

# Make your own sushi night

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*Sushi* is remarkably simple food, and fortunately, with a few tips, it is not too difficult to achieve good flavor in your kitchen. It is the appearance and presentation that are difficult to perfect, where sushi made by experts is a result of years of experience. However, if you are not afraid to make mistakes and eat broken sushi (whether you call it sushi or not is another matter) with a big laugh, it is surprisingly fun and you only need good dexterity, enthusiasm and practice!

## 1 Sushi varieties

In this “make your own sushi” event, we try a few different variants of modern sushi, including modern home style sushi.

### 1.1 *Nigiri-zushi* (hand shaped sushi)

A strip of seafood is placed on a bite-sized rice finger. This type of sushi requires the most skill to prepare, in slicing the fish as well as shaping the rice. *Nigiri* is best enjoyed at the beginning of the course when the subtle flavor of the fish is appreciated.

### 1.2 *Norimaki-zushi* (nori-rolled sushi)

A few ingredients are placed at the center of rice, wrapped by *nori* (seaweed). This type of sushi requires some skill in placing rice and rolling, but is easier to learn than the *nigiri* above. This style of sushi is very versatile, because thin end cuts of the fish fillet, too small for *nigiri*, can be used, as well as many other options, such as canned fish, vegetables, egg omelet cut into strips, etc. Dried *shiitake* mushrooms and gourd shavings are another typical ingredient in rolled sushi. They are rehydrated in water and simmered in seafood broth before use.

### 1.3 *Temaki-zushi* (hand rolled sushi)

This is a variant of the *norimaki-zushi* above, but everyone rolls their own sushi in their hand, and eat as they go. This style is more popular for dinner at home. In a small piece (about 4 inch square) of *nori*, a small amount of rice is spread out, on which a few pieces of seafood and vegetables are placed. This is then rolled, in a conical rather than cylindrical shape, and served at once. Small pieces of seafood, such as small sweet shrimp and shellfish are best enjoyed in this style.

### 1.4 *Chirashi-zushi* (scattered sushi)

This type of sushi is neither rolled nor shaped. Vinegared rice makes a bed, on which ingredients are strewn. This type of sushi is usually served in a shallow lacquered wooden vessel, but this is also ideal for lunch box. This type of sushi works very well with cooked fish, such as salmon steak salted and grilled, broken into small pieces with fork. This salmon dust can be mixed in or scattered on the bed of rice.

## 2 Serving *sushi*

Sushi is served with vinegared ginger garnish on the plate, as well as soy sauce in a small dish. A small amount of *wasabi* may be added to the soy sauce.

High quality green tea (*sencha*) is served in a large earthenware teacup, but sake and lager beer are other options. Green tea is usually served after Japanese meals, but with sushi, there is an exception; tea is served from the beginning. Ginger and tea are used to “refresh” the taste buds between different kinds of fish, so that the subtle flavors are fully enjoyed. (Miso soup is not served with sushi.)

If you incorporate *nigiri* and *norimaki* sushi as a first course in western style dinner, I believe dry white wine such as Sauvignon Blanc, Trebbiano d’Abruzzi, Pinot Blanc, Riesling or Torrontes from Argentine would be an ideal match. Some Alsace wines are made very dry and makes a good match. The quality of raw fish is enjoyed by enhancing the subtle flavors and mouthfeel with dry, acidic wine with refreshing aftertaste. The rice is already made a bit sweet, and the sweetness of the wine should not compete with it. However, *Chirashi-zushi* made with cooked fish may stand well with Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, expanding options beyond those above.

## 3 Today’s menu

Seafood: tuna in two different cuts: red, lean (*maguro*) and pinkish, medium fatty (*chu-toro*) parts. Salmon (*sake*) cuts of fatty parts. European bream (*kurodai*). Swordfish (*mekajiki*). Sweet shrimp (*amaebi*). Salmon roe (*ikura*). Sea urchin roe (*uni*). Cooked sea eel (*anago*).

When selecting cuts of large fishes for sushi and sashimi, fatty cuts are generally more desirable than lean cuts. Salmon is rarely eaten raw in Japan, but absolutely fresh Atlantic salmon is apparently suitable for eating raw. Sliced pieces can be marinated in lemon juice if preferred.

Others: cucumber, egg, dried gourd shavings (*kanpyo*), *shiitake* mushrooms.

### Other possibilities

Seafood: flounder (*hirame*), young yellowtail (*hamachi*), abalone (*awabi*), ark shell (*akagai*), vinegared mackerel (*shime-saba*), squid (*ika*), octopus (*tako*), boiled gray mantis shrimp (*shako*). Raw oyster is a popular food in Japan, but not a typical choice for sushi.

For rolled sushi, other vegetables such as asparagus, string bean, etc. can be quite successfully used after boiling in salted water, although these are not typical choices for sushi in Japan.

## 4 Shopping

Seafood and vegetable ingredients must be absolutely fresh and they must be safe to eat raw (“sashimi-quality”). This is not a problem in Japan, where a daily supply of fresh (within a day from landing) is abundant. In Boston, sashimi-quality fish are available from Japanese markets, but I strongly recommend buying directly from fish specialists.

Besides seafood and vegetables, *nori* (seaweed sheets), Japanese white rice, rice vinegar are essential, and vinegared garlic, wasabi, Japanese green tea should also be in the shopping list. *Nori* keeps for a few months as long as it is kept in airtight container, away from humidity, light and heat. It is *essential* to use Japanese white rice, as other kinds of rice are not sticky enough for sushi. Japanese soy sauce is quite different from the Chinese counterpart, so be sure to select Japanese one to use for sushi. Vinegared ginger can be purchased or made at home, but pickling takes about one full week.

### New Deal Fish Market

622 Cambridge St., Cambridge, MA 02141, telephone 617 876 8227. Operated by an Italian family, and open to 7pm (closed on Sundays). Although the selection does not compare to a typical fish market in Japan, they sell very fresh fish, and they are knowledgeable about Japanese terms for the cuts and species. They speak Italian, Spanish, and English, and accept credit cards.

## Sea to You Boston

212 Northern Ave., Boston, MA 02210, telephone 617 350 0130. Located in Boston Fish Pier, bays 13–15. Note that they are open to consumers only in Saturdays 9:00 to 15:00. Recommend to shop in the morning. They speak Japanese and English, and accept credit cards.

## 5 Cooking rice

A decent rice cooker offers the easiest way to cook rice. However, with a bit of skill, one can cook rice very well in a heavy pot on stove. The pot is preferably non-stick surface, and must be covered tightly at all times. If rice is used unwashed, rice-to-water ratio should be about 2:3 by volume, and if washed, 3:4. Use slightly less water than you would for regular white rice, as the rice is supposed to acquire a bit chewy consistency when cooled. The order of addition is also a bit different in cooking rice for sushi; boil the water first.

Heat the water with a piece of giant sea kelp on high flame until the water boils. Remove the kelp as the water boils. Add rice and continue to heat until the water boils again. Turn the heat down to the lowest possible flame to simmer until the rice absorbs all water (about 15 minutes). Turn off the heat and let rice stand for 15 minutes.

### Seasoning rice

After it is cooked, spread the rice on a shallow bowl in thin layers. Season the rice with pre-mixed sushi dressing or a home-made version.

sushi dressing (for 3-4 cups of uncooked rice)	
rice vinegar	80 ml
sugar	5 tbs
sea salt	4 tsp

While tossing the rice, take care not to mash the rice. Rice needs to be cooled to lukewarm temperature (about 50°C), preferably with a hand fan. The seasoned rice can be used at room temperature on the same day, but it is nearly impossible to make satisfactory sushi once it is refrigerated; one good way to use leftover rice is to make *chirashi-zushi* (splashed sushi), which can be refrigerated for lunch box.

## 6 Hand vinegar (*tezu*)

When shaping rice finger for *nigiri* or spreading rice on seaweed sheet for *norimaki*, one common source of frustration is that rice sticks to your hand, and you cannot shape or spread rice as you like. This is quite effectively solved by keeping a bowl of diluted (1:10) rice vinegar, and wet your hands before each time you manipulate rice.

When slicing *norimaki* or rolled sushi, the knife should be kept wet for smooth cutting. However, be careful not to wet the seaweed or any other part of the sushi.

## 7 Making green tea

Unlike black tea, green tea is steeped in hot but not boiling water of about 85°C. Heat water until rolling boil, and transfer the water to a ceramic or glass pitcher at room temperature. Put a teaspoonful of green tea per serving in a tea pot, and use the hot water from the pitcher. Wait for 4 minutes and strain the tea into tea cups. High quality water with low mineral contents (low temporary and permanent hardness) is best suited.

## 8 Brief history of *sushi*

The oldest mention of Japanese *sushi* is found in a classic document completed in year 701<sup>1</sup>. At that time *sushi* was fish meat that was simply salted and naturally fermented over several months, adding acidity and improving the flavor as well as shelf life. In these variations, neither vinegar nor rice was used. Around 1600, rice started to appear in making of *sushi*. Rice was naturally fermented for a month to produce acid, and starch from rice added complexity to the flavor. However, rice was discarded and the only fish part was served. Later variant of this *sushi* was fermented with hot rice and pressed under weight overnight. This appeared around 1700 and the rice part was served with the fish.

With the advancement of transportation and storage technologies, *sushi* lost importance for its preserving function, but rather became a popular fancy and a luxurious way to enjoy fresh seafood. Modern, Edo-style nigiri *sushi* became known around 1790, and its popularity grew rapidly among the mass population, next to *soba* (buckwheat noodle) and *udon* (wheat noodle). The main trait of modern *sushi* variants is that they call for absolutely fresh ingredients, prepared with vinegared rice and served at once.

Some other variants of *sushi*, taking days to months to prepare and rest before serving, remain regional specialties, especially in western Japan, but they are rarely served in *sushi* restaurants.

### Other techniques

For slicing fish fillet, shaping rice fingers, rolling *sushi*, see illustrations posted in the kitchen. For complete instructions, consult Tsuji (1980). Tsuji (1980) is one of the most complete and thorough Japanese cookbooks ever published in English.

### about MIT Epicurean Club

Anyone in MIT community is welcome to the club. Membership does not cost any money, but each event requires RSVP and small fee to keep the number of participants manageable. Events are typically held at a kitchen of one of the MIT housing buildings, and announced by epicurean mailing list (contact Julius Kusuma to subscribe). We are open to suggestions for event ideas, but our last event was breakfast with freshly homeroasted coffee, and next planned events are a cheese tasting night (we are working on alcohol permit) and a dinner with organically farmed food with dinner talk by a local organic farmer.

### Contact Information

Please send comments, suggestions and additional information to Ryuji Suzuki ([rsuzuki@mit.edu](mailto:rsuzuki@mit.edu)) to improve future events. Also, feel free to email me for further questions, other food-related parties, and possible future revisions of this note.

### References

- [1] Tsuji, Shizuo. 1980. *Japanese cooking – a simple art*. Tokyo: Kodansha international.

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<sup>1</sup>Similar food was prepared with fresh water fish and animal meat in southeastern Asia as early as 4th century B.C., and this practice was said to be propagated to northern China, then to Japan.