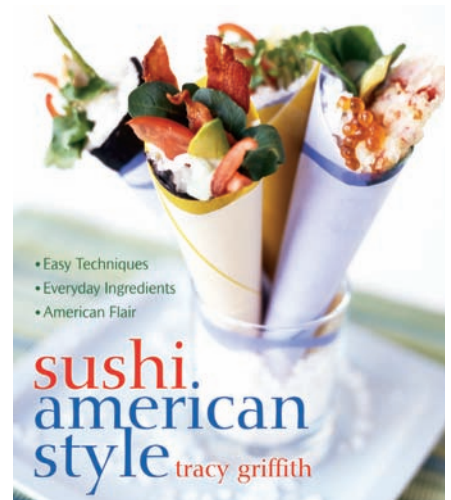


Have we died and gone to sushi heaven? The Dixie Chicken Roll, as published in a fun and flavorful new book, *Sushi American Style*, is cleverly created with fried chicken and coleslaw.

sushi goes southern

BY MELISSA TOWNSEND



From the first female graduate of the California Sushi Academy comes *Sushi American Style* published by Clarkson/Potter, 2004. Chef Tracy Griffith shows how to turn familiar ingredients—most of them cooked—into new tasty treats.

Deep South flavors find their way into haute cuisine in sushi bars nationwide

Southern food is on a roll. American chefs are rolling up everything sushi-style nowadays including down-home staples from the Deep South. From barbecued chicken to fried catfish, it's maki (sushi rolls) with a thick southern accent.

In *Sushi American Style* (Clarkson Potter, 2004), California chef Tracy Griffith shows how to use everyday common ingredients—cooked, not raw—to make unbelievably tasty and non-intimidating sushi at home. Griffith is the ingenious creator of the Dixie Chicken Roll—a roll made with tangy fried chicken, a bite of onion, and coleslaw (recipe follows), one of several rolls featured in the book to hail straight from the American South—literally. The California girl “went home to Mama” in Tennessee to write this new book where she says many of the ideas were formed. “My mother’s friends were coming over and I said, ‘You want to try some sushi?’ They were all like, ‘no, ew, gross!’ I said, ‘Just try it—it’s catfish.’ They tested the recipe for me and were raving.”

Thus, the Catfish Roll, “a sushi twist and roll on an old Cajun favorite—the po’ boy,” was born. “Those were my comfort foods when I was growing up,” Griffith says. “With the Dixie Chicken Roll, it was like you *know* what’s good with mashed potatoes. Substitute all the white stuff with white rice and roll it up!”

In Griffith’s book, there’s even a roll named for the King himself—The Elvis Roll. Yep, you guessed it—a sushi roll with peanut butter and bacon dipped in mayonnaise!

So what do Japanese sushi chefs think about Americans tampering with their sacred cuisine? “It’s non-traditional and frowned upon by real sushi chefs,” says Griffith. “The only thing we did do in school (Griffith was the first female to graduate from the California Sushi Academy) is the California Roll that sushi chefs in San Diego created in the ‘70s. Really, though, it’s only been in the last five years that people have been able to break out.”

The California Roll, now considered “traditional” in America, is filled with cucumber, crab and avocado. That’s hardly alluring to the experienced sushi eater now that Japanese fusion has kicked in to high gear. Add a Mississippi take on Japanese cuisine and it’s sushi heaven. Enter the Mississippi Roll—tempura fried catfish, snow crab, avocado, mayonnaise, and other ingredients rolled in a soywrap, an immensely popular specialty sushi maki at Little Tokyo in Jackson and Ridgeland. While others imitate, the Mississippi Roll at Little Tokyo is the original, conceived by Takahiro Higuchi about two years ago. Don’t even think of reaching for the soy sauce for this roll. The Mississippi Roll is served with a pink-ish spicy mayonnaise dipper called Mississippi sauce—a closely guarded secret in the Capital City.

Bethany Pepper, manager of Little Tokyo Sushi and Teppanyaki in Ridgeland, has witnessed the growing popularity of sushi (Jackson now has *seven* sushi bars; Little Tokyo on I-55 was the original) and is seeing a gradual number of locals, once afraid of the raw stuff, stepping over to the

sushi side. Pepper says, “I’d say it all started with the Asparagus Roll. After that, you couldn’t stop it.” (Eel and yellowtail is hardly appetizing to the beginner.) Not only do they order the cooked items, however, Pepper says many eventually become sushi addicts like the rest of their friends. “It’s astounding. People who have never tried sushi, see it (The Mississippi Roll) and think, ‘Catfish? I know catfish!’ Finally they sample the California Roll, then the fresh sushi, and it’s all over.”

Other local namesakes in Mississippi sushi bars include the irresistible Jackson Roll, also found on Little Tokyo menus. The Jackson Roll has the ingredients of the classic California Roll but with a little eel added and rolled inside out with the avocado and smelt roe on the outside. Two Stick, Oxford’s premiere sushi bar, features the Oxford Roll with fried crawfish. Thanks to Kevin Kantor, cooking instructor at the Everyday Gourmet in Jackson, there’s also a roll named for the Catfish Capital of the World. Kantor (see page 106) calls his version of a fried catfish roll the Belzoni Roll. Have Mississippi chefs gone a little maki mad?

Back in California, where it all began, Tracy Griffith adds, “One of the reasons I was drawn to Japanese cuisine is the reverence they have for everything. Everything matters—how the food is placed on the plate, how the plate faces the customer...the shiny side versus the rough side of the nori, and I appreciate all of that,” she says. “But it’s still white rice. Sorry guys.”