

# VANITY FAIR

## LETTER FROM TOKYO



Maguro no kaiwa, the almost surgical process of disassembling tuna, is practiced by a tuna dealer. The average bluefin yields 10,000 pieces of sushi. *Photograph by Tetsuya Miura.*

## If You Knew Sushi

In search of the ultimate sushi experience, the author plunges into the frenzy of the world's biggest seafood market—Tokyo's Tsukiji, where a bluefin tuna can fetch more than \$170,000 at auction—and discovers the artistry between ocean and plate, as well as some fishy surprises.

by **NICK TOSCHES** June 2007

**I**t looks like a samurai sword, and it's almost as long as he is tall. His hands are on the hilt. He raises and steadies the blade.

Two apprentices help to guide it. Twelve years ago, when it was new, this knife was much longer, but the apprentices' daily hours of tending to it, of sharpening and polishing it, have reduced it greatly.

It was made by the house of Masahisa, sword-makers for centuries to the samurai of the Minamoto, the founders of the first shogunate. In the 1870s, when the power of the shoguns was broken and the swords of the samurai were outlawed, Masahisa began making these things, longer and more deadly than the samurai swords of old.

The little guy with the big knife is Tsunenori Iida. He speaks not as an individual but as an emanation, the present voice, of the generations whose blood flows in him and who held the long knife in lifetimes before him, just as he speaks of Masahisa as if he were the same Masahisa who wrought the first samurai sword, in the days of dark mist. Thus it is that he tells me he's been here since 1861, during the Tokugawa shogunate, when this city, Tokyo, was still called Edo.

Iida-san is the master of the house of Hicho, one of the oldest and most venerable of the *nakaoroshi gyosha*,

intermediate wholesalers of tuna, or tuna middlemen, if you will.

The tuna that lies before Iida-san on its belly was swimming fast and heavy after mackerel a few days ago under cold North Atlantic waves. In an hour or so, its flesh will be dispatched in parcels to the various sushi chefs who have chosen to buy it. Iida-san is about to make the first of the expert cuts that will quarter the 300-pound tuna lengthwise.

His long knife, with the mark of the maker Masahisa engraved in the shank of the blade, connects not only the past to the present but also the deep blue sea to the sushi counter.

Everything around him seems to turn still for a breath as he draws the blade toward him and lays open the tuna with surgical precision. And everything around him is a lot, for we are in the frantic heart of a madness unto itself: the wild, engulfing, blood-drenched madness of Tsukiji.

Until the summer of 1972, bluefin tuna was basically worthless to American fishermen. Nobody ever ate it, and its sole commercial use was as an ingredient in canned cat food. The only tuna that people ate, the white stuff, also in cans, was processed from smaller, albacore tuna, and even that probably would not have gotten into the American diet if a California cannery hadn't run out of sardines and begun selling it in 1903.

Theodore C. Bestor is the author of *Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World*, the standard work on the subject. He, the chair of the Anthropology Department of Harvard, and I, the chair of nothing, spent some time together in Tokyo. It was Ted who taught me how to correctly pronounce the name of this place: "tskee-gee." (In her new book, *The Sushi Economy*, Sasha Issenberg says it's "pronounced roughly like 'squeegee,'" but it's not. Her book, however, is an engaging one.)

"I grew up in central Illinois," Ted told me, "and as a kid I don't remember ever eating fresh fish. I'm not sure I ever even saw one. As far as I knew, fish came frozen, already breaded and cut into oblongs for frying. And tuna, of course, was something that appeared only in cans like hockey pucks and ended up in sandwiches. I had absolutely no idea of what a tuna looked like, its size or anything else."

Tuna is the main event at Tsukiji, but everything from the sea—fresh fish, live fish, shrimp—is auctioned and sold here. At five in the morning, preceding the tuna auction, in another hall, there's the sea-urchin-roe auction. The most prized *uni* come from Hokkaido and its islands, and it's said that if you want to taste the best, freshest *uni* you must go there and eat it straight from the sea. But much of the *uni* laid out here in little boxes, often repackaged in Hokkaido, comes from California or Maine. Only in July, when sea urchins from the United States aren't available, are these boxes of *uni* not present. Color means more than size, and men roam the hall before the auction, smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee from paper cups, searching for *uni* of the most vibrant orange-golden hues. The northern-Japanese *uni* can fetch about ¥7,000, or about \$60, for a little, 100-gram box, while the Maine *uni* go for much less, from a low of about ¥800 to a high of about ¥1,500, or between \$6 and \$13. Being from Newark, I wonder if they ever douse these things with dye.

This place, the all of it—formally the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Central Wholesale Market, a name by which few know it—is, as Ted Bestor puts it, the "fishmonger for the seven seas." Its history reaches back 400 years, to the Nihonbashi fish market, which was located not far from the present site of Tsukiji, in the Chuo Ward. On September 1, 1923, Tokyo was devastated by the Great Kanto Earthquake, which killed more than 140,000 people. Nihonbashi was gone, and a new market came into being in the town of Tsukiji, within Tokyo. Tsunenori Iida, whose great-grandfather had a fish-selling stall at the old market, is one of only four men whose family businesses began at Nihonbashi and are still in operation at Tsukiji today.

It's hard to say how much of what is sold at Tsukiji is exported to high-class sushi chefs abroad.

"My guess, and it is a guess," says Ted Bestor, "would be that the total amounts are probably on the order of a thousand or two kilograms worldwide each day. This is minuscule by comparison with the roughly two million kilograms of seafood Tsukiji handles every day."

Two million kilos is about four and a half million pounds, more than 2,000 tons. The Fulton Fish Market, in New York City, the second-largest fish market in the world, moves only 115 tons a year, an average of less than half a ton each working day.

Tsukiji occupies about 22½ hectares on the Sumida River—about 55½ acres, or well over two million square feet: bigger than 40 football fields. Near the Kaiko Bridge entrance, tucked away in relative serenity, an altar bell is rung by rope at the Namiyoke Jinja, a small Shinto shrine whose name can be translated as the Shrine to Protect from Waves. Outside the shrine are stone monuments honoring the seafood that passes through Tsukiji: a big black sculpted fish, a big egg-like roe. Marketmen leave offerings of sake at these deific figures. And for a few yen a miniature scroll of oracular hoodoo can be had. It was thus, after I had genuflected before the *uni* god, that it was revealed to me that the last dangerous year that a man passes through in life is his 62nd, while a woman is free of danger after 38.

**A**t the main gate, not far from the shrine but far from serenity, a sign warns entrants to PLEASE PAY ATTENTION TO THE TRAFFIC and WALK CAREFULLY because THE MARKET IS CROWDED WITH TRUCKS AND SPECIAL VEHICLES and THE FLOOR IN THE MARKET IS VERY SLIPPERY.

Big trucks, little trucks, forklifts. And, everywhere, these things called turret trucks: high-lift vehicles designed to negotiate narrow passages and aisles. Old, diesel-fueled turrets; new, battery-powered turrets: every one of them driven by a single standing man who seems invariably to have both hands occupied with lighting up a smoke rather than with steering as he careens round and among the other vehicles that lurch and speed every which way, a surprise at every turn, over the bloody cobblestones amid the pedestrian traffic of the rest of the 60,000 or so people who work at Tsukiji. While no-hands driving seems to be purely optional, smoking at times does seem to be obligatory, and smokers outnumber by far the many no-smoking signs that are posted everywhere. Only the lowly Chinese stevedores who push or draw carts are deprived of the option of no-hands driving, and they squint through the smoke of teeth-clenched cigarettes as they trudge.

## Lethal Delicacy

Wandering through Tsukiji in the good company of Ted Bestor and Tomohiro Asakawa, the senior commercial specialist of the Fisheries Service of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) at the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo, I become aware that the full array of the Lord's fishy chillun on sale here is beyond knowing.

There are shrimp from everywhere and of every kind, live and sprightly, in open plastic sacks in Styrofoam boxes with bubbling aeration tubes: red Japanese shrimp, sweet Japanese shrimp (*ama-ebi*), striped Asian *kuruma* shrimp, along with Alaskan shrimp and Maine shrimp on ice, and frozen shrimp of every size and sort. Live lobsters in boxes of wood shavings; abalone; fresh and frozen marlin, fresh and frozen swordfish, from Japanese waters or caught off Cape Town or Iran. The swordfish, Tom tells me, is not too popular here for sushi. Most of it goes to mountain resorts that serve it as sashimi to tourists.

There are tanks of live fugu swimming madly about. These are the costly blowfish with neurotoxic poison in their genital areas, a sometimes lethal delicacy which a sushi chef needs a special license to prepare and serve. Tetrodotoxin,

the poison in fugu, can also produce a sense of euphoria when ingested in less than lethal amounts. The best fugu is from the waters of Kyushu, in the South.

In other tanks, live sea bass (*suzuki*), live sea bream (*tai*), and live flounder (*hirame*). There are flying fish (*tobiuo*), Pacific mackerel (*saba*), Spanish mackerel (*sawara*), and horse mackerel (*aji*).

From a profile of "the Controller in Charge of Horse Mackerel" in the corporate literature of Chuo Gyorui, one of the largest wholesalers here: "When Mitsuo Owada joined Chuo Gyorui in 1974, he became charmed by horse mackerel. Owada used to eat several horse mackerel almost every day.... Both shippers and buyers ... say, 'Depend on this man for horse mackerel traded at Tsukiji.'" The honored controller moves about 25 tons of horse mackerel through the market every day.

There are sardines and there are salmon, fresh from Norway and Japan. The salmon is not to be eaten raw, Tom explains, as its movement between freshwater and salt water renders it the host to many parasites. I ask him why I see no shark for sale. Shark, he says, can be eaten raw when fresh from the hook, but its muscle tissue is loaded with urea, which breaks down fast after death, releasing levels of ammonia that stink and can be toxic.

Eels: tanks, barrels, bushels, and bins of eels of all the shapes, colors, and sizes of slitheration, from the prized conger eel (*anago*) of the seas to the freshwater eel (*unagi*) of the rivers and lakes. All manner of squid—baby squid, big squid—and all manner of crabs—baby crabs, giant crabs; scallops and oysters and clams; periwinkles, cockles, and—what?—barnacles, yes, even barnacles, going for ¥1,600, or about 14 bucks, a kilo. I'd always thought these black footstalks were only an ugliness to be scraped from the hulls of old wooden ships.

"Broth," says Tom. "Some people make broth with them." He smiles, shakes his head. He apparently is not one of those people.

Giant oysters from Tsuruga Bay, with sea steaks of meat inside them; *tairagi-gai*, the enormous green mussels from the Aichi waters. Bizarre white fish laced with black, *Paraplagusia japonica*, known colloquially as "black-tongues." Sunfish intestines—chitlins of the sea—priced at ¥1,000, or about \$8.50, a kilo; grotesque scorpion fish; monkfish; freshwater turtles, which the Japanese much prefer to the saltwater kind. Amid sizzle and smoke, a guy is selling grilled tuna cheeks. From his tuna stall, Tsunenori Iida frowns on him. He says that the cheek of the tuna is eaten by poor young workers. It's their subsistence and it's not right to make money from tuna cheeks. Actually, he says, the head and tail of the tuna should be used for fertilizer.

Sheets of kombu (kelp) covered with herring roe; big white sacs of octopus roe. Among a biochromatic wealth of mysterious mollusks and other sea invertebrates of unknown nature, I see the weirdest creature I've ever seen. Now, that's a fucking organism. Tom Asakawa looks at it awhile, too.

"Sea pineapple," he says. "Attaches to rocks in the ocean. Tastes something like iodine. Sendai people like it."

It looks nothing like a pineapple. It looks like something that could exist only in a purely hallucinatory eco-system. It looks like, I don't know, maybe an otherworldly marital aid of inscrutable purpose for the brides of Satan.

"I need to eat that," I say.

"I'll see what I can do," Tom says.



And there, near the seaweed stalls, in those orange packages—yes, that's what the label says in Japanese: RESEARCH WHALING. And that's what it is: whale meat.

Twenty-four people have been to the moon. Only two have been to the deepest trench in the sea, and that was more than 45 years ago. They saw strange fish down there, and I'm sure that if those strange, abyssal fish could be brought to the surface they'd be here, at Tsukiji.

But as I said, tuna will always be the main event. The bluefin tuna, which can grow to more than 1,500 pounds and almost 12 feet in length, is a migratory fish that can be found in many parts of the world. According to Tsunenori Iida, the source of the best and most costly bluefin changes from season to season. In the winter, the most prized tuna is from the waters of northern Japan, near Oma and Hokkaido. But in the summer it is from the northeastern waters of the United States. This wasn't known in Japan until the summer of 1972, when the first such tuna was successfully brought fresh by air to Tokyo for sale at Tsukiji. (An account of the events leading up to that first successful tuna flight can be found in Sasha Issenberg's book.) Since then, fishers off the New England coast have seen the value of what used to be cat food rise to tens of thousands of dollars for a single fish. That's a lot of Puss 'n Boots.

And here, right here, let's stop trying to make sense, because very little of what is about to unfold harbors much sense.

A commercial trawler unloads its bluefin at a dock in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Awaiting the bluefin are agents of one or more of the five big fish wholesalers from Tsukiji, who set about examining the tuna.

"I tell you, Nicky, these Japanese guys, they take a little, thin slice from the tail, hold it to the light, look at it for a minute, then make an offer. God knows what they see."

This is what a Sicilian fish seller in New York once told me, describing a scene that occurs not only in Gloucester but also in ports throughout the world.

What the Japanese buying agent determines by his quick and practiced analysis of that sliver of tail is an indication of the tuna's inner color, its oil content, and the presence, if any, of parasitic disease. A smooth-grained and marbled tail is a prime indication of quality. The richness of the tuna's lipid content, its fat, can be gauged by how slippery the slice of tail feels between the fingers. Pockmarks reveal parasites. It's a complex diagnostic method that is mastered only with years of practice. The overall form and color of the tuna are also quickly assessed at the same time. The ideal of these qualities, inner and outer—the word for this ideal is *kata*—is also a bit of a mystery to outsiders.

If a tuna is deemed worthy, negotiations begin immediately. The buyer sees to it that the fish is properly gutted, packed with coolant, wrapped or sacked in polyethylene, and placed in an insulated box known as a "tuna coffin." In the case of a Gloucester catch, the tuna coffin is transported to John F. Kennedy International Airport, in New York, and secured in the refrigerated hold of the next flight to Narita International Airport, where it is unloaded and trucked to the Tsukiji market, in central Tokyo, a few days after having left the sea.



Hoya, or sea pineapple. Photograph by Tetsuya Miura.



Photograph by Tetsuya Miura.

The five big fish wholesalers at Tsukiji are also the five big auction houses at Tsukiji. In the dark of early morning, their tuna are graded and laid out in long rows on aluminum pallets in pools of blood in the big tuna-auction hall, in a quay of the main building. These tuna are from everywhere. Some were caught off the Australian coast, others were farmed in Mexico. Every one of them has the number of its grading painted on it in red. The tuna that bears the number 1 this morning is from Boston and weighs 150 kilos. No. 2 is from Spain. No. 3 is from the seaport of Sakai, south of Osaka.

Prospective bidders and their bidding agents roam the ranks of the dead fish, hunkering down here and there to peer intently into belly cavities with flashlights, and take notes.

The fish are auctioned in a squall of finger signals and utterances that are a language unto themselves. Assistants to the auctioneer execute invoices with astounding rapidity as the auctioneer's bellowing voice moves the bidding with speed from one fish to another. Bids are in yen per kilogram. These auctions are closed to the public. Tom Asakawa has hung a special permit around my neck. As we walk among the rows of tuna, Tom tells me that he has lived in Tokyo almost all his life and that, 30 or 35 years ago, long before he came to the U.S. Embassy, he worked here as a seafood importer. From the agents on the docks to the graders to the guys poking around in body cavities with flashlights, the challenge is the same: to evaluate through clues the inside of a fish that you can't simply cut open, because you don't yet own it.

## Bluefin Madness

Occasionally tuna mania overtakes an auction. Hiroyasu Ito, the president of Chuo Gyorui, the biggest of the wholesalers and auction houses in terms of sales volume, tells me of a January morning in 1999 when an Oma tuna came to auction through his firm. It appeared to be the perfect tuna, a vision of true *kata*.

Ito-san remembers that the auction started modestly at ¥9,000, or about 75 bucks, per kilo. "And then ¥10,000, ¥20,000, ¥30,000, and ¥40,000. And then three men wanted that tuna very badly." The bidding among them escalated furiously. "At ¥50,000 per kilo, one of them gave up." The remaining two continued to compete. "Ninety thousand, and then ¥100,000 was the last."

The tuna weighed 200 kilos. At ¥100,000 per kilo, the possessed bidder had paid ¥20 million—the equivalent of more than \$170,000—for a fish whose parceled meat could never recoup that amount.

"Big loss, big loss."

Tsunenori Iida remembers that unfortunate winner very well. He was a very wealthy man who was driven to have the most expensive tuna. He went bankrupt, Iida-san says, is out of the business, and is seen no more.

In December of 2005, Ito-san's company auctioned off a 285-kilo tuna from Oma for ¥39,000 per kilo: a total of ¥11,115,000, or about \$95,000—the company's second-highest auction price.

As soon as a tuna is sold at auction, it is hauled off to the buyer's stall by cart. This morning the No. 1 tuna, the 150-kilo tuna from Boston, has been won by Iida-san, who paid ¥5,700 per kilo. Given the tuna's weight of 150 kilos, this comes to ¥855,000, or a bit over \$7,250, a little less than \$23 a pound.

A tuna's quality can't truly be judged until it is laid open with the long knife—that is, until after it has been bought. Iida-san isn't so impressed with this No. 1 tuna his man has brought him. He says that its quality isn't worth its price. Nonetheless, many of his regular customers, including some of the best sushi chefs and their apprentices, have

already visited his stall, seen the tuna, and placed their orders. These include the owner of Nakahisa, in Roppongi, which Iida-san considers to be one of the three best sushi restaurants in Tokyo. (The others are in the Ginza district. They all have one thing in common: they are his patrons.)

With a smaller knife, the long quarters of the fish are cut into sections. Iida-san uses the breadth of four fingers to measure these sections before cutting.

"Generally speaking, Japanese man has eight centimeter."

The work area of the classic sushi counter is 26 centimeters deep. Three widths of Iida-san's hand equal 24 centimeters.

"Just right for the counter of 26."

Iida-san's is one of 1,677 stalls at Tsukiji, and his is one of 1,677 licenses to bid at the Tsukiji auctions and to resell what he has bought. Some of the other licensed buyers and resellers serve an international market, filling the orders of master sushi chefs in New York, Los Angeles, and elsewhere. And so it is that our bluefin tuna from Gloucester, Massachusetts, flown from New York to Tokyo, where it is auctioned, bought, and cut into pieces of three hand widths at Tsukiji, is flown back to New York and delivered—three to nine days after it has left the sea—to a sushi chef there, or even in Boston. The average bluefin can yield more than 10,000 half-ounce pieces of sushi tuna from cuts that, like cuts of beef, vary in kind, quality, and price.

The words of the late movie director Don Siegel come to mind. He once took me to a very fancy and very formal seafood restaurant in Beverly Hills. We ordered some kind of fish that was presented in phyllo pastry, into which the eyes, fins, gill lines, and scales of the fish within had been etched with exacting care. Siegel looked down at it and said, "Imagine going through all that trouble for a dead fish."

Some say that good tuna is like good beef, that aging enhances it, up to a point. As to the enhancement of the price, there is no question. From dock to auction to resale to restaurant, the price of the fish steadily increases. And, as we've seen in the case of Tsunenori Iida's No. 1 tuna of this morning, the quality of the "best" bluefin varies from day to day, and so the quality of the tuna offered by a sushi chef, be it in Tokyo or New York, who serves only the "best" is also bound to be better on one day than another. The greatest of the sushi masters will tell you that the quality of fish served as sashimi should be higher than the quality of the fish served as sushi. But this distinction seems rarely to be evident in practice, and slices from the same piece of fish are usually used for both, whether or not that piece is of the highest quality.

**F**rozen bluefin, from tuna boats with flash-freezers, are auctioned separately at Tsukiji. The hard, frost-covered tuna are inspected with the aid of *tekagi*, the hand hooks that, like rubber boots, seem to be an essential accessory among all who work here. And the subtle cutting art of *maguro no kaiwa*, "the conversation of the tuna," as practiced by Iida-san and others, is replaced by loud electric bandsawing in an outdoor area, where the frozen tuna are cut into icy five-kilo blocks and run under water to speed thawing. The auctions are smaller and less spectacular. A few buyers prefer frozen tuna, saying that flash-freezing captures the freshness of the fish at its peak.

While auction prices for fresh fish are more volatile, there is little difference in the bids for the fresh and for the frozen. Sushi eaters rarely know if what they are eating is "fresh" (having remained so on its long transoceanic journeys to and from market in and out of its coffin) or thawed. The same supplier will often provide different sushi chefs with different grades of fish, depending on what the chef wants, what sort of operation he's running. A piece of tuna sushi that goes

for 6 bucks at one restaurant and a piece of tuna that goes for 20 bucks at another restaurant may be from the same supplier but of very different quality. Likewise, a \$20 piece of sushi is not necessarily the same at one sushi restaurant as at another, if the sources are different. Some suppliers get better fish than others. As I think it says somewhere in the Bible, "He who knows dead fish shall know me." Beware always of those "spicy" rolls sold at lower-end sushi places. The spices are often used to disguise the taste of fish that is bad or going bad.

High-end retail food markets in major American cities have taken to describing their tuna as "sushi-grade." Judging by the wide range of quality represented by the fish auctioned off at a wide range of prices every day at Tsukiji, one can only ask: What *isn't* sushi-grade tuna? "The label 'sushi-grade' doesn't ensure that the fish is safe for raw consumption," advises Hiroko Shimbo in her excellent book *The Sushi Experience*. "Most fishmongers *don't* sell sushi fish." I would go further and say that the label "sushi-grade" doesn't even ensure that the fish is any good whatsoever, raw *or* cooked. Be especially wary of tuna that has a fresh, rich crimson color but a dull, gelatinous texture. This is an indication of cat-food-grade tuna, no matter what it's called. It's likely that it has been gassed with carbon monoxide, which binds with hemoglobin to arrest the browning and graying of a fish whose time, even in death, has passed.

**E**volving from a way to preserve fish in rice to a way to serve fresh fish on rice, sushi has been around for many centuries.

In the United States, where frozen fish sticks and canned albacore represented the bounty of the sea, the *uni* god has come only recently to threaten the sovereignty of Mrs. Paul and Charlie the Tuna. Today the Gorton Fisherman works for Nippon Suisan Kaisha of Tokyo.

The rise of sushi in America, and more lately in Europe, came at a time when omega-3 had turned into a shibboleth of the middle class and the so-called Mediterranean diet captured its cholesterol-ridden heart.

My grandfather's sister, my great-aunt Helen, lived well into her 90s. She enjoyed fish, and she never drank coffee, only tea. But her older brother, my great-uncle Giovanni, who lived even longer than she, breakfasted on fried *salsiccia* and a can of Rheingold beer, and enjoyed raw eggs, which he sucked through a hole he had poked in the shell. He was from a poor region in Southern Italy, and he once revealed to me in few words the *real* Mediterranean diet: "Eat everything you can get your hands on."

The one thing they had in common, along with every other very old person I've ever known, is that they never, ever ate anything simply because it was supposed to be "good for you," and they never, ever took any of the "nutritional supplements" that are the snake-oil nostrums of our ever growing modern-day medicine show.

**A**lice Mabel Bacon, who spent much time in Japan, introduced the word "sushi" into the English language in 1893, in her book *A Japanese Interior*. It is doubtful that this sushi, which she described as "rice sandwiches," was made with fish. We do know that the "sushi" included on the menu of a Japanese dinner in the fall of 1894 at the Club of All Nations in Manhattan was not. Almost 30 years later, in the spring of 1924, "sushi" was served on the lawn of the Vanderlip estate, in Scarborough-on-Hudson, at a fund-raising event for a women's college in Tokyo, but it is almost certain that no raw fish was involved. All these early references to sushi are likely to variations of the simple treats of sweet sushi rice wrapped in seaweed or in little soybean cakes that were so popular among Japanese children.

In 1929, *Ladies' Home Journal* evinced an awareness of sushi and sashimi in an article introducing American housewives to Japanese cooking: "Any recipes using the delicate and raw tuna," said the magazine, were "purposely omitted." Our first account of raw fish being served in America also dates to 1929. In its coverage of a celebration in honor of the arrival of two Japanese cruisers in Los Angeles Harbor, the *Times* of that city noted, on August 24, that

"sashimi, raw fish," was on the menu "at a dinner last night at the Japanese Cafe." The newspaper account referred to "Little Tokio," explaining that it was "the Japanese quarter of the city on East First street."

It was at 204 East First Street, in the heart of Little Tokyo, that the Kawafuku Cafe was located, having moved there from Weller Street, where it had opened in 1923. Like Miyako, the Japanese restaurant in New York that since 1910 had occupied a former brownstone mansion at 340 West 58th Street, Kawafuku was a swanky sukiyaki restaurant, run by Takichi and Hana Kato. An advertisement published on July 30, 1932, the opening day of the Los Angeles Olympics, described the "beautifully decorated" Kawafuku as "Featuring Japanese and Chinese Foods: 'SUKIYAKI' our Specialty." The Chinese cook, Chester, who worked for the Katos, is said to have made a mean *chashu* pork. But it's not for old Chester's pork that Kawafuku is remembered.

Kawafuku may have been the first restaurant in America to serve sushi. "My grandparents never dreamed that Caucasians would ever eat sushi," says Becky Kato Applegate, the granddaughter of Takichi and Hana Kato. But in 1946, Nakajima Tokijiro took over Kawafuku from 63-year-old Takichi Kato, and his dreams were different.

### "The Suki-yaki Is Genuine"

Throughout the 30s, New York and Hollywood sophisticates had remained provincial in their taste. In 1930, Rian James, in *Dining in New York*, wrote of Miyako as a restaurant where "white-coated Japs hover about you" and "there are no American dishes for the timid adventurer. Here, you will eat your beef Suki-yaki." A year later, in *Nightlife: Vanity Fair's Intimate Guide to New York After Dark*, Charles G. Shaw praised Miyako as "the best Japanese cooking on Manhattan Isle," but the cooking he praised was fairly Westernized: "The shrimp soufflé and steamed fish with rice are mouth-watering delights." It was much the same in 1939, when George Rector, in *Dining in New York with Rector*, declared that "the suki-yaki is genuine."

On February 19, 1942, Executive Order 9066 was issued in the United States by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the Japanese in America were rounded up and put into concentration camps, or "internment camps," as we more politely had it. Miyako had already been hit, shut down by the police on December 8, 1941, the day after Pearl Harbor was bombed.

When the years of war and internment ended, Little Tokyo was reborn with a strengthened sense of identity. In the summer of 1950, the *Los Angeles Times* reporter Gene Sherman ventured there during Nisei Week.

"War-inspired incidents are nil now. Slang-slinging Nisei are too concerned with their festival to give them much thought. And I am too concerned with sukiyaki." He went to the Kawafuku Cafe, the restaurant that Nakajima Tokijiro had taken over from Takichi and Hana Kato.

"Just sukiyaki," the round-eyed man told the waitress. As he explained to his readers, "She asked if I would like some sashimi. That's fresh raw fish."

He held out for his sukiyaki, and he got it.



Hana and Takichi Kato (circa 1936), the original owners of Kawafuku. Like most Japanese restaurants in pre-70s America, theirs was primarily known for its sukiyaki. *Courtesy of the Tsugio Kato family.*

"The idea of eating raw fish may be repellent to Americans, but only until they recall that they do the same with oysters and clams," wrote June Owen in *The New York Times* of August 18, 1954. She went on to tell of a man named Tom Tamura who sold "fish for sashimi" at his Kinko Fish Market, on Amsterdam Avenue. "His customers include not only those of Japanese background but also Caucasians who have tasted and liked this specialty."

Kabuki opened in downtown New York in early 1961. "Not all of the dishes at the Kabuki will appeal to American palates. Count among these sashimi, or raw fish," wrote Craig Claiborne in the *Times*. Nippon, with its sushi bar, opened in Midtown Manhattan in 1963, the year that Ronald McDonald entered the world through the McMiracle of parthenogenesis. "New Yorkers seem to take to the raw fish dishes, sashimi and sushi, with almost the same enthusiasm they display for tempura and sukiyaki," wrote Claiborne. But McDonald's Filet-o-Fish sandwich, introduced in 1964, was the real vanguard of fish-eating in America.

**B**y 1967, Miyako, which had reopened on West 56th Street, was looked upon as a place of the past. "New Yorkers may have become spoiled by a wealth of adventurous Japanese restaurants, and at the Miyako the food seems more Westernized than in some of the more recent ventures," wrote Claiborne. Eventually, even Miyako began serving sushi.

Regardless of what Claiborne said, it was Benihana, the restaurant that Rocky Aoki opened on West 56th Street in 1964, that defined the new Japanese food of America into the 70s. Serving steak cooked on hibachis at the center of diners' tables, Benihana was all the rage and soon became a chain that spread through the country, where most people still hadn't yet heard of sushi.

In July 1971, McDonald's came to Japan, opening in the Ginza Mitsukoshi department store, in Tokyo. It was the summer before that first New England tuna to be auctioned at Tsukiji made its transoceanic journey. And it was at this time, the early 70s, that an increasing number of people in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago became increasingly familiar with the increasing number of sushi restaurants in their cities.

These sushi eaters remained somewhat in the dark as to the subtleties of what they were eating. Wasabi was referred to as horseradish by *The New York Times* in 1954, and it was still referred to as horseradish by the *Times* in 1963. Used as a food and a medicine in Japan for more than a thousand years, wasabi, like horseradish, is a rootstock of the mustard family, but there is a world of difference between them. Wasabi grows naturally only in Japan, only on the northern slopes of shaded valleys near cold running streams, where it takes two or three years to mature. In preparing it for sushi, the chef or his apprentice finely grinds the root to a paste on a piece of rough sharkskin affixed to a small wooden board. Wasabi loses much of its flavor and pungency within minutes after it's grated, and so its preparation is timely.

**A**lmost all the real wasabi used by sushi chefs today is farmed, and the more distinct and intense taste of wild wasabi, which grows much smaller than its farmed variant, is all but unknown to modern sushi eaters. If one is fortunate enough to encounter the rare sushi chef who prepares his own wasabi, it will almost invariably be farmed wasabi, the best of which comes from the paddies of Amagi, in Shizuoka Prefecture. But these days even fresh farmed wasabi is hardly ever used by sushi chefs. As Hiroko Shimbo says in *The Sushi Experience*, cheaper sushi restaurants—I would say most sushi restaurants—rely on wasabi powder, which is mixed with water, or wasabi paste from a tube. "These are not really wasabi at all; they are mixtures of ordinary white horseradish, mustard powder, and artificial flavor and color." Or worse. Far removed from those shaded valleys and cold running country streams, one common commercial "wasabi" is concocted of horseradish, lactose, corn oil, sorbitol, salt, water, artificial flavoring, turmeric, xanthan gum, citric acid, FD&C Yellow No. 5, and FD&C Blue No. 1.

If referring to wasabi as horseradish—and even one of the first, and still one of the best, Japanese-authored English-language guides to sushi, *The Book of Sushi*, brought out by Kodansha, in 1981, does so—is like referring to horseradish as wasabi, referring to the artificially flavored, artificially colored gunk of today as wasabi is even more absurd. Such stuff is a fitting complement to those little pieces of green sawtooth plastic used in presentation in many sushi places. These green plastic things are called *baran*, the name of a type of actual bamboo leaf on which sushi was often traditionally placed.

The ascent of sushi's popularity in urban America in the years 1972 to 1982 was phenomenal, as was its ascent throughout the rest of the country in the decades that followed. This ascent reached its peak on January 1, 2004, when a place called Tiger Sushi opened at the Mall of America, in Minnesota. Since then, like the ruler of two domains, sushi has reigned as America's new favorite fast food and favorite slow food as well, and its imperium is extending to Europe and beyond.

Why? I'm sure there are social-anthropological theories, all of them bound to be as boring as they are meaningless. The real answer, I think, is simple.

America is addicted to sugar, but it seeks increasingly to veil its addiction. Power Bars. Sounds healthy. Main ingredient: fructose syrup. Almost 25 percent sugar. The guy, Brian Maxwell, who got rich selling these things, selling sugar as nutrition, swore by them and croaked at the age of 51. Eat a Power Bar and nobody gives a glance. Run up a bag of dope and people look at you funny. I don't get it. How about a nice, large Tazo Chai Frappuccino Blended Crème from Starbucks? Sounds healthy—I mean, after all, chai—and classy too: *crème*? Sugar content: 17 teaspoons.

A killer sugar addiction, a preoccupation with health, no matter how misguided, and pretensions, or delusions, of worldly sophistication. Sushi perfectly satisfies them all.

In a nation that never ate much fresh fish, it's interesting that eel sushi is so very popular. I mean, from fish sticks and Filet-o-Fish sandwiches to conger eels? "Mommy, Mommy, I want eels, I want eels." This can't be understood other than in light of the fact that the sauce, *anago no tsume*, used in confecting eel sushi is a syrupy reduction made with table sugar, sake, soy sauce, and the sweet wine called mirin, and that during this reduction caramelizing causes the browning sugar to grow in mass through the formation of fructose and glucose. The oldest known menu from Kawafuku, probably from the 50s, lists broiled eel along with sashimi and sushi among its à la carte dishes, at the head of which is still to be found that old standby, *sukiyaki*.

As for the other types of sushi, they are all made with rice to which both table sugar and sweet rice vinegar have been added. *Gari*, the pickled ginger served with sushi, is also made with rice vinegar and table sugar. If it's cobalt pink rather than pale rose in color, it has been treated with a chemical bath of dye and extra sweetening agents.

But what care I for health? Sloth and gluttony alone vie within me for dominion, and I've already outlived the Power Bar guy. So let's get down.

The difference between a bad sushi joint and a good sushi joint is: at a good sushi joint the sweetness of the sushi doesn't challenge the taste of the fish. The difference between a good sushi joint and a very good sushi joint is: at a very good sushi joint the sweetness of the sushi doesn't challenge the taste of the fish, and the fish is very good. The difference between a very good sushi joint and a great sushi joint is: at a great sushi joint the sweetness of the sushi doesn't challenge the taste of the fish, the fish is excellent, and, piece after piece—sushi should never be served more than one piece at a time; each piece should come freshly made directly from the chef's hands to you—the meal unfolds in a concert of many varied tastes, some delicate and some strong, all in a sequence of subtle harmony and balance that

leaves you exquisitely satisfied, in a way that Mrs. Paul never could.

## Some Breakfast

In the end, it is all in the eating, and Tokyo, with Tsukiji at its heart, is surely a place to eat it.

Everyone at Tsukiji seems to know Tom, who has been coming here for more than 30 years, first as a seafood importer, later as a representative of NOAA, and Ted, who speaks Japanese and also has been coming here for years, is a familiar figure as well. But on my second morning at the market, when we walk through the aisles and narrow passageways with Hiroyasu Ito, the president of Chuo Gyoru, one of the most powerful of the wholesalers and auction houses, he is more than recognized. Most of those we pass bow to him.

Yesterday, at his office in the Tsukiji compound, I asked him to tell me the name of the best sushi restaurant in Tokyo. He smiled and was silent. It was an awkward matter. After all, he knew many great sushi chefs personally, and he wished to offend no one. So, without directly answering my question, he said that we should meet in the morning and we would eat.

Now we wind through Tsukiji toward the northeastern outskirts of the market. It strikes me that here we are in the biggest fish market in the world and there is not a fishy whiff to be had. I've been told that only bad fish smells, but this is remarkable. When I pass the fish section at my local Food Emporium back home in New York, it stinks. When I pass Nobu on a summer morning, *after* the garbage has been hauled away, it stinks. Here the only smell is the sweet, smoky scent of the newly shaved flakes of dried bonito at the *katsuobushi* stand in the outer market.

Hiroyasu Ito leads us to a small, nondescript restaurant on a narrow street with no name. It's barely seven in the morning, and already there's a long line of people waiting to enter. Tom Asakawa tells me it's almost impossible to get into this place. People from all over Japan, from all over the world, come here in search of it. Ito-san looks at the queue and gestures for us to follow him. We turn a corner to another nameless, alley-like street, and come to an open kitchen door. The young girl scrubbing pans outside greets Ito-san with a happy smile. We enter through this back door, and emerge amid bows in a poky restaurant with a counter that seats fewer than a dozen. But somehow there are seats awaiting us. Small glasses and big bottles of Asahi Super Dry beer are set before us. The owner and chef, Shinichi Irino, immediately starts talking to Ito-san about the water's being good in this or that fishing port right now, and this or that fish came from this or that port; and as he talks, he prepares and serves us sushi made with this or that fish from this or that port.

"Southern bluefin. Indian Ocean."

Irino-san buys from 15 different dealers at Tsukiji, including five different tuna dealers.

The *maguro toro* sushi—the fatty bluefin-belly-meat sushi—is almost synesthetic and, to coin a phrase, melts in the mouth.

Daiwa, the name of this place, means "great harmony." Irino-san directs our eyes to the sign on the wall that bears this



Daiwa, a sushi joint within Tsukiji.  
Photograph by Tetsuya Miura.

name in four-character calligraphy. He tells us proudly that it was painted by Kitanoumi, the youngest sumo wrestler to achieve the top rank of Yokozuna and now the chairman of the Japan Sumo Association.

"Personal friend."

Sardine sushi. Mackerel sushi. *Uni* sushi. More beer. This is breakfast as she should be et, Jack-san.

I ask Irino-san who is the best sushi chef in New York.

"Keita Sato. Hatsuhana restaurant."

Has Irino-san ever been to New York?

No. But he was invited to Norway last year.

It's explained to me that Keita Sato, the owner of Hatsuhana, is an old friend of his.

Hiroyasu Ito smiles with satisfaction. "This," he says, "is the absolute best way to eat sushi, just sitting at a small counter, talking to the chef, and having piece by piece unfolding in front of you."

"And always a joke."

**T**omohiro Asakawa is a man of his word. He hasn't forgotten about me and the sea pineapple. On my last day in Tokyo, he gives me the name of a restaurant that serves sea pineapple. It's a drinking place, he says, a sake place. "They serve mostly whale meat, but they also have sea pineapple." He pauses and smiles. "And other things."

Whaling in Japan dates back to the prehistoric Jomon period. Today the Japanese government allows a number of certain species to be killed by permit every year. Many of them are from Antarctic waters and the seas of the Ogasawara Islands, an archipelago of more than 30 subtropical islands, including Iwo Jima, some one thousand kilometers, or about 540 nautical miles, a day's journey by ship, south of Tokyo. These whales, I'm told, are captured for "research." I recall the label on those packages of whale meat: RESEARCH WHALING.

Kabukicho, ablaze with neon, is Tokyo's red-light district. It's where the pleasure-houses are, and the fugu joints, and the clubs where yakuza gamble with flower cards. It's where, on the fifth floor of an old building on Kabukicho Street, the whale-meat restaurant is to be found. The name of the restaurant is Taruichi, which means something like "No. 1 sake barrel."

My companion, the Japanese translator Eva Yagino, speaks to the chef, Hiroyoshi Gota, who tells her that, among the many sakes sold here, there's a special sake, made by the Miyagi brewer Uragasumi, that's rarely available. The waitress pours us some, letting the cold sake overflow to the ceramic saucer beneath the *masu*, the sake box, made of the same pale wood, hinoki—a cypress that grows only in Japan—from which the best sushi-bar counters are crafted. A ceramic dish of sea salt is placed on the table, and Eva-san sets me straight: I'm to put a pinch of the salt on a corner of the *masu*, drink from that corner, raising the *masu* and ceramic saucer together, replenish the salt in the corner whenever I want, and in the end drink all the spillage in the saucer; then order more sake and do it again. As we sip our salted spillage, Eva-san translates the menu for me.

"*Nodo-kuro*," she says. "A white fish with a black throat from the Sea of Japan. It is rarely caught."

As she continues, I recall the way Tom Asakawa smiled when he said, " ... and other things."

"Anglerfish liver. Ayu-fish guts. Sea-cucumber guts. Oh, and look at all these whale dishes: whale sushi; *hari-hari nabe*—that's whale meat with mizuna, a sort of Japanese mustard green that looks like a dandelion green; whale bacon; whale skin; whale tongue; whale brain; *shinzo* (that's whale heart); whale ovary—and, oh, here's your *hoya sashi*, your raw sea pineapple. *Sashi* is what the restaurant people call sashimi."

As I ponder my choices, Eva-san tells me about *mamushi-zake*. It's a sake to which, during fermentation, a *mamushi* is added. The *mamushi*, a type of pit viper, is one of the two species of poisonous snakes indigenous to Japan. Introduced live into the fermenting sake, it releases its poison into the brew as it leaves this vale of tears. Unlike the Chinese, the Japanese are not big on snake eating, but there is this sake.

"I need to drink that," I say.

But this is my last night in town, and the Asakusabashi snake store will be closed for the evening. She'll send it to me by air. Good. Back to the menu.

Just my luck: they're out of the whale ovary. I get me a big, juicy, red-meat whale steak. I get some whale heart too. And, of course, the sea pineapple, which comes with a little dipping bowl of *su*, rice-wine vinegar. I'm living. And what more fitting an end than whale ice cream, made with green-tea powder and whale morsels? Mmm, no?

Sea pineapple, good. Whale heart, bad. The ice cream, I don't remember.

I want to know what kind of whale I've eaten. Eva-san talks to the boss.

"Minke. A sort of small baleen."

I want to know what kind of whale makes for the best grub. Eva-san talks to the boss. He makes a forlorn gesture to a poster on the wall that pictures all the species of whales in the sea, and, forlornly, he expounds awhile.

The great blue whale, the largest animal that has ever lived, is by far the best, he says. But, as it's considered one of the world's most endangered species, it has been unobtainable for more than 35 years. I feel for the guy.

"No black market?"

"Too big to hide."

## The Full Abundance

Some may have the temerity to disagree with me, but, for my money, the greatest Japanese restaurant is Sugiyama, in New York. There is no sushi here, no wasabi, but no shortage of raw fish, if you like it straight.

Nao Sugiyama, who is from Okayama, is a master of *kaiseki*. Of Zen origin, *kaiseki* is held as the highest form of Japanese cuisine, presenting through a series of courses and interludes the finest tastes of the *shun*, or season. But, more than that, Sugiyama-san is a master at bringing out—and allowing you to luxuriate in—the complexity that lies in simplicity and the simplicity that lies in complexity.

I've tried for a long time to better describe what Sugiyama-san does with what he carefully selects, on this day or that, in this season or that, from the full abundance of sea, stream, and woods. But whatever the secret is, it more than eludes description (he himself only shrugs and smiles at what he does); it subdues and silences the very desire to

describe it as it bears you away.

He arrives at his restaurant at half past nine in the morning, prepares until half past five, then opens the door at six. I last ate there on an evening when lingering winter was giving way to spring. Here's what he fed me:

First, a course of monkfish liver, vinegared baby eel, which seems to have been filleted, and a jelly cake of crab and vegetables. (Later, I find out that the "baby eel," *noresore*, which I assumed to have been filleted, is actually pre-baby eel—the flat, transparent larvae, whose season is brief and now, of the Japanese conger.) Then slices of raw bluefin tuna, raw bluefin toro, raw *hamachi*, raw *hamachi* toro, raw tilefish, steamed octopus, *ama-ebi* (sweet shrimp; the sweetness is in the meat of the brain), a raw Kumamoto oyster, and a fragrant spray of small, purple *shiso* flowers. Then a clear soup of seaweed, whitefish cake, bamboo, and *asari* (a sort of springtime Japanese littleneck). Then grilled black cod from Toyama and crisp-roasted mild green peppers. Then half a lobster (served with a spoon to blend the soft, dark meat of the head into the white tail meat) and shiitake and oyster mushrooms. Then a miso soup with straw mushrooms and seaweed. Then minced grilled eel, tilefish, and bonito steamed in a mixture of *botan* rice and sticky rice, wrapped in a large, salted *houba* leaf, served with pickled Japanese radish. Then *hoji* tea, which Sugiyama-san describes as "sticky" tea. He means it was made from tea twigs, and "sticky" is to be taken as an adjectival form of "stick," which in fact turns out to be the first definition of the word in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Then a grapefruit-and-cream thing, invented by Sugiyama-san many years ago, made from hand-squeezed grapefruit juice, powdered sugar, lemon, Chardonnay, and scotch—all of which, magicked into a chilled semi-solid sphere, somehow ends up seeming to be an idealized peeled grapefruit, with no fibrous membranes, no pulp, no pits—served in very cold cream with a sprig of mint.

As to what all this looked like and how it tasted, well, you can't eat metaphors, and if I ever use words such as "succulent," shoot me, but suffice it to say that I remember thinking as I walked into the night: If the Roman emperors can be said to have missed out on anything, it was this.

Unless you've an intense jones for something special, food at the hands of a Japanese master chef should always be taken *omakase*, entrusting all to him. This is true of sushi, and it is certainly true of *kaiseki*. But once, when I was sick, I requested that Sugiyama-san prepare me a meal built around a hard-to-find Japanese turtle that he mentioned could cure me of what ailed me. It took him some days to get the turtle, but he did it. Whether it fixed me, I'll never know. By the time he secured the turtle, I was probably about to get better anyway.

Sugiyama-san is one of a handful of chefs in America with a fugu license, allowing him to prepare this poisonous and mildly intoxicating fish. I find it pretty bland, and I never got off on it, but Sugiyama-san does a great imitation of someone overdosing on the stuff and begging for more, as has been known to happen in the old country.

**M**asa, the New York sushi restaurant of Masayoshi Takayama, is within short walking distance of Sugiyama, and from one to the other, you could eat yourself to death, or new life, in a manner most sublime. If you could afford it, that is. Masa is the most expensive restaurant in the country, if not the world. It is also the best sushi restaurant in the country, if not the world.

It's a beautiful place. The small sushi bar, crafted from a single, solid, \$60,000 piece of blond virgin-forest hinoki, is cared for daily: lightly sanded, cleaned, buffed to renew its soft, natural luster by apprentices, who also, like those of Tsunenori Iida at Tsukiji, spend hours each day tending to knives that are kept razor-sharp and brilliantly gleaming. The surface on which Takayama-san uses those knives is an imposing thick block of ginkgo. Hinoki,



he says, is a very hard wood, even though it looks quite soft. But the wood of the ginkgo tree—a unique tree, a botanical "living fossil" that constitutes a genus of its own—is soft and perfectly suited for knifework, as it won't dull the blade during the trimming and oblique slicing of piece after piece of raw fish that must be performed with uninterrupted and meticulous precision from the first to the last course of a sushi meal.

Watching Takayama-san at work at his block of ginkgo, or Sugiyama-san at his Yamaken low-density polyethylene (*jyushi manaita*)—as when watching Tsunenori Iida at his stall in Tsukiji—there is something to be sensed of the ancient belief in the soul, *tamashii*, of the knife.



Chef-owner Masayoshi Takayama of New York's Masa, where dinner for two is routinely more than \$1,000. Photograph by Eric Ogden.

As when I was last at Sugiyama, winter is giving way to spring. Behind Takayama-san as he works are big fresh-cut branches of spring-blooming Asian forsythia, their yellow, bell-shaped flowers blossoming bright. The plates, bowls, and cups, everything here right down to the *ohashi-oki*, the little ceramic chopstick rests, have been made by craftsmen in Japan especially for Takayama-san according to his own exacting designs. Even the spoons are of his design, carved of Ishikawa wood from the seaside north of Kyoto, then finished with the sap of the tree from which they were made. The door through which one enters Masa is made of 2,000-year-old Japanese bogwood.

This is a far cry from Daiwa, the hole-in-the-wall at Tsukiji, which Takayama-san agrees has the best sushi in Tokyo, though he adds that the best sushi restaurant in all Japan is Kameki, in Sendai, in the Northeast.

**B**ut you don't eat wallpaper. You eat this: baby firefly squid (*hotaru ika*) in a sauce of Japanese mustard (*karashi*) with rape-blossom buds (*nanohana*). Then chopped raw toro topped with caviar. Then seared bonito (*katsuo tataki*) with crispy seaweed (*ogo*), woodland ginger and bamboo (*myoga take*), wasabi greens, and those little purple *shiso* flowers. Then steamed *asari* clams from Chiba in their broth. Then icefish (*shirauo*)—tiny, almost translucent fish with buggy little black eyeballs which can be had for only a few weeks in early spring—served in sizzling white-sesame oil with Kalamata-olive paste and sprigs of newly budded prickly-ash leaves (*kinome*). Then a hot pot of cherry trout (*sakura masu*), whose season also lasts only a few weeks in spring. And then, after the *kaiseki* overture, the sushi feast begins.

Each piece of sushi is prepared individually and served immediately, as Takayama-san slices the fish, reaches into a cloth-covered barrel of rice, applies fresh-made wasabi paste to the side of the sliced fish that will be pressed to the rice, and, piece after piece, forms perfect sushi with dexterous rapidity in the palm of one hand with the nimble fingers of the other, placing it before you on a stoneware dish. He tells you to eat it with your hand. At humble little Daiwa, in Tsukiji, we had respectfully followed Hiroyasu Ito's manner of eating sushi with chopsticks. Now here, in the most opulent sushi restaurant on earth, the guy is telling me to use my hands. It's really just a matter of preference, but you don't want to piss this guy off while he's feeding you. You're given a small bowl of shoyu, into which only certain sushi should be dipped, and another small bowl of pale pickled ginger to be nibbled between courses.

The toro sushi is first. Then, in succession: striped jack; fluke; sea bream; snapper; squid; *ama-ebi* (the little shrimp with the sweet brain); cockle; red clam; giant clam; baby scallop; Nantucket scallop (freshly caught by a diver who sells only to Takayama-san and a few others); grilled toro sinew; herring; horse mackerel; *uni*; octopus; cooked shrimp; sea eel; freshwater eel; shiitake sushi; black-truffle sushi; a seaweed-wrapped roll of chopped toro and green, *negi* onion; young *ume*, a sort of Japanese plum, enclosed in a *shiso* leaf.

"And that's all," says Takayama-san with a smile.

Then there's a slice of Japanese muskmelon and buckwheat tea. (Also shoot me if I use the word "infusion.") And, of course, there's the check. My cohort and I drank two bottles of water, one Hoyo sake, and one glass of Sancerre. Our bill for two, including a 20 percent service charge but not including the additional tip, was \$1,102.74.

My meal at Daiwa was free because the owner and chef, Shinichi Irino, wouldn't charge Hiroyasu Ito or anyone with him. Ted Bestor, who was with us that morning, says, "We were undoubtedly being served the top-of-the-line stuff, since we were guests of Mr. Ito, president of Chuo Gyorui, so who knows what it might have cost, but probably no more than ¥6,000 or ¥7,000"—50 or 60 bucks—"per person. I was in Daiwa early this month, and their standard menu price for the 'in-season chef's selection' was around ¥4,500," or about \$38. "I also had dinner for four at an excellent and tiny Ginza sushi restaurant, with a celebrity chef. Four of us had a superb dinner for ¥15,000," or about \$125, "per person."

The funny thing is, Masa's prices don't seem to be as exorbitantly jacked up as they might first appear. There's no way of knowing what you're paying for a particular piece of sushi, as dinner here is at the fixed price of \$400 a person. But next door, at Bar Masa, there's a bar menu, and one of the items on it is toro tartare with caviar, the customary second course of a dinner at Masa, and the price is \$68. Toro is costly, and the Sterling Royal caviar Takayama-san uses goes for about \$70 an ounce, so what could the profit margin be? This dish alone is nearly a fifth of the cost of a dinner at Masa that includes five other overture dishes and 23 varieties of sushi, among them rare and expensive delicacies such as icefish. (In the past, he's also offered fish such as *sayori*, needlefish, and *hamo*, daggertooth conger pike, an eel-like summer-season thing so bony that no one could figure out how to eat it until the people of Kyoto devised a special technique called *hone-giri*, to which Takayama-san has added variations of his own.)

I first encountered Takayama-san in Beverly Hills, where he had Ginza Sushi-ko, named for the Tokyo restaurant where, after leaving his hometown of Kuroiso, in the mountainous prefecture of Tochigi, north of Tokyo, he served his years of apprenticeship. His own apprentice on the West Coast, Hiro Urasawa, took over the place, renamed it Urasawa, and Takayama-san moved to the East Coast and opened Masa in February 2004, at about the same time Tiger Sushi opened at the Mall of America. Since then, he seems not to have raised the price of a meal all that much. In the end, it's one of those choices we have to make in life: icefish and tuna sinew or that new H.D. TV for the next season of *American Idol*.

Guess what Takayama-san does when he takes his vacation every August? He goes to the mountains of Japan to fish and hunt for wild wasabi. And he is a fool for *hoya*, sea pineapple, too. These things say something.

I first ate Nobuyuki Matsuhisa's food years ago on the West Coast as well, when Matsuhisa, also in Beverly Hills, was the only restaurant he had. It was a good place. As for his Nobu in New York, my friend Chiemi Karasawa put it best: "a theme park of a restaurant, sort of a homogenized extraction of the real thing for the masses: a bunch of Caucasians serving things they don't even know how to pronounce."

## High Holy Fish

From both Sugiyama-san and Takayama-san, I get intimations that Tsukiji's rule is no longer absolute. They both have suppliers who fly in most of their fish from Tokyo. The relationship between them, chef and supplier, and the process of choosing fish long-distance, involves much established trust and a daily and complicated exchange of faxes and calls. Besides a supplier who provides from Tsukiji, Takayama-san also has a supplier who provides from the smaller fish market in Osaka, for, he says, there are some northern fish, such as icefish and certain eels, that are more readily available in desirable quality and quantities in Osaka than in Tokyo. He told me the names of his suppliers on the

condition that I would not reveal them. Sugiyama-san isn't so guarded as to his sources, and he told me his primary supplier is True World Foods, which runs fleets of boats and dozens of distribution centers, and supplies most of the sushi chefs in the United States.

True World, a major presence from Gloucester to Tokyo, is part of the global empire of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, the 87-year-old founder of the Unification Church and self-proclaimed "Savior, Messiah, Returning Lord, and True Parent" of all humanity. Representatives of the firm were not forthcoming when I tried to arrange a meeting with True World buyers at the Tsukiji market. Later a representative of True World did tell me that the True World buyer arrives at Tsukiji every morning at two o'clock. "We purchase in the neighborhood of 30,000 pounds of fresh fish monthly from Tsukiji and other Japanese fish markets, of which over 6,000 pounds makes its way to customers in the Greater New York area."

Savior, Messiah, Returning Lord. Hell, no big deal. Maybe Charlie the Tuna was a Satanist, or a Scientologist even. I long ago lost interest in religion and politics except in their most extreme and entertaining forms. But I will say this: His High Holiness, or whatever the fuck he is, sure deals some damned good fish.

In partnership with Kyokuyo, which, like Hiroyasu Ito's Chuo Gyorui, is one of the biggest of the wholesalers and auction houses at Tsukiji, True World has recently introduced Polar Seas Frozen Sushi, which may become what frozen fish sticks and frozen fish cakes were in pre-sushi America.

Like Masa's primary supplier, True World now obtains many fish directly from their sources. At both Sugiyama and Masa on the nights I last visited them, the *uni* was from California and had been delivered directly from there. The shared feeling seems to be that if a box of 15 Maine or California *uni* are of high-enough quality and can be had for 15 bucks, why should one pay 65 for a similar small box of Hokkaido *uni* that comes through Tsukiji? And at Masa, in addition to the Nantucket scallops procured by a private diver, the bluefin tuna, which was from Spain, had been purchased at the Fulton Fish Market by one of Takayama-san's apprentices.

Now that the Japanese economy isn't what it was, Takayama-san says, more of the best tuna can be found locally, where it can fetch almost as good, or as good, a price as if it were sold to the Tsukiji buyers. Both men try simply to get the best fish they can, and the best fish is no longer to be found only at Tsukiji.

I tell Ted Bestor about encountering a Fulton Fish Market bluefin at Masa, and of my puzzlement as to how, on any particular day, one could figure out if the tuna is better at Tsukiji or here.

"I am not surprised that he gets Spanish tuna directly from Fulton rather than from Tokyo," Ted tells me. "Everyone at Tsukiji says Japanese buyers are increasingly being outbought by buyers from other countries. China, Taiwan, the U.S.—all with strong economies and a newly vigorous demand for the finest seafood, for sushi and for other cuisines, create stronger markets for the best fish in places other than Japan.

"The long-distance calculus of determining whether the fish are better at Tsukiji or at Fulton would be fascinating to figure out. I would guess that it involves a fair amount of hunchwork but also very close communications among people who have worked together for a very long time."

Thus, what was written so recently, by Sasha Issenberg, in *The Sushi Economy*—that a fish market such as Rungis, south of Paris, "in effect serves as a destination for Tsukiji's Mediterranean leftovers (and for tuna from other oceans that don't meet Japanese standards)"—is no longer necessarily so. In fact, there is now a very good sushi restaurant in Paris, Isami, on the Quai d'Orléans, on Île Saint-Louis, and the chef, Katsuo Nakamura, who is from Hokkaido, gets

almost all his stuff from the Rungis market. The French—who often still associate Japanese food strictly with older restaurants such as Taka, in Montmartre—are warned when calling to make a reservation at Isami that only raw fish is served. (This isn't exactly true. There is *carrelet grillé*, grilled plaice, a European flatfish that has both eyes on the right side of its head.)

**T**here are relocation plans under way for Tsukiji, and the market is scheduled to move, in 2012, to an even bigger site, in the Toyosu district, an industrial area on the other side of Tokyo Bay.

The bay is very polluted. The local fishing industry that once busied its wharves died off after the war. One small live-fish boat remains docked at Tsukiji, near where the Sumida River empties into the bay. It is a relic that goes nowhere.

Tsunenori Iida wipes the blood from the long knife. His family has been here at Tsukiji since the beginning. They were here, doing what they did, doing what he does, long before this market was here, back in the final days of the shoguns, in the old Nihonbashi market, when Tokyo was Edo. And he has been here all his life. What does he think of this move to come?

"I don't think there will be a big difference," he says. He returns his attention to the knife. "I don't like to think."

The fate of the market unsettles many at Tsukiji. Meanwhile, in the candyland of the West, where few people have ever heard of Tsukiji, what once was repulsive—the raw flesh of that laid-open tuna, the raw flesh of all that swims and slithers at Tsukiji—is now craved, more widely and more ravenously each day.

After returning from Japan, I see that one of the joints in my neighborhood has posted a new menu in an attempt to revive its dying business. Now, besides the cheeseburger deluxe, there is yellowtail pastrami and bigeye-tuna mignon with potato "gnocci" and red-wine, mushroom, and foie-gras broth. Around the corner from that place is a sushi place called Tokyo Bay, whose name now evokes dioxins. Contaminated-sediment sushi. Nearby are Ninja New York, a gimmicky and overpriced place where, as *The New York Times* put it, "servers, in black costumes, play the parts of ninjas and perform magic, something the kitchen doesn't do," and Kuki Sushi, describing itself as "Korean-Japanese cuisine" and offering take-out tuna, and of course eel, sushi at a buck seventy-five a piece. The local natural-food dump sells vegetarian sushi. The two local supermarkets sell prepared, refrigerated sushi. The supermarkets are close to yet another sushi place. From my windows I can see three more sushi restaurants.

From "the sukiyaki is genuine" and not for "the timid adventurer" to this. I'm waiting for the *uni* ice cream to hit those supermarket freezers.

My snake sake arrived, as Eva-san promised it would. It's right here, the dead viper coiled with its fanged mouth open at the bottom of the jar, looking as if it's trying to tell me something from beyond. He sure doesn't seem to be at peace, if you get my drift. What can I say? I don't know. I will drink responsibly.

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