

## Chapter 1

# Embarking on the Sushi Adventure

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Looking at sushi's benefits
  - ▶ Sitting down to great sushi meals at home
  - ▶ Finding your way around a sushi bar
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**S**ushi is a world of tantalizing, clean, fresh flavors. Pristinely beautiful, plump, and chewy white rice, glistening with freshness and flavored with a fragrant vinegar dressing, is topped or mixed with fresh vegetables, cheese, tofu, or whatever you desire.



Notice we didn't say anything about raw fish. Why? Because there's a *huge* misconception that sushi means raw fish, when it really means vinegared rice or items served on or in vinegared rice. This inaccurate belief probably came to be because sushi bars, where most people first experience sushi, offer gorgeous sashimi (sliced raw seafood) dishes, and sushi is frequently topped or made with raw seafood.

We're not trying to take anything away from raw seafood — we love it! *Sushi For Dummies* offers great raw seafood information (see Chapter 4) and raw seafood sushi recipes. But when you consider that prepared sushi rice functions like bread in a sandwich, you begin to understand how versatile sushi is and how it can be a favorite food in any cook's repertoire, from vegetarians to fish, poultry, and meat lovers. We offer all kinds of sushi recipes made without raw fish, such as sushi bar favorites California Inside-Out Rolls, Caterpillar Inside-Out Rolls, and Cucumber Sliced Rolls, all in Chapter 8.

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In this chapter, we demystify sushi, touching on its development over the last 2,000 years; what's involved in the way of ingredients, tools, and techniques to make all the satisfying sushi at home you could want; and how to get the absolute best experience out of a visit to a sushi bar.

### *Appreciating Sushi's Past, Present, and Future*

Sushi can be over-the-top-chic at times, such as our Smoked Salmon Sushi Packages in Chapter 11, but that's not how it started out. It has a very humble past.



Over 2,000 years ago, Japan learned about preserving fish by packing or pressing it in salt and rice, a practice that was common throughout Southeast Asia at the time. An early type of pressed sushi, called *nare-zushi*, was held for months before the preserved fish was eaten, and the fermented rice thrown out. One of these early pressed sushi, *funa-zushi*, or preserved carp, developed around AD 700, is still enjoyed in Japan today — the pickled carp eaten, the fermented rice thrown out.

Fast forward to the fifteenth or sixteenth century, when the pressing process was substantially shortened, creating *nama-nare-zushi*, meaning partially fermented sushi. For the first time, the Japanese began to eat this freshly fermented, tangy rice with the pickled fish instead of discarding it. Pick up the pace and enter the seventeenth century, when a savvy Japanese sushi connoisseur thought to add vinegar to cooked rice to obtain the desired tangy rice taste, creating *haya-zushi*, or instant vinegared sushi rice. But the Japanese still pressed the vinegared rice with fish or other foods, waiting awhile before eating it. By the eighteenth century, *maki-zushi*, or rolled sushi, and *chirashi-zushi*, or scattered sushi, also began to appear.

By the early nineteenth century, *nigiri-zushi*, or finger sushi, came into being as sushi stalls popped up in Japan, offering these bite-sized vinegared rice treats to on-the-go customers. In 1824, a great moment in sushi history, a Tokyo (formerly Edo) sushi stall operator named Hanaya Yohei offered finger sushi topped with slices of raw fish, like our Tuna Finger Sushi in Chapter 8. Word quickly spread out from his stall, and now around the world, that raw fish and vinegared rice make a perfect pair!

*Oshi-zushi*, today's pressed sushi, is all about freshly cooked rice that is tossed with a rice vinegar dressing, cooled, then pressed with the freshest and best ingredients available, and eaten that

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same day (see our Crabmeat and Avocado Pressed Sushi with Wasabi Mayonnaise in Chapter 9). Many other types of sushi have developed over the years, and their origins are not always clear. Their taste and popularity are now well established, however, and they include such sushi as *temaki-zushi*, or hand rolls, and *inari-zushi*, or tofu pouches, both of which we offer in this cookbook.

Today, the names of sushi dishes, even the names of types of sushi, can vary for the same dish or same type of sushi, depending on the country you're in, the sushi bar you're in, who you're talking to, or for other reasons (see Chapter 6). After you read how sushi rice and types of sushi are made, you'll be able to work your way around this sticky rice name situation, and figure out what a sushi dish is by what's gone into it, regardless of what it's being called.

Today, sushi has lots going for it:

- ✔ **Sushi tastes good and makes you feel good.** Sushi doesn't contain big hunks of any food item. It's all small bites of flavorful foods that leave you feeling satisfied, but not stuffed or heavy.
- ✔ **Sushi is good for you.** It consists predominately of lowfat, high-protein, and complex-carbohydrate ingredients and is rich in vitamins and minerals. Sushi is the perfect food for a health-conscious nation.
- ✔ **Sushi exposes you to tastes and textures you may not have experienced before — it's an adventure!** Your first taste of lively pickled daikon radish (*takuan*), slippery and chewy longneck clam, or the buttery richness of raw tuna will wake you up to a whole world of exciting food choices!
- ✔ **Sushi is an incredibly well-designed food.** Rice vinegar, wasabi, pickled ginger, and soy sauce all have antibacterial properties, which are helpful when working with raw fish.
- ✔ **Sushi is frugal.** Nothing is wasted in Japanese cuisine, and sushi is proof of that attitude. When you order raw sweet shrimp (*amaebi*) at a sushi bar, not only do you enjoy the shrimp, but knowledgeable sushi lovers ask for the heads grilled (see the second menu in the sushi bar sidebar in Chapter 15). This sushi treat may sound weird and look strange, but it tastes terrific!

Sushi's future shines brightly. Chances are, if you can't find a sushi bar in every country in the world today, you will soon. Traditional techniques used in making popular types of sushi will still be around, but it's anybody's guess where *sosaku-zushi*, or creative sushi (see Chapters 11 and 12), will take us!

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### *Enjoying Sushi at Home*

Most people lead busy lives and have too little free time, yet they may want to eat exciting food such as sushi. Thankfully, sushi is not only delicious but also can be quick and easy to make at home. You just need fresh ingredients, a few tools, and this cookbook.

### *Gathering fresh ingredients*

If ever a food culture treasured the high quality of its ingredients, it's the Japanese food culture.



To create the best sushi dishes, consider every single ingredient, and every single step when working with that ingredient (see Chapter 6). The best sushi includes ingredients so fresh that they're practically still growing in the ground or swimming in the sea. This means that you may spend more time carefully selecting your ingredients and cutting, combining, and properly arranging these ingredients than you do cooking — but it's worth it! Chapters 3 and 4 provide tips on purchasing the freshest ingredients either online or at a market in your area.



Remember the following ideas when selecting sushi ingredients:

- ✔ **Respect the integrity of each ingredient.** For example, in the Tuna Sushi Rice Balls in Chapter 9, nothing distracts from the beauty and pristine taste of the sashimi-grade raw tuna. Only three ingredients go into the rice balls: raw tuna, fresh-tasting sushi rice that complements the tuna's clean taste, and a dab of wasabi paste to heighten the flavors of the raw tuna and vinegared rice.
- ✔ **Reveal each ingredient's taste and texture.** Carefully evaluate every ingredient, from tofu to salmon roe, for the best way to preserve its unique qualities when used in a dish. For example, in Tofu Finger Sushi, found in Chapter 9, tofu's custardlike texture is a wonderful contrast to the chewy nature of sushi rice, just as its faintly nutty taste finds a perfect companion in the nutty flavor of the rice.
- ✔ **Let your ingredient choices follow the seasons.** Do this, and your sushi will take on a culinary character worthy of that time of year. For example, the Mexican Hand Rolls in Chapter 9, with their cooling sticks of mango, jicama, and cucumber, offer relief from summer heat.

## Collecting a few tools

All you need to make most types of sushi at home is your own two hands and some basic kitchen equipment you probably already have. But, as you go down the sticky rice path, making all kinds of delicious sushi dishes, you're bound to want a few nifty sushi tools that make the process that much more pleasurable (see Chapter 2).

What's the only indispensable sushi tool you'll want to buy? An inexpensive, bamboo sushi mat that's required for making sliced sushi rolls. As your passion for sushi grows, you'll also want to pick up a rice cooker to take the guesswork out of this process; a *handai*, or beautiful wooden sushi rice tub, designed specifically for cooling down the rice for sushi; and an *uchiwa*, or flat fan, for creating a breeze to help cool off the hot rice, making your sushi rice experience all the more authentic.



The Japanese samurai, or warriors of old, carried a pair of fighting swords. Samurais are no more, but the tradition of making some of the world's finest knives (think of them as very short swords) continues. In Chapter 2, we go over the two Japanese knives that can help you achieve the even, smooth, sometimes transparently thin slices you want for our sushi recipes. Of course, you can use the sharpest nonserrated knives you have, but what a joy it is to own and use fine Japanese knives.

To finish off your sushi kitchen, and add finishing touches to your sushi, you'll want to pick up decorative vegetable cutters, which look like little cookie cutters, and a Japanese mandoline, for beautiful slivers and slices, both discussed in Chapter 2.

## Mastering popular techniques

The techniques involved in making the most popular types of sushi aren't difficult at all. They may seem strange the first few times you try them, but they'll quickly become second nature to you, much as building a better cheeseburger becomes second nature. We explain each technique to you in detail in Chapter 6, so you should have no problems creating the sushi of your dreams. You need to read these instructions only once, and then you can simply follow the condensed, abbreviated version of the technique found in each sushi recipe.

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But before you can make your first finger sushi or bowl of scattered sushi, you must first master the technique of making perfect sushi rice, the heartbeat of sushi. Making sushi rice that turns out fragrant, moist, and chewy is no big deal if you know what you're doing. So trust us when we say that if you want to make perfect sushi rice, all you need to do is follow the directions in Chapter 5, just once. After that, you'll be able to make sushi rice in your sleep (although we don't recommend it!). Please don't skip reading through that chapter, start to finish, or you may not get the perfect sushi rice you want.

What's the best way for a sushi beginner to get started? First, for the fun of it, and for the solid information, read Chapter 16. Doing so will take you all of five minutes. Then adopt the first principle: Relax! Sushi is as much fun to make as it is to eat.



Don't worry about lacking sushi skills. Start off with one simple technique and one simple recipe, such as the Smoked Salmon Sushi Rice Balls in Chapter 9. All you do is twist a small portion of sushi rice with smoked salmon into a round ball (using plastic wrap), unwrap it and top it with a caper. Anybody can do that, and the results are pretty and very tasty! Try this recipe, and you're on your way. Build on your success by adding a new technique from Chapter 6 each time you make sushi.



Sushi can look sloppy and still taste good, as long as your rice and ingredients taste good. So don't worry, be happy, make sushi!

### *Making up a sushi menu*

When you're ready to make a full meal of sushi, select your recipes while keeping in mind that sushi doesn't have to be eaten in any specific order. Decide on the one, two, or three sushi you want to make from Chapters 8 through 12. We group our sushi recipes into what we call lifestyle moments so that you can flip to the chapter that meets your lifestyle needs at the moment. For example, if you're in a hurry and want to make finger-snapping fast sushi (in sushi time, that is), try out the recipes such as the Roast Beef and Watercress Hand Rolls in Chapter 9. Or if you want a menu that sidesteps the last-minute rush, turn to Chapter 10 for recipes such as Sweet Tofu Pouch Sushi or Teriyaki Chicken Sliced Rolls, which allow you to prepare several of the ingredients ahead of time so that you can assemble the sushi quickly when you're ready to sit down and eat.

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If you want to begin a meal with an appetizer or add a delicious side item to the menu, then take a look at Chapter 13. Somewhere in that chapter is the perfect starter for you, perhaps Edamame (boiled soybean in their pods) or something dressier, such as the Hard-Boiled Quail Eggs with Matcha Salt. Dessert can be as easy as Fire and Ice Cream Sandwiches or Oranges in Plum Wine, which take very little time to make (both recipes are in Chapter 13).



When creating a sushi meal menu for yourself or for a sushi party (see Chapter 14), go for a symphony of flavors. For example, if you start with a very singular taste, such as Salmon Roe Battleship Sushi in Chapter 9, move on to a more complex combination of tastes next, such as Grilled Shrimp and Thai Basil Inside-Out Rolls with Spicy Lime Dipping Sauce in Chapter 11.

### *Enjoying each and every piece*

Sushi is not only delicious but beautiful, too. To get the most out of your sushi experiences, relish each piece of sushi with all your senses. When appreciating sushi, do the following:

- ✓ **Look:** See the beauty of the ingredients.
- ✓ **Taste:** Pay attention to the different flavors in the sushi and how they complement one another.
- ✓ **Feel:** Enjoy the different textures of sushi ingredients in your mouth.
- ✓ **Smell:** Savor the scent of the sea in fresh seafood, and the scent of the earth in vegetables.

### *Feeling at Home in a Sushi Bar*

Walking into a popular sushi bar is always exciting. It's a gathering place to eat sushi, true, but if you sit at the sushi bar (and you should), it's also about camaraderie between you and the sushi chef and between you and the others at the sushi bar. This little tip — that the sushi chef welcomes your attention — is one of dozens throughout *Sushi For Dummies*. In fact, we devote Chapters 15 and 17 to helping you feel comfortable, know how and what to order, and practice perfect sushi etiquette. And the Cheat Sheet helps you figure out what's on the menu and how to pronounce the names of

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the dishes correctly. You'll be equipped to enjoy sushi from the finest sushi bars in Tokyo to the neighborhood sushi bar in Indianapolis. Here are a few pointers to get you started:

- ✔ **Make a reservation for seats at the sushi bar counter.** That way, you're guaranteed a seat, and you can observe and talk to the sushi chef while he's working.
- ✔ **Follow chopstick etiquette.** Japanese table manners focus on chopstick etiquette. For example, don't cross your chopsticks when you set them down. Instead, lay them down, tightly together, below your plate and directly in front of you. Chapter 17 contains more details about chopstick etiquette and other sushi manners.
- ✔ **If you're sitting at the sushi counter, order dish by dish rather than from the restaurant's standard menu.** If you don't know what to order, the sushi chef is there to help you. And you're sure to win the chef's favor if you tell him to prepare something his way when he asks how you want your sushi prepared. Chapter 15 has more details on ordering your meal.
- ✔ **Order sushi like a pro.** If you order in Japanese, the chef is sure to be impressed. The Cheat Sheet in the front of the book contains the Japanese pronunciation for many popular menu items as well as decodes many items on sushi bar menus.