pear, rather than the Rachael Ray version, which calls for a whole flank steak rubbed with McCormick Montreal Steak Seasoning, served atop a bed of faux kimchi, a godawful mess of sautéed bok choy, red bell peppers, and canned sauerkraut?⁵⁵ (Surely if the gastronomic apocalypse is indeed at hand, the slouching rough beast, its *30 Minute Meals* and *\$40 a Day* come round at last, has to be Rachael Ray, doesn’t it?) Is the qualitative gulf between *this* and *that*—between what could be called apocryphal gastronomy and authentic gastronomy—unmistakably self-evident, irrefutable, and as wide as the Orient itself? Bottom line: do authentic foods simply taste better?

To attempt to answer these questions, let alone pose them, is to play along in a game of make-believe; it is to put one’s faith in the fictive or imaginary as a discursive strategy for making sense of and coping with the world as it is. It is to deliberately reenact the conversation between Lady Brett Ashley and Jake Barnes, the accidental platonic lovers, as they ride off into the Madrid sunset in the back of a taxi at the end of Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*. “Oh Jake, we could have had such a damned good time together,” the wanton Brett says wistfully. “Yes,” the impuissant Jake replies. “Isn’t it pretty to think so?”⁵⁶

Likewise, isn’t it pretty to think of the eternal virtue and wholesomeness of gastronomic authenticity, pretty to cling to a vision of wholly discrete

foodscapes undamaged by the passing of time and the ceaselessness of human activities? To contemporary diners, the answer to the question “What should I eat?” is unduly complicated, as chronicled by Michael Pollan in his gastro-opus, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. “When you can eat just about anything nature has to offer,” Pollan reminds us, “deciding what you should eat will inevitably stir anxiety.” Shall I eat organic or conventional, wild or farmed? Should I remain a carnivore or convert to lacto-vegetarianism, or perhaps veganism? Pollan compares the plight of today’s American diner to a long-ago hunter-gatherer contemplating the edibility of a wild mushroom picked off the ground, with the supermarket aisle replacing the forest floor. We select a packaged victual, eyeball the baffling label, and fret over the cryptography of “cage-free,” “range-fed,” “TBHQ,” and “xanthan gum.”⁵⁷ Enter the salve of culinary nostalgia, accompanied by authoritative reassurances in the form of connoisseurship of authenticity. If we feel hemmed in by the minefield of synthetic and potentially toxic foodstuffs that clutters our edible environment, then the promise of gastronomic authenticity is a welcomed portal that leads us to a land of milk, honey, and incredibly scrumptious heirloom tomatoes.

To desire to eat authenticity is to combat the weariness of the modern condition as an endless romantic might, disdainful of the present and wistful of the past. The trick is to pull this off as Jake Barnes would, with *aficion*, or passion backed by thorough knowledge of a subject, and in a manner that would gain you entrance into Montoya’s hotel, where the true bullfighters come to stay each year. Accordingly, you must at all costs avoid coming off like the drippy Robert Cohn, former Princeton middle-weight boxing champion and failed knight of latter-day chivalry. (In other words, you must be a culinary Indiana Jones, à la Anthony Bourdain of the Travel Channel’s *No Reservations*, and not a mere culinary tourist, à la Jeff Smith of PBS’ *Frugal Gourmet*.) You must be worthy of having your photograph framed by Montoya and hung on his wall, not thrown into his desk drawer. As Jake said of true *aficion*, “there was no password, no set questions that could bring it out.”⁵⁸ Likewise, gastronomic authenticity is something that is defined as either is or isn’t; like all cultural matter that depends on taste, either you have it or you don’t. As the noted African art dealer Henri Kamer has said of connoisseurship and expertise, you must have an “instinct for quality,” “a sixth sense” with which “to feel the quality.”

And while much can be gained through the study of books and firsthand field experience, as far as Kamer is concerned, “taste and a feeling of quality are never acquired”; it is, rather, “innate.”⁵⁹

To attach one’s faith to gastronomic authenticity, to borrow an allusion from Milan Kundera, is to prefer the “unbearable heaviness” to the “unbearable lightness” of food, but not in a sense of richness of ingredients or tallying calories. It is the Beethovenian *ess muss sein* view of food, of believing that food must be a certain way, that it has to adhere to a prescribed order of things.⁶⁰ Arjun Appadurai contends that authenticity “measures the degree to which something is more or less what it *ought* to be.” To “ought” I would add *must, shall, should*. The alternative modals—*may, could, might, can*—are too capricious for such a weighty rhetorical game. But given that authenticity is a “norm of some sort,” Appadurai wonders who or what exactly—to borrow a George W. Bush-ism—is the decider? Does authenticity emerge from the thing itself? Is it an “immanent norm, emerging somehow from the cuisine itself? Or is it an external norm, reflecting some imposed gastronomic standard? If it is an immanent norm, who is its authoritative voice: the professional cook? the average consumer? the gourmand? the housewife? If it is an imposed norm, who is its privileged voice: the connoisseur of exotic food? the tourist? the ordinary participant in a neighborhood cuisine? the cultivated eater from a distant one?”⁶¹ Unable to come up with satisfactory answers, Appadurai likens authenticity to a “mirage,” which the diner obsessively pursues even as it “invariably vanishes just when we think we have it” within our reach.

In this respect, authenticity is the White Whale of modern epicurism, tirelessly pursued by hungry Ahabs (e.g., cosmopolitan foodies and displaced migrants) in search of the perfect “native” meal despite heavy tolls of spiritual anguish and material oblation. Authenticity is also Godot, the anticipated company that never manages to arrive despite encouraging rumors, signs, and promises. When something does finally arrive, accompanied by extortionate fanfare, it rarely—if truly ever—lives up to expectations. Unlike a Snicker’s candy bar, it never really quite satisfies. The best that can be hoped for is a conciliatory simulacrum of some uncanny essence that is hankered for, a diminutive but true-to-scale proxy of the thing itself, say, the Eiffel Tower on the Las Vegas Strip in place of the genuine article on the Champ de Mars, with one crucial difference: imagine Alexander Gustave Eiffel never built a tower, that the Exposition

Universelle never took place, that the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce made it all up. Imagine if what happens in Vegas really doesn't happen at all.

Had John Berger opted to write *Ways of Tasting* instead of *Ways of Seeing*, he might have equated the desire for culinary authenticity with the bogus religiosity of food, with full-color illustrations of how the fear of the present—the fear of the demise of authentic dining experiences due to modernity, globalization, and industrialization of food—leads to the mystification of the past, where inequalities appear noble, hierarchies thrilling, and everything is magically delicious.⁶² This is a condition unique to modernity that I call the cult of gastronomic authenticity, a quasi-religious, fashion-driven system of veneration directed toward a particular set of comestibles, commonly organized along a racial, ethnic, national, or regional axis. I use the term “cult” quite deliberately, as I wish to maximize the “shamanistic” or “priestly” dimensions of gastronomic authorities who wield a special kind of cultural, economic, and emotional power over not only the words that come out of their mouths, but also the viands that go into ours. A pronounced characteristic of the system is an excessive admiration for and pursuits of culinary elements that faithfully re-create or attempt to resemble undisputed origins. As Appadurai puts it, authenticity “seems always to appear just after its subject matter has been significantly transformed” and is indicative of a profound doubt over a culinary tradition that is believed to have undergone some sort of inimical disturbance.⁶³ The result is a search for the so-called authentic, if not original, version of a cultural product deemed to be damaged, contaminated, or interrupted via imaginative travel to a place and time assumed to be more glorious, faraway, and bygone.

Here, I follow the semantic lead of Edward Said, who, in *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, describes *origin*—in contrast to *beginning*—as “a unique miracle” that “cannot be duplicated or incarnated within the absolute boundaries of human life.” Said posits that between the words “origin” and “beginning” “lies a constantly changing system of meanings,” where the former possesses a more “passive” meaning and the latter a more “active” one. “Origin” is a term that is almost “theological,” Said argues, “in that it must be understood in the strictest sense possible.” This is the word best suited to buttress mythological beliefs or religious entitlements, systems that are diminished by rigorous demands of reason or ocular proof. “Beginning,” however, is “eminently secular, or gentile, continuing

activities.” In short, while origin concerns itself with what we construe to be mythical, mystical, or sacred, beginning inaugurates something temporally historical. (E.g., while the origin of all human souls may be attributable to biblical Eve, it can be said that the beginning of all *Homo sapiens* is mitochondrial Eve.) “To complicate matters further,” Said asserts, “we generally locate origins before beginnings, since the Origin is a latent state from which the beginnings of action move forward: retrospectively considered, then, the Origin is a condition or state that permits beginning.” The power of origin, therefore, is arbitrary, if not divine, and beginning is often placed under its rhetorical jurisdiction. Given the passivity of ideas that rely on claims of origins and the original, Said even goes so far as to say that they “ought to be avoided” in honest criticism.⁶⁴

Unless, of course, you believe in magic or the occult, upon which, I believe, transcendental notions such as culinary authenticity rely. All food-related claims of authenticity are passively derived through a narrative of origin, which transports the modern eater back to the golden era of human gastronomy, a mythical time when every fruit was organic and livestock hormone free—a prelapsarian Larder of Eden, if you will. The empty stomach gives way to the restless tongue, which in turn sits second fiddle to the bored ear. The decision behind each bite of food must be accompanied by a credible Scheherazade story—be it a creation myth, a narrative of origin, a chain of custody, or a documentable *terroir*—in order for another to be taken. Foods haloed with the rose-colored aura of nostalgia, often for someone else’s invented past, is the holy grail of today’s recreational diners and forlorn expatriates, whose need for subsistence is trumped by a need to fill a more urgent spiritual void.

To cope with the unbearable ennui of the present, we must travel to a nobler if not more vibrant past so that a worthwhile future might be secured—or so we are told. In this regard, culinary authenticity functions as a time-travel vehicle, and in the driver’s seat are culinary authorities whose job is to manipulate and profit from this arrangement. This is not to say that the ceaseless activities of gastronomic professionals are necessarily dishonest entrepreneurship, however. They are, rather, savvy capitalists who know exactly who their customers are (hopeless romantics) and know exactly what they want (another delectable bite). They are also lowbrow versions of high modernists, charged with the awesome task of bringing the impenetrable poetics of luminaries such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Thomas Keller down to the pews.

Whence Sushi?

Unlike sukiyaki or tempura, “sushi is completely Japanese,” writes Sylvia Lovegren, author of *Fashionable Foods: Seven Decades of Food Fad*, a book chronicling US food crazes from the 1920s to the 1990s. Suki-yaki, the best-known Japanese dish in the United States before World War II, is either Dutch or Portuguese in origin, she asserts, and remained a “foreign” dish in Japan for over a century after having been introduced to the islands in the sixteenth century. Another well-known Japanese dish, tempura, was also introduced to Japan in the sixteenth century by the Portuguese, and it too remained “foreign” for a century, until the Japanese adopted it as “one of their own favorite foods.” According to Lovegren, the origin of sushi, by contrast, is strictly insular: “Some say sushi was invented, much like the Occidental sandwich, by Japanese gamblers too busy to tear themselves away from the gaming tables to eat. Others say that vinegared rice was used to separate layers of salted fish, and when a hungry worker tasted the rice, sushi was born. Whichever story is true, sushi is completely Japanese.”⁶⁵ Based on Lovegren’s line of thought, it is the place of origin and the moment of inception that determine whether an item of food is “Japanese” or “foreign.” In her view, neither sukiyaki nor tempura, although having thoroughly been assimilated into the nation’s gastronomy for over a century, is wholly Japanese, given its European origins. What makes sushi completely Japanese is that some autochthonous inhabitants of Japan (e.g., a Japanese gambler) are principally, if not solely, responsible for its birth, even if the details of that birth are murky, to say the least, as evidenced by her use of “some say” and “others say” in the narrative.

Lovegren’s sketchy account of sushi’s origin differs dramatically from Theodore Bestor’s more specialized rendering, in which the modern form of sushi is linked to an atavistic sushi that survives today as *funazushi*, a regional specialty from Shiga Prefecture near Kyoto.⁶⁶ (*Funa* is a freshwater fish, a type of carp, and is most strongly associated with Lake Biwa, located about six miles east of Kyoto at the nearest point.) According to Naomichi Ishige, the origin of the word “sushi” is linked to this original sushi.⁶⁷ In point of fact, *funazushi* is the best-known example of *narezushi*, a fermented fish product that takes months and often over a year to prepare. After capture, the *funa* is salted and packed inside a crock between layers of vinegared rice. Over time, lactic acid is produced by the rice,

which essentially pickles the fish and keeps it from spoiling. This method of fish preservation coincided with the introduction of rice cultivation in Japan during “prehistoric times,” assert Kinjiro Omae and Yuzuru Tachibana. They also note that the rice of narezushi was discarded by the ancients, and it was not until the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that the people of Japan grew not only impatient with the long duration of fermentation but began to feel that the entire undertaking was a waste of an extremely valuable commodity, namely rice.⁶⁸ Bestor, meanwhile, relates that culinary historians date the origins of sushi in the form of funazushi not to prehistoric times but to “perhaps as early as the seventeenth century.” He also stresses that “the rice itself was simply discarded before the fish was eaten.”⁶⁹

The fact that this earliest sushi was one in which the rice was not consumed but cast aside is significant for a simple reason: as Trevor Corson reminds us in *The Zen of Fish*, the term “sushi” does not, by definition, entail fish, raw or otherwise, as commonly assumed by most Americans. To the Japanese, the essential component of sushi is “rice seasoned with rice vinegar, sugar, and salt,” and “any food made with this seasoned rice can be called sushi.”⁷⁰ Corson finds this to be “ironic because the original sushi chefs threw the sushi rice away.”⁷¹ (Provided this is true, Corson is unaware of another irony, namely the title of his book. If indeed his book is about sushi, why not call it *The Zen of Seasoned Rice* instead of *The Zen of Fish*?) Michael Ashkenazi and Jeanne Jacob reinforce the centrality of rice in sushi by repeating the words of an unnamed sushi chef: “Rice is the soul of sushi.”

Question: if vinegared rice is indeed what makes sushi *sushi*, would it make sense to consider the precise moment when freshly (i.e., unfermented) seasoned rice was first consumed (with or without fish, raw or otherwise) as the birth of modern sushi? If so, when exactly did this occur? Not until the Tokugawa period, according to Bestor.⁷² (He, however, does not specify exactly when during the Tokugawa period, which lasted from 1603 to 1867.) And the individual responsible for introducing freshly vinegared rice that would be paired with unfermented (i.e., fresh) raw fish? According to Omae and Tachibana, it was the brainchild of Yoshiichi Matsumoto, a doctor who lived in Yotsuya, Edo, and was employed by Ietsuna (1641–1680), the fourth Tokugawa shogun.⁷³

And what about the origin of perhaps the most iconic sushi of all, nigirizushi, the bite-sized block of rice with a slice of raw fish placed on top?

According to Bestor, nigirizushi “became the rage of Edo in the 1820s or 1830s” and is thus also known as *edomaezushi*. (Edo was renamed Tokyo in 1868 by the Meiji government.) Although he briefly alludes to Hanaya Yohei (1799–1858), “who invented or perfected the technique in 1824” at his Edo shop, Bestor does not elaborate further on this famed sushi chef but instead refers to this account merely as a “common story” of nigirizushi’s origins, strongly implying that there are others versions out there.⁷⁴ Omae and Tachibana augment the story by calling nigirizushi “an instant improvement on the older, more venerable sushi dishes,” adding that the stall that Yohei opened in the “bustling Ryogoku district of Edo caught on at once.”⁷⁵

But even if Matsumoto’s status as the originator of vinegared rice and Hanaya Yohei’s as the father of nigirizushi can be authenticated, the precise origin of sushi itself still remains unsettled due largely to the legacy of narezushi, which, contrary to Lovegren’s Japanese gambler hypothesis, did not spontaneously originate in Japan. By all accounts, this so-called earliest version of sushi instead was brought to Japan by ancient settlers hailing from the Mekong River basin of Southeast Asia some twenty-five hundred miles away. Narezushi, which is essentially fermented fish, is in this regard directly related to other fermented fish products, most notably fish sauce (e.g., *kecap ikan*, *nampla*, *nuoc mam*) and fish paste (e.g., *bagoong*, *kapi*, *padek*), that are key elements to Vietnamese, Thai, Filipino, Cambodian, and other Southeast Asian cuisines.

If modern-day sushi, which typically uses the freshest and the least adulterated seafood, bears no resemblance to fish sauce, look no further than the vinegar in the sushi rice for a reminder of this common culinary ancestry.⁷⁶ (The vinegar is said to mimic the acidic note typical of the taste imparted by the lactic acid in fermented foods.) In this regard, sushi’s origin might very well be tied to the *shiokara*, the “salt-cured preserve of fish, mollusks, and their entrails,”⁷⁷ which is the Japanese version of fermented seafood. In his retelling of the story of sushi’s origin, Corson likewise locates the place of sushi’s birth to somewhere along the Mekong River, “in what is now landlocked southern China, Laos, and northern Thailand.” As for sushi’s date of birth, he takes us back as far as the Jomon period, to 3500 BC. And although it is unclear when sushi, in the form of narezushi, exactly made its way from southern China to Japan, Corson cites an AD 718 government document listing sushi as an acceptable form of tax payment, indicating that sushi goes at least that far back.⁷⁸

Question: given the probability that sushi in fact did not spring forth autochthonously in Japan but that its origins lie somewhere in Southeast Asia, can it really be considered completely, purely, or indigenously Japanese? That said, how do we know for sure that the trail stops in Southeast Asia? If we rewind the story even further, where might we end up? India? The Fertile Crescent? The savannahs of East Africa? The Garden of Eden?

Whence California Roll?

Fast forward to the twentieth century, to the late 1960s. By all accounts, this was when California roll first came into existence. But as Sasha Issenberg, author of *The Sushi Economy: Globalization and the Making of a Modern Delicacy*, puts it, the “story of the California roll’s creation varies slightly depending on who is telling it.”⁷⁹ In 1989 Molly O’Neill of the *New York Times* wrote that in Los Angeles’ sushi bars “Japanese immigrants used American avocados to confect the ‘California roll.’” This was part of what she called the “Chop Suey Syndrome” to describe the process of “Americanizing the Exotic.” The Chinese American chop suey, Afghan American kofta kebab, Italian American lasagna (laden with meat), Tex-Mex nachos (piled high with beans, cheese, guacamole, and sour cream), and Japanese American California roll were cited as examples of how “new arrivals”—meaning immigrants—often play the role of “culinary ambassadors” by fabricating versions of traditional dishes that are “easily produced and tuned to current tastes.” But before these dishes “move from pushcarts to storefronts and on toward mainstream America,” they first must be “tamed” in order to “suit the shy American palate.” By making the “exotic familiar,” O’Neill argues, immigrants transform these ancestral dishes into “ethnic icons” that “say more about where immigrants have arrived than where they have left.”⁸⁰

O’Neill’s rhetorical use of chop suey is significant in that the dish has long been regarded as the paragon of a shoddy “ethnic” American dish that bears little or no resemblance to anything eaten by a so-called true native back in an immigrant’s place of origin. Is California roll the chop suey of Japanese food? Is it a jerry-built invention of Japanese immigrants who settled in America over a century ago? Does it bear only the slightest resemblance to the “authentic” sushi in its ancestral homeland? Indeed, perhaps more than any other dish associated with Japan, it is California

roll, made tame by subtraction of raw fish and made familiar by addition of avocados, that plays the role of cultural ambassador to Japanese food in America.

The chop suey–California roll analogy, however, is muddled by the question of California roll’s origins (not to mention chop suey’s).⁸¹ Specifically, whence did it arise? Were the originators in fact Japanese *Americans*, as Molly O’Neill presumes, or were they Japanese *nationals*, who just happened to be in California at the time of California roll’s creation? In other words, does California roll say more about how Japanese immigrants and their descendants manifest their cultural presence in the United States or about how, in the words of Iris-Aya Laemmerhirt, a traditional Japanese food such as sushi is “reimagined in the United States” and becomes a participant in “a transnational exchange, thereby communicating across cultural and national boundaries”?⁸² Or perhaps the two processes are inextricably linked and inseparable, like the two sides of a single sheet of nori?

What appears to be undisputed with regard to California roll’s origins is the birthplace—the Little Tokyo neighborhood of Los Angeles at a restaurant called Tokyo Kaikan, first opened in 1963. As for the individual—or individuals—credited as creator, according to David Kamp it was a pair of Japanese sushi chefs named Ichiro Mashita and Teruo Imaizumi.⁸³ Trevor Corson also identifies Tokyo Kaikan, which he calls “one of the first restaurants to open a sushi bar, and the premier Japanese eatery in L.A.” during that time, as the place of origin. He, however, names only a single person as the creator—Ichiro Mashita.⁸⁴ Issenberg, meanwhile, names both men but refers to Mashita as “Chef” and Imaizumi as “his broadcheeked and sideburned young assistant.” He also points out that the two men were there on a business assignment, meaning they were not immigrants. Tokyo Kaikan was part of “the EIWA Group, a Tokyo-based food-business conglomerate that had purchased a Chinese restaurant going out of business in First Street in Little Tokyo,” and Mashita and Imaizumi “had been imported from EIWA’s Tokyo restaurants.”⁸⁵

Thus we have a rough consensus, at least among Issenberg, Kamp, and Corson, on an approximate *when* (the 1960s), a most likely *where* (Tokyo Kaikan in Little Tokyo), and *who* (Mashita and Imaizumi). To better understand California roll’s origins, however, we need to also understand *why* and *how* this concoction came to exist in the first place. This is crucial if, as the sushi cognoscenti believe, origin is in fact inextricably linked to

authenticity. What inspired Mashita (and Imaizumi) to put avocado, an ingredient hitherto unacquainted with the concept of sushi, in the mix? Who was it first intended for? That is to say, was it designed for Tokyo Kaikan's clientele of Japanese nationals, who presumably knew what authentic sushi was by the virtue of their Japanese nationality, or was it for benighted Americans, for whom sushi was essentially culinary exotica? If the former, perhaps California roll can be rescued from its current low status and reputation as a dubious sushi and allowed to join the ethereal rank enjoyed by other so-called proper sushi types. If the latter, perhaps California roll can be justifiably compared to chop suey and is deserving of all the disparagement heaped upon it. Whichever the case, if in fact Mashita and Imaizumi were the inventors, then the dish was not the product of Japanese American culinary adaptation as Molly O'Neill suggests, and thus it would be erroneous to lump California roll with chop suey, kofta kebab, meat-laden lasagna, Tex-Mex nachos, and other "exotic familiar" dishes made possible through immigrant entrepreneurship.

According to one myth of origin, an executive of the Japanese conglomerate that owned Tokyo Kaikan came to America and suggested that sushi be made to appeal to Caucasians. Mashita and his assistant took heed and came up with a king-crab leg, avocado, and mayonnaise amalgam. Issenberg, however believes this to be "company lore" and offers another story, placing Mashita's culinary genius at the center. During the 1960s in California, fresh tuna was available only during the summer months. When his American (i.e., Caucasian) customers, having taken to the taste of *toro* (a cut from the fatty belly of tuna), complained of its absence during the off months, Mashita experimented with fatty beef and chicken but eventually settled on silky avocado, "accented, for good measure, by creamy mayonnaise"—and presto, ersatz *toro*!⁸⁶ "Mashita first prepared the avocado as *nigirizushi*, placing a slice upon a mound of rice," writes Issenberg. Seeing his customers taken aback by the odd green hue of avocado, he decided to roll it up along with king crab, creating the *maki-zushi* form that we are familiar with today. (Today's inside-out form, a type of *maki-zushi* called *uramaki*, which has an outer layer of rice and fillings surrounded by nori inside, reportedly occurred at a later date.) Issenberg notes that California roll was not cheap at first, as avocado was relatively expensive at the time, as was king crab, which was shipped from Alaska. Industrial surimi (e.g., imitation crabmeat) used in most mass-market versions today was not yet available.⁸⁷

Kamp, meanwhile, tells a slightly different story, one that takes place in 1964. He begins by quoting directly from an interview he conducted with Imaizumi, Mashita's assistant: "It wasn't because we were trying to make something more palatable for Americans, but because of the poor variety of fish back then. . . . The tuna was just a seasonal thing in LA, available in the summertime, so we were thinking, 'What else can we use? What else can we look for?'" According to Imaizumi, then, California roll was originally intended for Japanese customers. "Cut into little cubes, ripe avocado flesh had an unctuousness that approximated the texture of fatty fish, and the two sushi chefs combined it with king crab, cucumber, and ginger, serving their creation as a *hand roll*," writes Kamp.⁸⁸ The Japanese diners were initially wary of the absence of raw fish. But soon a new clientele emerged: "Caucasian diners—executives and financiers who had business with Japanese companies, and fearless diners emboldened by the new spirit of ethnic adventure afoot in the seventies." Apparently it was they who would take California roll into the culinary stratosphere and make it into the most popular form of sushi ever invented.⁸⁹



Premade supermarket California roll. The classic version consists of avocado, imitation crabmeat, and cucumber rolled "inside out." Photo by the author.

Another detail worth noting: provided Kamp's version is correct, the original California roll was not the more common type of makizushi, such as *futomaki* or *uramaki*, that is rolled into a cylinder with the aid of a bamboo mat (called *makisu*) and cut into bite-sized pieces. Rather, it was a type of makizushi called *temakizushi*, which is "rolled by hand" and is typically conical in shape. This distinction appears to be reinforced by what might be the first ever mention of California roll in the *New York Times*. In a 1982 review of a Japanese restaurant in Glen Cove, New York, Florence Fabricant refers to California roll as "a West Coast invention for those who may be timid about trying sushi." Although she does not cite the term, she unmistakably implies that it was a *temakizushi*, describing it as "the size of a small ice cream cone, rolled in a thin sheet of papery pressed seaweed and filled with rice, cooked crabmeat, avocado and mayonnaise."⁹⁰

Corson offers yet another variation of California roll's origins. Like Kamp, he asserts that California roll was not initially created to appease timid American eaters, but to satisfy discriminating Japanese palates. Tokyo Kaikan's sushi bar, he notes, primarily served a Japanese—not American or Japanese American, even—clientele. Unable to obtain toro, Mashita found in avocados a stand-in that "melts in the mouth sort of like fatty tuna." He first mixed the avocado with shrimp before settling on crabmeat. While Issenberg remarked that avocados were expensive at the time, Corson claims they were available by the "truckloads" and presumably quite cheap—this, after all, was California. And Mashita prepared his invention as a traditional sushi roll (i.e., makizushi) to remind his Japanese customers of the fatty tuna back home. "According to one report, three months passed before someone came up with the name 'California roll,'" writes Corson.⁹¹

Let us say we follow either Kamp's or Corson's narrative to its logical end: it turns out California roll is not so American after all. That is to say, the inventors were not amateurish Americans but highly trained Japanese sushi chefs employed at a highly respected Japanese restaurant that catered to highly knowledgeable Japanese eaters. The fact that the act of creation took place in Los Angeles is perhaps incidental and is meaningful only so far as it involved avocados. Had Mashita and Imaizumi been stationed elsewhere, say, somewhere in Europe, perhaps they would have found another substitution for toro that was just as ingenious and appetizing.

Then again, perhaps there indeed is something exceptional about the taste and mouth-feel of avocado, allowing it to be a singularly ideal

simulacrum of toro. That said, perhaps there is something singularly exceptional about the state of California, the city of Los Angeles, and the neighborhood of Little Tokyo. After all, where else during the 1960s could so many disparate factors—a growing number of expatriated Japanese businessmen longing for a familiar meal, a truckload of cheap avocados, a seasonal shortage of toro, a pair of highly trained sushi chefs sent to a culinary hinterland by their corporate employers, and an ethnic business district established by emigrant Japanese who settled in America earlier—have so perfectly collided to produce what is arguably the king of all sushi in the twenty-first century?

If indeed the priests of the cult of culinary authenticity have it right, if origin is indelibly linked to authenticity and authenticity cannot be detached from quality, perhaps it is possible to argue that California roll is an authentic sushi. The ostensibly disparate components of California roll, fused together using meticulous, time-honored sushi preparation methods, did somehow commingle perfectly, and thus was loosed upon the world something not only utterly cutting edge but also wonderfully familiar, and, given its principally Japanese pedigree, utterly authentic. So let us not hate California roll for its popularity, for its ubiquity. Let us look beyond the illusion of its dubiousness, for it is as authentic, and therefore as delicious, as Mexican chiles, Japanese soy sauce, and Chinese noodles, is it not?

Yes, it's pretty to think so.