

counter culture

Admit it: you love sushi, but plenty of it still bewilders you. (To dunk or not to dunk?) Here, one of the world's great sushi chefs cuts through the mystery

BY ANYA VON BREMZEN

In an age when sushi joints sport names like @Sushi Plus, when your *hamachi* might be delivered by a waiter on roller skates, and when it's easier to find raw fish jeweled with gold leaf than an exceptional piece of *otora* (super-fatty tuna), the classic purity of New York's new sushi temple Sushi Yasuda is something of a miracle. In contrast to Nobu Matsuhisa - whose game is culinary cross-dressing - chef Naomichi Yasuda winces at the mere mention of spicy tuna rolls and other West Coast frivolities. Call it a back-to-basics backlash. For anyone willing to watch, listen, and taste, a meal at his bamboo counter is an initiation into the secrets of sushidom. Pull up a seat; here's some of what you might learn.

The hands: Like a musician who channels the melody through his fingers, a great sushi master can "taste" with his hands. While molding the rice into cakes in six swift strokes, and slicing the fish with the precision of a neurosurgeon, Yasuda even studies the diner's mouth to determine the appropriate size of each morsel. To best appreciate the play of textures, he suggests eating the entire piece in one bite.

The rice: Regarding it as far more than a sticky placeholder for the fish, a true sushi master prides himself on the flavor and texture of the rice. Even when accompanying a sliver of cucumber - Greek cucumber at the prime of its crunch - Yasuda's rice is a revelation. The secret? Two varieties of U.S.-grown Japanese rice boiled in purified water and blended in exact proportions with red and white rice vinegar and Japanese sugar. Each grain is as eloquent as a haiku.

Sashimi or sushi? Sashimi (raw fish without the rice) is a fairly recent addition to the sushi arsenal. While some consider eating sashimi as graduating to the next level of sushi

awareness, Yasuda believes that an extensive sashimi list is usually a smoke screen for a chef's inferior sushi skills (this from a guy who cuts pretty amazing sashimi). Still, a few glistening petals of Yasuda's precious sea bass fin or his extra-fatty *hagashi toro* is a great way to tune your mouth to raw fish before eating sushi. Though fingers are fine for sushi, sashimi requires chopsticks.

The fish tale: Thanks to his network of suppliers, Yasuda can buy exotic *hakkaku* (white-fish) from Hokkaido or *sayori*, a halfbeak, from the Kyushu fish market in southern Japan. He also ferrets out silky Long Island tuna, available only two months a year; pristine sturgeon from Washington State; luscious Santa Barbara *uni* (preferred over Maine sea urchin for its sweetness); and Alaskan king salmon roe as juicy as berries. Keeping presliced fish in glass cases, the practice at most sushi bars, is a crime against freshness in Yasuda's book.

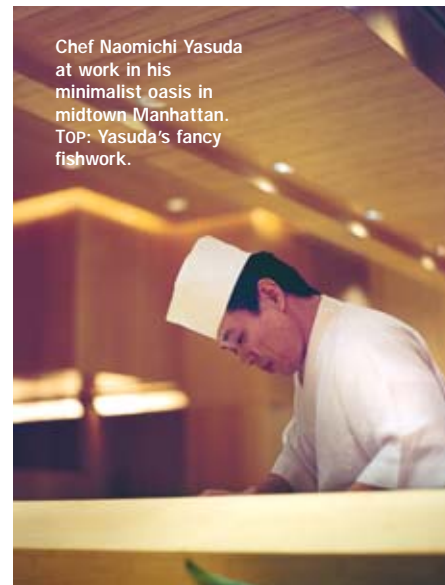
The trimmings: Yasuda advises not to dunk an entire piece of sashimi or sushi in soy sauce, or shoyu, but rather to dip only a small edge of

the fish. Purists frown on mixing wasabi into the soy sauce, as it can dull the flavor of the fish. Go easy on the ginger, too; it's meant to be a subtle between-bites palate freshener, not a condiment. If a sushi bar serves pink-dyed ginger, or wasabi paste straight out of a tube, flee.

The drink: Green tea is sushi's best friend, especially since it helps your body metabolize the salt from soy sauce. Yasuda's brew of new and aged *gyokoro* leaves from buds picked once a year coaxes out the nuances in the fish. Good sake, like *Kikusui* or the drier *Hakkaisan*, should be drunk cold and matched to the fish, just as wine would be. Beer works too, particularly the Yebisu brand. Slightly smoky brown *houjicha* tea revives the palate at the end of the meal.

Savoir faire: To establish rapport with a sushi chef (and to display your expertise), start by requesting a fish that's somewhat rare but not esoteric - say *kanpachi* (yellowtail) or *chuturo* (a medium-fatty cut of tuna). Before the first bite, say "*itadaki-mas*" (a kind of grace), and then compliment the fish or the rice. If you opt for *omakase* (chef's choice), indicate your price range - \$70 to \$90 per person is respectable - your appetite level, and your fish preferences, and then let the chef do the rest. Just don't ask for the California roll. ■

Chef Naomichi Yasuda at work in his minimalist oasis in midtown Manhattan. TOP: Yasuda's fancy fishwork.



AMERICA'S BEST SUSHI

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Makoto *Washington, D.C.*
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