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**ON A ROLL  
WITH SUSHI**

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CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE

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# sushi on a roll

It's fun to eat bite-size bundles of  
Is it any wonder, then, that impeccably fresh

Raw fish at Nacional is a good match with a broad assortment of fruity and slightly sweet vodka-based martinis



PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAURIE PROFFITT

food, maybe because they give us an excuse to eat with our hands. *inada*—very young yellowtail—wrapped in sweet rice and toasted nori is so irresistible?

Diners young and old are flocking to sushi bars around the country for their favorite combinations of raw fish and seasoned rice. There's something on the menu to suit everyone's tastes, from the approachable *sake* (lightly smoked salmon) and exotic *odori-ebi* (live shrimp soaked in rice wine) to the decadent *ankimo* (monkfish liver) and healthy *maguro* (lean tuna).

### The New Fast Food

According to Tokyo's National Sushi Society, the number of sushi bars in America has quadrupled in the past decade, with 75 percent of Americans being aware of sushi and receptive to trying it. Sushi is especially popular with young urban diners, who have disposable income and more adventurous palates. Wise restaurateurs have capitalized on this new market with everything from the traditional sushi to wild fusion rolls.

Sushi is sweetened and seasoned rice; sashimi is raw fish. Most of us eat a combination of the two and simply call it sushi. The most popular styles are *maki sushi* (raw fish or vegetables, or both, with seasoned rice wrapped in seaweed) and *nigiri sushi* (a bite of seasoned rice topped with a nugget of wasabi and a slice of raw fish).

Tracy Griffith, sushi chef and cookbook author, adores raw fish. "I love the colors and shapes, smells, textures, and possibilities," she says. "The specific cut of beautiful fluke matters. The curl of a shrimp's tail and the angle of the fish as you present it to the customer matters. The aesthetic and reverence of sushi is mindful and respectful and the way it should be."

### Fresh Catch

Griffith believes "there is no reason not to get fresh fish, even if you are hundreds of miles from water." Jeff Drew, executive chef of the Snake River Grill in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, jokes, "My cuisine is FedEx based. With the exception of river trout, which is catch-and-release around here, I do not have indigenous seafood. But for the right price, I can get whatever I need, really fresh."

Drew can spot a fresh fish from across the kitchen. "It shimmers, and its eyes are clear and shiny. I feel and smell the flesh for firmness and freshness," he expounds. The fish's eyes should be clear and not sunken, the gills bright red and moist. The flesh should be firm and bounce back to the touch. A slippery texture is okay, but slimy is not. Above all, the fish should smell fresh, like the sea.

The optimal temperature range for storing fresh fish is 32°F to 35°F. Putting fish directly on ice is not necessary and can "burn" the delicate flesh. If your walk-in or line reach-ins are above 35°F, place ice in a solid four-inch hotel pan and place a two-inch solid or perforated pan insert with the fish in a single layer on top. Whenever possible, serve within 24 hours of delivery.

## SUSHI TERMINOLOGY

**Ama Ebi:** Sweet pink raw shrimp that have been cured.

**Bonito:** A dark, oily, dried fish that is shaved into flakes.

**Chirashi sushi:** A bowl of rice artfully topped with colorful raw fish and vegetables.

**Ebi:** Boiled shrimp.

**Fluke:** A white-fleshed flat fish also known as summer flounder.

**Gari:** Pickled fresh ginger.

**Hamachi:** Young tuna.

**Hirame:** Halibut, turbot, or flounder.

**Hon Maguro:** Bluefin tuna, which is highly prized in Japan. A whole fish can weigh up to 1,000 pounds and sell for thousands of dollars. The fattiest part of the fish, called *ootoro*, is the most desirable and fetches the highest prices. As a result of its popularity, bluefin has been overfished and is in danger of extinction.

**Kamaboko:** Imitation crabmeat also known as *krab*; usually made with Alaskan pollack and generally used in California rolls.

**Katsuo:** Also known as skipjack tuna, *katsuo* is most common in West Coast sushi bars because it is a Pacific Ocean fish and doesn't freeze well.

**Konbu:** Dried kelp used for seasoning rice and broth.

**Maguro:** Lean flesh from the spine of the fish.

**Maki sushi:** Raw fish, seasoned rice, and vegetables wrapped with nori and then sliced.

**Nigiri sushi:** A finger-shaped roll of seasoned rice topped with wasabi and a slice of raw fish or vegetables.

**Nori:** Seaweed that has been washed, chopped, pressed, dried, and toasted and is used to wrap sushi rolls.

**Ponzu:** A dipping sauce made with lemon juice, soy, sake, konbu, and dried bonito flakes.

**Saba:** Mackerel served raw when extremely fresh, or lightly salted and marinated for a few days before serving.

**Sashimi:** Fresh, raw fish that has been chilled and sliced.

**Shiro:** Albacore or white tuna; not as common as the other tunas.

**Sushi:** Seasoned and sweetened short- or medium-grain rice.

**Temaki sushi:** Cone-shaped roll of raw fish, seasoned rice, vegetables, and nori.

**Tobiko:** Flying-fish eggs, which are red orange and crunchy.

**Toro:** Fatty flesh from the belly of the fish.

**Umaki sushi:** Also called inside-out rolls, because the raw fish or vegetables are wrapped with nori and then surrounded by seasoned rice and *tobiko*.

**Uni:** Sea urchin roe.

**Wasabi:** A rhizome that is traditionally grated fresh and served right away. Since fresh wasabi is very expensive, many sushi bars make a paste with horseradish powder, dry mustard, and green food coloring.

Dave Rudie, owner of Catalina Offshore Products, has been importing and exporting seafood from the waters of Baja and Southern California for 20 years. He says, “The industry standard defines *sashimi* as the highest grade of fish available and able to be eaten raw.” This can include seafood that has been blast-frozen aboard the fishing boat, which is a common practice in Japan.



There is no governing body that defines, regulates, or grades raw fish, however, so Rudie advises buying only from trusted vendors. “We buy directly from fishermen that we know and trust,” he comments. “But first we teach them to preserve the freshness of their catch with good handling procedures. Every boat must contain chill tanks, and we pick up from harbor or

beach every day. Most of our fishing is done with hand lines, which helps maintain our natural resource: the ocean.”

The integrity of the supply chain is very important. Closely inspect every delivery—even if you buy from the same vendors every week. If the boxes are dirty and damaged, chances are the fish has not been handled properly. Be sure to weigh orders before the driver leaves so that you don’t wind up paying for the ice and shipping carton, and take the temperature of the fish to ensure it was shipped in good condition. And while beautiful fresh fish on the menu will excite your guests and bring them back for more, don’t be afraid to buy frozen. Sometimes it’s the best quality available, especially during certain times of the year.

### Raw Deal

Most chefs and diners agree that tuna is the undisputed champion of the raw-fish category, as its high fat content practically guarantees flavor and tenderness. Even mainstream America, with its conservative palate, is inclined to order tuna “blue,” especially if it has been marinated in lemon, ginger, and soy sauce.

Less common rare or raw but equally delicious are the white-fleshed snapper, grouper, and fluke. *Uni*, or sea urchin roe, is seen almost solely on sushi menus and is always served raw. Rudie, who built his business diving for sea urchins, remarks, “We catch it locally every day the season is open, weather permitting, and process it within 24 hours.”

But not all fish is desirable or even safe eaten raw. Fresh-water fish like trout and catfish should not be eaten raw, because they have parasites, which are nearly invisible. Salmon must be cured or cooked for the same reason. Swordfish can be eaten raw when extremely fresh, but is better grilled.

Raw and barely cooked fish have been featured on Japanese menus for centuries, but in recent years it has started appearing on menus in French, American, and Mediterranean restaurants. For example, Pierre Schaedelin, executive chef of Le Cirque in New York City, presents Tuna Tartare with a Seaweed and Basmati Salad, Soy Ginger Wasabi Vinaigrette (\$21) on both his lunch and dinner menus. Chef Christine Keff of Flying Fish and Fandango in Seattle sears tuna rare and serves it with Coconut Lime Sauce and Tomatoes Escabèche Vinaigrette (\$16.95). Chef Tom Colicchio of Gramercy Tavern in New York City serves marinated Hamachi with Lemon-Olive Oil, Roasted Beets, and Fresh Herbs Vinaigrette (\$14).

## Sushi Dumplings By Tracy Griffith

Yield: About 12 servings

### INGREDIENTS

#### Sushi Rice

- 1½ cups short-grain rice (japonica)
- ¼ cups water
- 1-inch-square piece of konbu
- Dash of sake

#### Sushi-Zu Dressing

- 3 tablespoons cider vinegar
- 1½ tablespoons honey
- 1 teaspoon sea salt

#### Wasabi Crème Fraîche

- ½ cup crème fraîche
- 1 tablespoon wasabi paste

#### Garnishes

- Fresh, sushi-grade ahi, smoked salmon, or halibut, thinly sliced into 2-inch squares
- Lemon wedges, cut wafer-thin
- Chives, blanched
- Julienne snow peas, blanched
- Fresh jalapeño, charred and cut wafer-thin
- Cherry tomatoes, cut wafer-thin
- Lemon zest
- Chili paste
- Ponzu sauce

### METHOD

1. Rinse the short-grain rice in a colander until the water runs nearly clear. Drain, and spread out on a parchment-lined sheet pan. Allow the rice to dry for 30 minutes.
2. Put the rice in a rice cooker, add the water and konbu, cover, and cook. After the cooker turns off, keep covered and let the rice rest for 15 minutes. Remove the konbu, and splash the rice with sake.
3. With a small wooden paddle, scoop the rice into a flat wooden bowl or parchment-lined sheet pan. Gently but quickly “slice” through rice with the side of the paddle to separate the grains and spread out evenly.
4. Mix the dressing ingredients together in small saucepan over low heat. Whisk until the honey and salt dissolve, about 30 seconds. Set aside.
5. Drizzle the dressing over the back of the paddle, and sprinkle it over the rice. Continue “slicing” through the rice until the grains are glossy. Place the rice back into the cooker, cover with a damp kitchen towel, and allow to rest on the warmer setting.
6. Whisk together the crème fraîche and wasabi. Spoon the mixture into a squeeze bottle.
7. Lay a 12-inch-square piece of plastic wrap on the work surface. On top of the plastic, place a piece of raw fish.
8. Scoop out 1 tablespoon of rice, and form it into a ball. Place the rice on the fish. Gather up the four corners of the plastic wrap, and twist together, tightening to form a ball. Remove the plastic, and press ball gently to flatten. Dip hands in a small bowl of cool water with a splash of vinegar to prevent rice from sticking.
9. Garnish the dumplings with a combination of garnishes. Top with a dot of chili paste and a squiggle of Wasabi Crème Fraîche, and serve with ponzu sauce.