

# fish'n'nips

**Londoners are beating the Japanese at their own game by making a success of sushi bars. CHARLES CAMPION goes fishing for the story**

**Fast food** has become an integral part of the capital's culture. It's not just for tourists, it's for everybody – grabbing a snack on the way home, having a quick lunch/dinner because time is short, going for a bite to eat while out on the town at the weekend. And, of course, with the rise in fast food comes the chance to make quick money.

Historically it is the Americans who have been most successful at knife-and-fork imperialism – the gastronomy of France (which has never quite caught on to the fast-food bandwagon) is currently losing in extra time to the massed forces of McDonald's, and in China the evangelists from Coca-Cola have made more progress in ten years than the missionaries did in 200.

But there is another country which has quietly been taking on the Americans head-to-head. The sushi bars of London may not be chains like McDonald's, but they are extremely successful. Even take-away chain Pret-A-Manger has been forced to stock more sushi lunches due to customer demand.

Sushi, the healthy raw fish delicacy so enjoyed by the Japanese, has a reputation based on quality, freshness and a slice of tradition that stretches back in Eastern history for aeons, and it is partly this idea of quality, of the one-to-one service, that makes sushi popular. However, in London, the invasion of classical Japanese sushi is being headed off at the pass by ranks of brash, new, entirely home-grown sushi restaurants. On a culinary front, Britain is not the pushover it was, and all over the capital entrepreneurs are taking the concept of sushi, reworking it and making a fortune, much to the chagrin of Japanese traditionalists.

Caroline Bennett is just such an entrepreneur. As a fund manager, based in the City but working mainly in Japan, she was quick to spot the potential of 'kaiten', or conveyor-belt sushi. These are essentially self-service restaurants with a difference: you sit still and the food comes to you. You make your choice from plates of sushi which are paraded in front of you, and at the end of the meal counting the colour-coded plates forms the basis of your bill. So in 1994, Caroline Bennett started the first Tokyo-style kaiten in London, transforming a unit overlooking the platforms of Liverpool Street Station. It was called Moshi Moshi – which in Japan is a general-purpose greeting used instead of 'Hello', particularly when answering the phone – and it has been a runaway success.

Restaurants like Moshi Moshi, the Japanese Canteen in Islington and to some extent even the smaller traditional but innovative sushi establishments like Ikkyu in Tottenham Court Road changed sushi for ever. What they did was make it affordable. In the Seventies, sushi was exclusive, obscure and expensive, and unless you were fluent in Japanese, a bit of a lottery. In the Nineties, sushi is bargain-priced, quick, easy and even for vegetarians.

What is sushi? Ask this question in a traditional Japanese restaurant and the answer is a formal one: sushi is an art form masquerading as food. Nigiri sushi is a ball of sticky rice, bound with rice wine vinegar and topped with a smear of wasabi – a furnace-hot green paste made from dried horseradish root – then a perfectly cut morsel of ultra-fresh raw fish, shrimp, or shellfish is arranged on top. Alternatives are tamago or Japanese omelette, or, very rarely, raw meat. Maki are small rolls made with rice and fish within a casing of papery nori seaweed, and futomaki are the same thing only larger.

To become a sushi chef takes absolute dedication and a little over seven years. Typically the timetable would run like this: year one, washing up; year two, cooking rice; year three, making miso soup and maki mono (the rolls); year four, fish cleaner; year five, fish filler; year six, cutting slices of 'easy' fish like salmon or mackerel; year seven, ready for tuna.

What's more, there is an almost umbilical link between a Japanese sushi chef and



**Fish on the move: Moshi Moshi was the first conveyor-belt sushi restaurant to open in London, at Liverpool Street Station.**

his fishmonger – they will have worked together throughout the seven-year learning curve and the idea of a traditional sushi chef shopping around for value is complete anathema.

Enter the Brits. Operations like Moshi Moshi and the Japanese Canteen are clever enough to demand high standards from their fishmongers and chefs but flexible enough to buy wisely and without the constraints of tradition; plus they are hip enough to make 'sushi' out of whatever they fancy.

British fishmongers have caught on, too, and Matthew Anglin of Aberdeen Sea Products – one of the few British fishmongers to sell to Japanese chefs as well as the English upstarts – admits that, 'The influence of the Japanese chefs has greatly improved the quality of fish in London, as well as increasing the range of fish that's on offer.' Now he's selling bluefin, yellowfin and big-eye tuna – fish which are bought purely on two criteria: colour and freshness. And as the tuna market is a worldwide market, the price can vary from £2.50 to £5 per lb from day to day. As Matthew says, 'Buying tuna is a horrendously risky business.' Once again the Brits are nudging ahead. One of the advantages of the rise and rise in Mediterranean cuisine is that the 'spare' bits of the tuna – the tail, or fish that's marginally too old to make good sushi – can be found a home chargrilled on menus throughout the West End. This makes buying less risky and so keeps costs down – something that's a lesser consideration to traditionalist Japanese fishmongers whose sole watchword is quality.

Sushi has changed: 200 people a day visit Moshi Moshi at Liverpool Street and more than 20 per cent of the sushi sold is vegetarian – maki rolls with carrot, green-olive paste; baby corn and mayonnaise; red, green and yellow peppers; spinach and cheese; sun-dried tomato. All unheard of in Japan. The Japanese Canteen is similarly iconoclastic – big sellers there are enoki mushroom maki, and futomaki, made from spinach, egg and mushroom, and prices continue to fall. Both make the virulent wasabi an option rather than the rule, and both understand Londoners' addiction to gari – the reddish pickled ginger that is traditionally used to clear the palate between mouthfuls of different sushi. Gari is so impossibly moreish that diners have been seen sitting down to eat a plateful of it after their sushi – behaviour that raises hackles in the more traditional Japanese establishments.

Even on the fish side, the British approach makes short work of Japanese traditions. Here, salmon is the most popular fish, closely followed by tuna and shrimp. Consumption of those traditional sushi, described euphemistically as 'challenging', like shako (squilla), ika (cuttlefish) or kohada (gizzard shad), continues to falter – it appears that tradition alone is not enough reason for people to eat something they dislike. Both the skills of the fish buyer and the welcoming of new styles are geared to the same end. The British sushi houses do not want to be small, expensive and exclusive. They want to be large, popular and have a high turnover, so if the punters don't like raw octopus, sell them sun-dried tomatoes. It seems to work, and behind the strategy is yet another hidden agenda: a loophole means that there's nothing to stop sushi bars being the sandwich bars of the Nineties. Providing that cooking (ie the rice) is carried out off the premises, and a fixed percentage of the turnover is take-away business, you can open a sushi bar in premises with lowly class A1 planning permission rather than the A3 consent you need for a conventional restaurant.

It seems that London's restaurateurs have taken sushi and bastardised it for their own good; what's more, it seems to have worked. Scheduled to open this autumn is yet another vast kaiten sushi bar destined for Poland Street, it'll have hundreds of seats and be modern rather than traditional. It's not the ultimate, though. In California even conveyor-belt sushi is old hat. There, instead of a mechanical system, diners are confronted with a small river and plates of sushi float past them on the current; by night the whole affair is illuminated by tiny floodlights. I can't wait.

PHOTOGRAPH BY Fleur Olby

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## Winners

### The top ten at Moshi Moshi:

1. **Sake** – salmon.
2. **Maguro** – tuna.
3. **Ebi** – shrimp.
4. **California maki** – crabstick and avocado.
5. **Tomaki** – cone-shaped California roll, crabstick and avocado.
6. **Tekkamaki** – tuna roll.
7. **Sakomaki** – salmon roll.
8. **Saba** – mackerel.
9. **Tai** – red snapper.
10. Sun-dried tomato roll.

## Losers

### The sushi described as 'challenging' (which means horrid):

1. **Uni** – sea urchin.
2. **Ayoagi** – round clam.
3. **Tako** – octopus.
4. **Ika** – cuttlefish.
5. **Kohada** – gizzard shad.
6. **Kazunoko** – herring roe.
7. **Shako** – squilla.
8. **Akagi** – ark shell.
9. **Mirugai** – giant clam.
10. **Awabi** – abalone.

