

LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

Letter of Recommendation: Cheap Sushi

By Jonathan Malesic

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For several years in the early 2000s, I made mediocre sushi at a Japanese restaurant in suburban Virginia. I never intended to take up the knife; I never thought I could. I started as a dishwasher, and when I made it into the kitchen, I mostly prepared yakitori and tempura. But then one busy night, the head sushi chef, who was also the owner — and who would sometimes sing Japanese folk songs to customers in an Orbison-esque tenor — poked his head into the kitchen and made a fateful request. “Jon!” he called. “Make sushi!”

I told him I didn’t know how. “Doesn’t matter!” he replied.

He gave me a one-minute lesson in making maki, and for the next hour, I put whatever fish and vegetables he tossed onto my cutting board into a piece of nori I had smushed with rice and sprinkled with sesame seeds. I rolled each one up, cut it and placed it on a lacquered tray. If the diners didn’t like it, I never found out. The owner eventually moved me away from the deep fryer and onto the sushi line for good. Over the next few years I learned to cut fish for nigiri and to form the rice balls with quick, gentle-firm finger motions. But if there was an esoteric secret to the work, my boss never told me. As he said, it didn’t matter; it was still sushi.

Before sushi could become a perfect American convenience food, it first had to become *food* and not just a cultural signifier. As it became trendy in places like California, eating raw fish was considered more or less insane by the rest of the country — a revulsion fueled as much by underdeveloped palates as by xenophobia. As recently as 2004, in the Club for Growth’s infamous anti-Howard Dean ad, “sushi-eating” was nestled right between the better-remembered anti-liberal insults “latte-drinking” and “Volvo-driving.” But then sushi was swept up in the trend toward mass-market luxury, alongside granite countertops, selvedge-denim jeans and artisanal cocktails. Now they serve sushi in high school cafeterias. You can get spicy crab rolls at Walmart. You can just toss a box of nigiri in your grocery basket at 9 p.m. because you’re out of ideas and you figure, At least it’s healthy. And it’s dependably good, no matter how far you are from the ocean.

To many aficionados, this progress looks like vulgar decline. These deep-pocketed pilgrims seek sushi as they imagine it is meant to be: perfect gemlike morsels, pure fruits of the sea undefiled by a hot pan, never mind cream cheese. Clean. Minimalist. Balanced in taste and texture. The fish, practically still swimming, expertly sliced; the rice fanned to precise temperature; each grain aligned in a delicate structure.

To sushi snobs, part of the allure is surely that no other food demands such austere discipline of its makers. At some sushi bars in Japan, prospective chefs begin making rice only after a long novitiate, then wait even longer before they are permitted to pick up a knife. Like the apprentices themselves, diners submit to the will of a master. The Japanese word *omakase* — a menu of the chef’s selection, often requiring weeks-ahead reservations — carries overtones of

entrusting yourself to another's superior judgment. Even as some see cultural appropriation in cafeteria sushi, it is surely preferable to sushi meant for only investment bankers.

Everything about the sushi at middling pan-Asian restaurants and in cooler cases — the underseasoned rice, the thick slabs of fish, the jagged piece of artificial turf on the tray — is an affront to such connoisseurship. It demands little of anyone. But it manages to be delicious anyway. It's tender, yielding. A little fatty, a little sour, a little sweet. It soaks up your spicy-salty wasabi-and-soy-sauce mixture. It might even crunch. We're lucky to enjoy such delights, as I do every couple of weeks, downing pieces of a California roll like Cheez Doodles as I walk down the street, thinking about the preposterous confluence of historical and economic forces — trade, technology, migration, transport, diplomacy — that made such an experience not just possible, but possible for \$6. Now fully democratized, this taste of sublimity can become a habit.

A few years ago, I came across a Zen koan about someone named Banzan, who overhears a conversation between a butcher and a customer:

"Give me the best piece of meat you have," the customer said.

"Everything in my shop is the best," the butcher replied. "You cannot find here any piece of meat that is not the best."

At these words Banzan became enlightened.

A friend who is a scholar of Japanese Buddhism tells me the parable is about how enlightenment is not elsewhere; it's always here. Connoisseurs complain that mediocre sushi is ubiquitous. Well, so is nirvana.

In a sense, connoisseurship is the enemy of enlightenment: It is craving for something that is not here, and as the Buddha taught, to crave is to suffer. When I made sushi, customers would sometimes ask me, “What’s good tonight?” These men (and they were all men) misunderstood where they were and what I did. The restaurant was in a ramshackle strip mall, a few doors down from a laundromat. I didn’t sample the fish before dinner service or skulk around a market at dawn. As far as I was concerned, all our fish was sourced from the same place: the freezer. I would tell the customers it was all good. I wish I’d told them the truth: That it was all the best, the best in town, the best in the world.

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