

AMERICAN ATTITUDES TOWARD SUSHI AS A REFLECTION OF ATTITUDES
TOWARD GLOBALIZATION AND CULTURE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department

of Anthropology

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts of Anthropology

By

Emily V. McDonald

August, 2016

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ABSTRACT

This research examines American attitudes toward “high quality” sushi in America, in order to examine ideas that individuals have regarding the authenticity of “ethnic” food and the designation of “high quality.” By examining American sushi restaurants’ reputations and trends regarding *omakase* menus from different large metropolitan cities in the United States and observing and interviewing members of a large sushi enthusiast organization, attitudes and ideas that individuals have regarding identity and globalization are revealed. The perception of American sushi’s quality, particularly as it relates to adherence to or deviation from traditional Japanese sushi production, indicate real and imagined ideas of sushi’s cultural identity, as this “ethnic” food is being experienced outside of its original culture by individuals who may or may not have ever experienced Japanese culture. Individuals and geographic areas with different levels of exposure to Japanese cuisine and culture appear to influence the manner that sushi is produced and how its quality is determined. The perception of what is termed “Americanized” sushi also reveal values and attitudes held by Americans regarding authenticity and quality in food production.

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Chapter One

Food is and always has been a dynamic and important cultural commodity. Cultures often find ways to express themselves in culinary practices that reflect the environment and the unique tastes of those cultures. But as the world becomes more connected and culinary practices traverse vast areas, and the meaning and preparation of dishes evolve and change. Sushi is considered a simple dish that has different meanings and interpretations as it evolved over time and as it traveled to different geographic areas with different cultures. Sushi comes in many different forms, but the one unifying factor is the use of cooked rice that has been seasoned with vinegar. I chose to examine *nigiri* (“little rectangles of rice topped with slices of fish and other toppings that sushi chefs squeeze together with their fingers”) because this type of sushi can be an icon of historic Japanese culture (Corson, 2007, p. 24). *Nigiri* is emblematic of Japanese culture as it is readily recognized as Japanese by Japanese and non-Japanese people and its construction reflects Japan’s history, beliefs, and values, similar to the way that certain kinds of cheese are emblematic of France (Holtzman, 2006, p. 369). Sushi can also represent a modern cosmopolitan lifestyle and a global flow of economic and cultural capital when it is served in a Westernized roll, like a California roll.

Sushi has become a very popular dining choice not only in Japan but all over the world. Sushi has also become an important part of the global exchange of practices. Sasha Issenberg (2007), author of *The Sushi Economy*, explained that “Sushi as we know it is very much an invention of the late twentieth century, in particular in the flows of money, power, people, and culture that define the era’s interconnectedness” (p. xi). The sushi industry is a prime example of globalization, as the taste for sushi has travelled the globe and has developed into a lucrative economic venture for all levels of production, from procuring fish

and rice to the preparing of sushi at a sushi restaurant. Issenberg stated that eating at a sushi bar is an immersion in fast-paced global commerce, particularly the complex dynamics of the blue fin tuna trade demonstrate how global capitalism has affected the all industries, especially the deep-sea fishing industry (Issenberg, 2007, p. xi). The observable global connectedness that Issenberg describes in the economics of the sushi industry undoubtedly influences some of the ideas that consumers have associated with sushi consumption, but the economics associated with the food likely cannot influence all of the ideas consumers have, as this assumes that all consumers would have specific knowledge of the economics of sushi. Additionally, in the influence that consumers have over the demand for a product also must influence the economic dynamics of the sushi industry. I do not believe that all consumers thoroughly research their food, and so their information must develop in a different manner. Additionally, the influence that consumers have over the demand for a product also must influence the economic dynamics of the sushi industry.

In support of this idea, food historian and scholar, Warren Belasco, has described a “food studies axiom,” in which he states that “what we think about food may have little to do with the actual material properties of the food itself,” and thus it is greatly possible that the industry is more heavily influenced by the opinions of consumers rather than the economics of procurement, production, and distribution (Johnston and Baumann, 2010, p. 31). Naturally, this would mean that the information one has regarding sushi influences a consumer’s perception of the dish, and would likely take on new meanings as the information a consumer has changes. In Japan, it is understood that sushi was first a fast food snack that later became a luxury item (although there is more humble sushi still exists) that is infrequently eaten, and usually only at a restaurant (Feng, 2012, p. 205; Corson, 2007, p.

317). These new meanings can lead to changes in the preparation and experience of consuming the dish changes as it moves from Japan to elsewhere in the world, where the knowledge of the dish's origins are undoubtedly varied.

When sushi crosses geographic areas and breaks traditions, the perception of its preparation reveals attitudes about prestige toward the components contributing to and the aesthetic style of the dish. These attitudes and opinions regarding quality reflect attitudes toward globalization's influence over culture products. Scholars have asserted that "globalization offers us opportunities to discuss differences and similarities between cultures," and I feel that sushi and the ideas surrounding it allow for a discussion about differences and similarities between cultures (Edwards, 2012, p. 224). I further believe that sushi is a valid medium for studying such attitudes, as it is a high status and popular "ethnic food" in America with a documented history of traditions regarding preparation and presentation both in America and Japan (Wenning, 2016, p. 3, 32). Now, while the economics of the sushi industry are undoubtedly interesting, my main concern is the ideas that consumers have that drive this industry and what this says about their perception of the experience of eating sushi. By examining and comparing the history, chef training, aesthetic norms, and public opinions of sushi created in an Americanized fashion and sushi created in a Japanese fashion in different American cities should show how these two styles of sushi are markedly different. More importantly it should show the differences that individuals with different experiences, worldviews, and cultural knowledge establish which style should be deemed higher quality than the other.

Methodology

In order to examine the ideas that Americans have toward sushi, I took two approaches – one to examine sushi menu trends and popularity in different areas in the United States, and the other to ask consumers directly about their opinions on sushi. First, I pulled a select group of sushi restaurants from New York, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and Houston that were highly rated on the Zagat website. I did this in order to get a broader view of what sushi was available around the United States, and to have quantitative data to reinforce any ideas that I found regarding sushi. For example, if a restaurant is very Americanized, is highly rated, and individuals express that this restaurant is one of their favorites, it would be fair to assume that the idea that this restaurant and its food is high quality that idea is widespread and can assume to be a pervasive opinion.

These cities have different histories and current trends with Japanese food and thus may likely reflect the different relationships with Japanese food, particularly sushi, these Americans developed over time. I am interested in how this relationship can affect how a person from that area defines high desires “quality” sushi. I have chosen the Zagat website for its regular customer feedback and restaurant scoring system. Zagat also provides menus for restaurants that are highly rated, but do not have a website of their own. The restaurants were selected from the Zagat website, if they fell within a certain threshold of its “food” rating, as this would indicate that individual would say that the sushi alone was worth going to the restaurant.

According to Zagat’s 2013 methodology, their ratings are based on a thirty-point scale, which is broken down as follows: scores between twenty-six and thirty are deemed “extraordinary to perfection;” scores between twenty-one and twenty-five are considered

“very good to excellent;” scores between sixteen and twenty are “good to very good;” scores between eleven and fifteen are “fair to good;” and scores between zero and ten are considered “poor to fair.” The restaurants are rated on three measures: food, décor, service. The average price of a meal at the restaurant is also included in the information Zagat provides. Based on these ratings, I selected fifty-seven restaurants in the Houston (15 restaurants), Los Angeles (13 restaurants), New York (15 restaurants), and Las Vegas (14 restaurants) areas that had a food rating of at least as “very good to excellent.” I created an Excel file of the restaurants and their menus found that there were some interesting trends among the 57 restaurants I felt confident in studying for the quantitative part of my research.

After that, I looked up the menus of these restaurants to assess what kind of food they were serving, and how expensive the restaurant is, because the economic value of a dish can indicate the perception of the restaurant and its food’s quality. I compared the style of sushi against the cost and score for the quality of its food. I also looked for keywords in the description of these restaurants on their websites and on Zagat to reinforce whether it was more common for a restaurant to indicate that its menu was traditional or not as a selling point, as this would indicate that one would be more appealing than the other. I defined “traditional Japanese” sushi as sushi, particularly *nigiri*, that is similar to what a person may find in Japan. This kind of sushi would include rice seasoned with vinegar, seaweed (*nori*), and simply seasoned and frequently raw fish (with the exceptions of egg, shrimp, and eel) or vegetables. There would only be a few ingredients (approximately two to three, including the rice) included in a single piece of sushi. Americanized sushi would include fried food items, non-seafood proteins, herbs, spices, sauces (especially those with mayonnaise bases), and

dairy products. Americanized sushi would often include several items in a single piece of sushi.

Next, I developed a relationship with the Sushi Club of Houston, the largest sushi enthusiast club in the United States. I went to Sushi Club events, which include dinners with other members at local sushi restaurants and sushi cooking classes at various venues in Houston. During that time, I met members and interviewed some in order to get a deeper understanding, developed through multi-level thematic analysis, of what someone who is very interested in sushi considers high-quality sushi, and what implications their opinions point toward in their opinions of whether Americanized or traditional Japanese sushi is more appealing. Through this two-pronged approach that looks both from the top-down and the bottom-up, I felt more confident about the conclusions I drew rather than electing to do one over the other.

Theoretical Framework

Exploring the deeper meanings of “quality” in sushi production and consumption habits requires a deeper understanding of what it is that makes individuals deem a product as high value. As the British anthropologist Mary Douglas suggested, taste (i.e. the choice of an item over another based on the selected item’s perception of being “better”) is the product of hierarchal ideals that individuals place on an object to assess its quality (Brumann, 1998, p. 143-144). In other words, individuals choose certain components of an object to consider valuable, and similar objects lacking those components are considered less valuable. When given the opportunity, individuals will elect to have the object with those components as this item is, to them, perceivably “better.” Thus, all ideas that people have regarding quality

toward all objects are based on determining what is good and what is not, including everyday objects like food.

Jean Baudrillard (2005) stated that everyday objects are the products of knowledge and skills brought about by a culture to fill a need or desire (p. 9). These objects then take on an emotional value as they become more ingrained in the culture, and the applied knowledge and skills that goes into making an object is what deems the object as “authentic” (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 4). In time, the applied knowledge and skills that go into creating these objects are refined to create a “better” product, and when coupled with the idea of the authenticity of the cultural practice it was born from, the object becomes more highly valued. Baudrillard (2005) explained, new practices are continually added to the pre-existing techniques that change the practice of production are what become known as the “real practice” of creating an object (p. 9). Thus, the practice of creating a product in a way that is reminiscent of the traditional method yields a product that people consider “real,” even if the technique in producing it is different than the original method. So, while styles of cuisine are changed and evolve within their original culture, they are not considered inauthentic but rather improved and more relevant. The object’s authenticity remains intact as long as the original culture is the primary contributor to the evolution of this object.

Authenticity certainly appears to be an important in the assessment of the quality of food particularly for individuals who are especially interested in exploring high-quality food items. Johnston and Baumann (2010) described the importance of authenticity as a determinant of quality in American “foodie” culture, which is a culture of individuals who prize high quality food and actively seek out exceptional food consumption experiences. American “foodies” are engaged in “identity politics and status distinctions through their

eating practices,” (Johnston and Baumann, 2010, p. 69, 4). Johnston and Bauman (2010) documented certain qualities of food that foodies used to define the worthiness of food, and they found that exoticism and authenticity were very important in determining the value of food (p. 4).

Ideas like authenticity affect the economic value placed on food because authenticity adds to the symbolic value of the food item. In consumer-oriented societies, producers create commodities that take on symbolic value, because that symbolic value is the basis of the commodity’s value on the market (Koch and Elmore, 2006, p. 556). This concept is what Baudrillard refers to as “symbolic exchange,” which elaborates on a Marxist critique of capitalism (Koch and Elmore, 2006, p. 556). Symbolic exchange is an important aspect in the study of globalization as it indicates that a product’s value is based on *perceived* symbolic value, which inevitably varies from place to place. Baudrillard explains that “Western information cultures” are networked to generate symbolic values in a constantly changing symbolic environment, in which the new demand for access to symbolic status is generated (Koch and Elmore, 2006, p. 556). In other words, Western cultures, like that in America, are primed for ascribing meaning and value to an object which either bolsters or diminishes the object’s symbolic status and economic value.

It is this “simulated environment of symbolic exchange” that encourages various industries to manufacture “fetish objects,” which are items that are wanted solely for their symbolic value (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 111). Fetish objects are only valuable because the consumer assigns the value in such object. Thus, such objects require the consumer to decide what aspects of the object determine its quality and desirability, as the value of the object is based on their personal affinity for the object (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 111). Authenticity does

appear to add to the value of these fetish items, as it seems to provide the consumer with an experience that is not mass produced and feels individualistic to them. However, if an individualistic experience with objects is appealing, then it could be reasoned that an object that deviates from “real” or “traditional” practices of production may be more valuable to the consumer as they are specifically different from what has been produced in the past. In the case of Americanized versus Japanese sushi, this could explain why many Americans favor Americanized sushi, as it is composed of ingredients that are prepared in a manner that suits their tastes but presented in an innovative different manner. However, for some Americans, the Americanization of sushi is producing a disingenuous product that is not highly valued because it does not possess the attributes that made traditional Japanese sushi that they deem as valuable, particularly regarding the authenticity of the dish. This perspective is similar to Baudrillard’s opinion on the value of “kitsch” versus “authentic” items.

Baudrillard states in his comparison of “kitsch” versus “authentic” items, that kitsch items have a weak value because the value of the object is tied to creating a product that maximizes statistical profitability, rather than provide the consumer with a distinctive and rare experience, as the authentic object does (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 111). Thus, a kitsch item may resemble an authentic item, but the lack of distinctiveness in production of the kitsch item makes it less valuable. The distinctiveness of the item and the effort put in to making the item “correctly” makes the authentic item more highly valued. It would appear that the idea that someone is consuming a “real” item rather than a reproduction is far more appealing. Additionally, Walter Benjamin agrees that original objects made by a process that is established through ritual and tradition, which creates an aura of authenticity that increases the value of the object (Rickly-Boyd, 2012, p. 269). This would add evidence to the idea that

kitsch items lose value because they do not have an aura of authenticity and can be endlessly reproduced.

This logic is relevant to perceptions that people have toward food. In José Johnston and Shyon Baumann's examination of the "foodie" culture in America, they found that eating authentically, that is to mean eating in the particular style of cuisine from a specific culture often from a specific geographic area, is important to the American foodie because it is distinctive and seems more "real" to them. Johnston and Baumann (2010) state that in order for a food to be considered authentic it should have "*geographic specificity, is 'simple,' has a personal connection, can be linked to a historical tradition, or has "ethnic" connections*" (p. 70). The idea that there is "real" and "authentic" food that exists, but that food has to have a history that is tied to a place indicates that consumers demand an assumed cultural knowledge and personal experience from the producers of their food, particularly food that can be considered "ethnic cuisine," which Japanese cuisine is considered in the United States.

Since these factors make an item distinct and that distinctiveness increases symbolic value of the item, the economic value of such an item will likely increase. Individuals with a high socioeconomic status have greater access to highly valued items than those with a lower socioeconomic status, and high status individuals will seek to collect valuable items in order to identify themselves as having a high socioeconomic status (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 111). Veblen referred to this concept as "conspicuous consumption," in which the wealthier individuals in a culture will simply buy objects for the sake of displaying their own wealth and social status, which includes their cultural knowledge (Carolan, 2005, p. 83). Thus, if the wealthy are collecting what is deemed as "high value" in a society, it can be assumed that

good method of discovering what that society values includes exploring what the wealthy choose to collect. Although, it should be noted that not all wealthy people have what can be considered “good taste” so the cost of an item does not necessarily mean that it is highly valued because of its “quality.”

These ideas lead me to choose to examine the “*omakase*” menus in sushi restaurants. The “*omakase*” menu is a traditional Japanese “chef’s choice” tasting menu composed of multiple courses of sushi, which has been popular in American society since the 1980s and tends to be expensive (Issenberg, 2007, p. 121). *Omakase* translates to “I’ll leave it up to you” and it is “an invitation to the chef” to “not just serve what he thinks are the freshest ingredients of the day but also to show off his skills” (Corson, 2007, p. 76). Traditionally, in Japan sushi bars did not have menus, so ordering in such a way developed as a way to get the best of what the chef can provide (Corson, 2007, p. 76). *Nation’s Restaurant News* food writer, Florence Fabricant defended celebrity sushi chef Masa Takayama’s three hundred dollar *omakase* menu at his restaurant in New York, Ginza Sushi-Ko, by explaining that: “15 pieces of sushi in a fine sushi bar...can easily set you back \$150, so for \$300 for an entire meal is not so far off the mark” (Fabricant, 2002, p. 26). Since these meals are expensive would imply that the meals are “high quality.”

Further, the *omakase* menu requires the customer to relinquish their power of choice to the chef, and allow the chef to prepare whatever meal he or she deems as high quality. This act allows the diner to self-identify as knowledgeable by choosing to have the highest quality meal possibly via having a cultural expert (i.e. the sushi chef) select what the diner will be served. This idea is supported theoretically by Mary Douglas, as she explained through her “cultural theory,” that the high-spending consumer’s motivation to consume the

“best” sushi qualifies these individuals as “hierarchists” in their consumption patterns, which is an individual who value group membership and protects the status quo (Brumann, 1998, p. 143). If these individuals are hierarchists, then they should value traditions that keep sushi as a refined art that is difficult to replicate.

Individuals who purchase expensive *omakase* sushi meals are identifying themselves as hierarchists. They are asserting that they are purchasing the best sushi because it meets or exceeds the certain criteria that the consumer has deemed important to the quality of sushi. Since sushi is a culturally specific food, individuals who purchase the *omakase* menus, identify themselves also as knowing what is the “best” sushi because it has been identified for them by an expert (i.e. the chef). Other scholars have pointed out that food identity and globalization are linked, and foods like sushi are still identified as Japanese even when it does not come from or resemble the norm in Japan (Edwards, 2012, p. 212). I suggest that individuals who recognize the food’s identity, self-identify themselves as knowledgeable of the food and its associated culture.

The identification of an individual as being an authority of this particular Japanese dish, but who may have never even been to Japan, reveals ideas that the individual has toward the globalization of food practice and whether there is an ability to experience an unique dish that is attached to a particular culture can be transplanted from one culture to another in different geographic areas. The act of identifying a person as an expert of Japanese cuisine is expressed through the diner’s food choice, which means that how a person chooses to eat their sushi reflects the prestige of that type of preparation. When sushi “experts” in America, like Trevor Corson (author of *the Story of Sushi*) or Daniel Gelb (director of documentary film *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*), champion eating traditional sushi, they add to the

social prestige of traditional Japanese sushi practice within an American audience. Paige Edwards (2012) stated that sushi's perception outside of Japan has become "static and unchanging" because sushi has become an international emblem of Japanese identity (p. 211). This perception indicates that while the history and the cultural identity of the dish are necessary components in the determination of sushi's symbolic value in America, which affects the economic value of traditional Japanese sushi. Therefore, while the Japanese history and identity is tied to the American perception of sushi, it is not treated like a traditional Tokyo snack food but instead like a high-priced luxury meal in America (Ishige, 2001, p. 227).

This perceived prestige of traditional Japanese sushi to American sushi consumers may conflict with the integration of sushi into the American diet and the popularization of sushi in America, particularly by the way of Asian fusion cuisine or by the Americanization of sushi, makes determining the appeal of Americanized versus the traditional Japanese sushi more relevant to the examination of attitudes toward globalization. My primary goal is to discover if sushi that stays true to a traditional *edomae* construction (its "Japanese" identity) is a more highly sought-after eating experience than the Americanized sushi that has been re-interpreted to be more palatable to Americans. Does the Americanized reinterpretation of sushi give that type of sushi a more or less valuable position in the global economy? By examining the aesthetic authenticity of the *omakase* menus from reputable Japanese restaurants in major U.S. cities that have a high density of prestigious restaurants (i.e. New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas) the social value of adhering to or breaking away from traditional norms of sushi making practice is revealed.

Also, these trends should show what ideas that individuals have about sushi in America, and how they feel about a food culture that has gone global. The globalization of a food culture does not automatically mean that sushi is homogenized to suit the tastes of a new audience. Theodore Bestor explains that globalization does not homogenize cultural differences or “erase the salience of cultural labels,” but rather “the global economy of consumption, [and] the brand equity of sushi as Japanese cultural property adds to the cachet of both the country and the cuisine” (Bestor, 2000, p. 58). By this rationale, “high quality” menus should contain culturally distinct dishes rather than a homogenized product. The exploration of attitudes toward sushi’s re-interpretation and its perceived quality is supported by interviewing and observing the Sushi Club of Houston.

In order to examine individuals who seek to identify themselves as knowledgeable about sushi, and want to learn to determine the style of sushi (i.e. Americanized or “traditional” Japanese sushi) that is of the highest quality, I sought out the Sushi Club of Houston. To clarify my definition, by Americanized sushi I would describe a piece of *nigiri* with salmon, yogurt, dill, and mint which is combining several different ingredients than what would be found in traditional sushi. I would describe traditional Japanese sushi as a prepared in the style most often found in Japan, so it could be a piece of *nigiri* with a slice of fish with only a small amount of wasabi between the fish and the rice. I hypothesized that chefs who lean toward a more *edomae* tradition of sushi preparation and construction will be more highly regarded by the big-spending consumption hierarchists who are the individuals that are ordering (and paying for) highly-priced, highly-reputable sushi.

History of Sushi in Japan

Re-tracing the history of sushi is not as easy of a task as one might imagine as it has changed and evolved over time. Sushi's history actually starts outside of Japan, along the Mekong River in what is now landlocked southern China, Laos, and northern Thailand around 400-300 BC – shortly after rice cultivation was established there (Corson, 2007, p. 28). The people in this area were looking to secure a food source by preserving the freshwater fish from the river, which were not consistently in ample supply (Corson, 2007, p. 28). Farmed fish also had to be dealt with in timely fashion, as they had to be harvest shortly after monsoon season, before the rice paddies that they swam in dried up (Corson, 2007, p. 28). The people living further inland had started preserving whole fish, innards and all, in salt, which resulted in a pungent fermented fish paste (Corson, 2007, p. 28-29). The farmers living along the Mekong River were inspired by this process, and adapted it by packing a gutted fish with cooked rice (Corson, 2007, p. 28-29). This product did preserve the fish but the rice was very sour, and was described by local in the 12th century as tasting “no different than the vomit of a drunkard,” which is likely why the people then would discard the rice and only eat the fish as a side dish (Corson, 2007, p. 28-29, 31).

This form of sushi spread from China to Japan, where it became known as *narezushi* and became popular enough that by 718 AD Japanese people could use it to pay their taxes (Corson, 2007, p. 29). Currently, *narezushi* is almost unrecognizable to today's sushi enthusiasts (Ishige, 2001, p. 230). Around 718 AD, *narezushi* began to branch beyond freshwater fish and began to include shellfish from the ocean (Corson, 2007, p. 30). As time passed and *narezushi*'s popularity grew, Japanese aristocrats with regular access to fresh fish, began eating *narezushi* earlier in the fermentation process and by 1400 they were eating it so

early in the process that the fish was relatively fresh and the rice was much more palatable (Corson, 2007, p. 30). Two hundred years later, this form of *narezushi* received its name and was referred to as *nama-nari* or *nama-nare* which translates into English as “ready raw” and was only aged for a short amount of time – from only a few days to a month (Corson, 2007, p. 30). Interestingly, this form of sushi changed from being a side dish to a luxury self-contained meal (Corson, 2007, p. 30).

In the second half of the 1600s, the role of the rice in *nama-nari* changed when a doctor of a shogun added vinegar to rice and adored the tangy taste that was reminiscent of the rice in *nama-nari* but did not need to be fermented; thus changing the role of the rice as a preserving agent to a flavoring component of the dish (Corson, 2007, p. 31). During the 1600, sushi changed further by becoming a fast-food in Kyoto and Osaka, that included rice that was seasoned with sugar and vinegar that was spread “in a box, laying whole fillets of fish on top, compressing it with heavy stones for a few days” and “after pressing...was cut into pieces like a cake” (Corson, 2007, p. 40, 64). In the same century, a new shogun moved the capital of Japan away from Kyoto to the city of Edo, which is present day Tokyo (Corson, 2007, p. 64). The capital’s move to Tokyo, and the form of sushi that traveled with it began the beginning of what we recognize as sushi today.

Around 1818, a Japanese sushi chef that was making the Kyoto- and Osaka-style “quick sushi” but found the process was too slow to keep up with the demand for quick meal, so he came up with the idea of hand-squeezing balls of rice and applying a slice of fish for a fast to-order method of producing sushi (Corson, 2007, p. 65). This form of sushi is called *nigiri* (a rectangular lump of rice topped with a thin slice of fish), that was made popular in the Edo period (1600 – 1868) of Japan and is what I am defining as “traditional

Japanese” sushi in my research (Corson, 2007, p. 317; Ishige, 2001, p. 106). This form of sushi can be thought of as the beginning of “modern sushi,” and it is still what most Japanese people eat today (Ishige, 2001, p. 227; Corson, 2007, p. 85). As Naomichi Ishige (2001), author of *the History and Culture of Japanese Food*, stated that *nigiri* (also referred to as *nigiri-zushi* and *edomae-zushi*) that was made popular in the Edo period was “the final stage in the transformation of sushi from a preserved food into a fast food” (p. 228, 231).

In the city of Edo (present day Tokyo), at the beginning of the nineteenth century, *nigiri* sushi as we know it today was created and rapidly became popular. Sushi shops developed their own style of service and production that made eating sushi a unique experience (Ishige, 2001, p. 227). Ishige (2001) states that sushi chefs are believed to have “inherited the temperament of Edokko, or ‘child of Edo’ (p. 227). He explains that the “term Edokko actually refers to the people from the city’s *shitamachi*, the large merchant and artisan district that was the centre not only of trade but also entertainment, fashion and urban lifestyles including snack shops” (Ishige, 2001, p. 227). Edo was a city littered with snack shops at the time. In 1804, a survey found that there were 6,165 shops that were “engaged in serving food,” which equates to one shop for every 170 townspeople (Ishige, 2001, p. 122). The popular restaurants in the area were mainly inexpensive *soba* (noodles), *tempura* (deep-fried meat or vegetables), and sushi shops (Ishige, 2001, p. 122). These meals served the purpose of providing the large population of single men living in Edo the chance to go out for snack foods that they preferred rather than cooking meals at home (Ishige, 2001, p. 123).

In Edo, there was a large population of single men for various reasons. There was a large amount of men in the military and in the construction industry, as most of the samurai at the time had come to live there to accompany the daimyo for a required two-year period of

residence, and many men working in construction had relocated to Edo to rebuild the city after a large fire (Ishige, 2001, p. 123). Many men with families had to leave their wives and children behind to work find work in Edo during this period, as their employment opportunities were not suited for family life (Ishige, 2001, p. 123). Men working in retail were only given board and lodging by their employers, and laborers and artisans in Edo were living in very cramped quarters, which inspired them to chose to go out for snack foods rather than cook at home (Ishige, 2001, p. 123).

Spending a large amount on food, even for the low-earning artisans and laborers, was important to Edo's food culture. The "prevailing ethos" dictated that it was "shameful to have money left over from the night before, and extravagance was not seen as a vice" (Ishige, 2001, p. 123-124). Since money was no object to the common man taking himself out for a meal, it is of no surprise that the Japanese upper-class in Edo were also eating out regularly (Ishige, 2001, p. 124). Edo inhabitants of every social class were very likely to eat regularly at a snack shop (Ishige, 2001, p. 124). In fact, in the early 1800s the shogun's authority was slipping as a nobleman named Sekiō Nakano was becoming more powerful (Corson, 2007, p. 79). His home was located near Yohei Sushi (a shop that was owned by Yohei Hanaya, the man who first successfully marketed *nigiri*) and Pine Sushi (Corson, 2007, p. 79). Prominent political figures who were trying to win Nakano's favor would purchase elaborate boxes of take-out sushi from these shops, which featured *nigiri* with several different toppings, to give to Nakano as a gift because these boxes of sushi were his favorite (Corson, 2007, p. 79).

These shops made extravagant and expensive sushi, and eating it became a fashion statement, so much so that samurai became listless and fell into gluttonous lifestyles (Corson, 2007, p. 78). Nakano's political influence did not last. In the 1840's Nakano's political

power declined, the government passed a prohibition against extravagance, which resulted in closing several sushi shops including Yohei Sushi and Pine Sushi (Corson, 2007, p. 78). Luckily, within two years the sushi restaurants would be back in business, and within a few more years the shops started to install counters or *tatami*-mat rooms for in-house dining rather than the traditional food stall that costumers stood at to wait for their order (Corson, 2007, p. 78-79).

After World War II, Americans were occupying Japan and banned outdoor food stalls as a health hazard, and sushi moved indoors entirely but sushi chefs maintained the essence of the stall by building high counters for diners to eat at, which is why contemporary sushi restaurants have sushi bars today (Corson, 2007, p. 79). American occupiers along with an earthquake in Kanto in 1923, are two contributing factors of the spread of *nigiri* throughout Japan (Corson, 2007, p. 65). After an earthquake in 1923 and World War II, much of Tokyo was destroyed and the city's sushi chefs fled the city and retreated to their hometowns to open *edomae-zushi* shops that served *nigiri* (Corson, 2007, p.66). American occupiers who aimed to improve the Japanese economy from the damage of the earthquake and World War II, promoted the restaurant industry and created a “consignment processing system” that specified that sushi chefs throughout the country should make *nigiri*-style sushi (Corson, 2007, p. 67). This made *nigiri* something that the entire country could enjoy.

Some sushi-serving restaurants at the time were oriented to operate like the socially well-regarded *ryôri* teahouse, which served full-course meals of various foods that were served banquet-style (Ishige, 2001, p. 122). The tea ceremony in Japan is a very distinctive and spiritual ritual. The meal at a *ryôri* teahouse, would be served in the *kaiseki* tradition which builds its practices off of Zen beliefs and since its conception has changed Japanese

dining culture (Ishige, 2001, p. 88, 90). *Kaiseki* is a traditional Japanese tea ceremony that involves “making and drinking tea in a specific, formalized manner” that takes years for practitioners to appropriately perform as they are expected to know the various aspects of Japanese history, religion (i.e. Zen Buddhism), and arts that are incorporated into the ceremony (Sato and Parry, 2015, p. 522). Corson (2007) explained that: “fancier sushi bars added elements of *kaiseki* cooking to the elaborate, multicourse meals they served, taking the high end of sushi further into the realm of extravagance” (p. 79). The food at the ceremony was meant to be limited so not as to mitigate the “stimulus of the rich, strong tea which will be drunk afterward” (Ishige, 2001, p. 88). Originally, the ideal menu consisted of only one soup and three small sides, but later four dishes became the standard – one dish of which was a raw fish or vinegared vegetable dish, similar to the main ingredients in sushi (Ishige, 2001, p. 89).

Aesthetics are very important to the *kaiseki* tradition, particularly creating an ambiance of naturalness, which includes eating seasonal food items, and creating plating arrangements in an asymmetrical (as true symmetry does not occur in nature) fashion and the inclusion of empty spaces (Ishige, 2001, p. 89-90). Many of the traditions of the *kaiseki* tea ceremony have become merged into the practice of sushi service, and ultimately into the experience of sushi consumption, particularly for the *omakase* menu experience at fine sushi restaurants. *Omakase* translates from Japanese to English as “I’ll leave it up to you” and is an invitation to the chef to serve what he thinks is freshest and to show off his skills as a chef (Corson, 2007, p. 76). It is a multiple course meal that reflects the *kaiseki* dining experience, as the *kaiseki* menu is typically three grilled or simmered *kaiseki* appetizers, followed by several different sushi selections that should be sequenced from light to heavy flavors, and

should be made of only seasonal ingredients (Corson, 2007, p. 76-77). Clearly, the Japanese tradition of sushi making and service are deeply connected to Japanese history and culture, which has given prestige to the technical and esoteric knowledge that comes with making and serving sushi in that tradition.

Japanese Sushi Chefs

Japanese sushi chefs are known for being engaging and boisterous, in fact they often loudly greet their customers by yelling “*Irasshaimase!*” which means “welcome” in Japanese (Corson, 2007, p. 5). Becoming a sushi chef in Japan is not a choice that people make flippantly or a career that allows the chef to progress to the top of the hierarchy in the kitchen quickly. Also, not everyone is welcome in the kitchen of a Japanese sushi restaurant. Women in Japan are not encouraged to work as sushi chefs for a variety of excuses that boil down to the idea that the restaurant’s sushi bar would be “defiled by the presence of a woman” (Corson, 2007, p. 53). In general, a sushi chef apprenticeship can require more than five years of commitment, which includes the first two years an aspiring sushi chef is only allowed to cook rice and wash dishes (Corson, 2007, p. 4, 55; Gelb, 2012). Preparing the rice is considered very difficult and traditional Japanese sushi chefs consider the rice to be a more important determinant of high quality sushi than the fish (Corson, 2007, p. 37-38). Becoming a master of sushi takes quite a long time as well. It will take ten years of working as a chef or owning a sushi restaurant before a sushi chef in Japan reaches the eligibility to be called a *shokunin*, a master sushi chef (Weaver and Gelb, 2012). Becoming a sushi chef, and the ability to be promoted is a trying and difficult process. In the film, *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, which documents the experiences of arguably the world’s best sushi chef, Jiro Ono, and his employees (including his son) at his Tokyo restaurant (*Sukiyabashi Jiro*), they describe the

process of developing skills as a sushi chef. Many of the Ono's employees recall having to spend hours simply drying seaweed (*nori*) and often ruining a tedious egg sushi dish called *tamago* (Weaver and Gelb, 2012).

One young chef working for Ono recalled being an apprentice and making *tamago* four times a day only to have the master chef say, "no good, no good, no good" (Weaver and Gelb, 2012). It was only after three to four months and approximately two hundred rejected batches of the dish, the young chef finally got the dish right. The young chef was so overcome with emotion when his dish was accepted by his sushi mentor that he broke down into tears of joy (Weaver and Gelb, 2012). When he says this, the young chef beams with pride, as he has met the standards of a man who is constantly pushing for sushi greatness. To me, this is indicative of the intense and laborious nature of the Japanese sushi making profession. Further, I believe that stories like this make the Japanese production of sushi seem more romantic to an American audience, which adds to the emotional value of traditionally prepared sushi.

Aesthetic Norms of Japanese Sushi

Where Japanese sushi came from is incredibly important to the presentation of modern sushi today. "What the world now knows as sushi began as a street snack in nineteenth-century Edo-era Tokyo," said Sasha Issenberg (2007, p. xxvi). What began as a humble snack for single men to grab between meals, has transcended the era and has become a highly sought-after experience. As with all objects in the world, different people have different tastes that alter the form of foods and the necessity of certain items. In Japan, there are clear preferences for the more traditional versions of sushi. Trevor Corson states in his book, "Japanese people still mostly eat *nigiri* sushi. Without Americans who are crazy for

rolls, the *nori* [seaweed used as a wrapper] business might still be [as it once was] languishing” (Corson, 2007, p. 85). Traditional sushi reflects the Japanese philosophy of cooking. Different from many other cuisines in the world that emphasize “the creation of new tastes of food that do not exist naturally, Japanese cooking methods strive to retain the natural tastes of food with a minimum of artificial processes” (Feng, 2012, p. 206). Thus, “traditional Japanese” sushi is defined by me as being prepared simply to bring out natural flavors, thereby reflecting the valuing, Japanese aesthetics and in Shinto religion, of nature.

Choosing a protein in Japan, especially in Tokyo, is always based on what is the freshest in the market that day. The largest seafood distributor in the world, *Tsukiji*, is located in Tokyo and is where most upscale sushi restaurants around the world get their fish (Issenberg, 2007, p.xvi). Selecting a proper fish to put on a sushi menu is no easy task. Fish at *Tsukiji* are handled by experts who grade the sushi on fat, texture, oil, color, flavor, and other features of the fish as well as from the feel, look and smell of the fish – all of which determine the (often exorbitant) price of the fish (Issenberg, 2007, p. xii). Japanese sushi patrons also tend to favor leaner cuts of fish (particularly tuna), as opposed to Americans, whose desire for fatty cuts of tuna (called *toro*) has changed the tuna market dramatically. In fact, American preferences for fatty cuts of tuna have in part been responsible for making fatty cuts of blue fin tuna the most sought-after and expensive sushi protein on the market (Issenberg, 2007, p. xii).

The foundation of a proper piece of sushi is the rice. In fact, even selecting the species, variety, and size of the rice grain is important. The preferred species of rice is *Japonica* because the grain is shorter and stickier than other types of rice, and the rice should be at least a medium size grain for an average sushi restaurant, or a short-grain for a high-end

sushi restaurant as the latter molds better (Corson, 2007, p. 37). Corson (2007) explained that “the most favored sushi rice is a variety is called *koshihikari* because the grain’s construction contributes to a firmer, denser texture,” and it contains “aromatic fatty acids” that provides flavor and moisture, which is considered crucial for quality by sushi connoisseurs (p. 38). The drying of sushi rice prior to milling is also important in creating a “high quality” sushi rice. “Sushi purists” prefer that the rice is dried in the sun over a few months rather than forced-dried with hot air. This is due to when the vinegar is added to the rice after it is cooked, the force-dried rice will not absorb the vinegar as it tends to develop a paste on the outside that the sun-dried rice does not develop (Corson, 2007, p. 38). Japanese sushi uses premium rice that has been polished by a trademarked process called *Kapika*, which entails that after the rice has had its hull and inner husk removed through a two-step milling process the grains are rubbed together and polish one another. This results in a rice that does not require much rinsing to remove starch released in the milling process, which makes the rice too sticky for “proper” sushi rice (Corson, 2007, p. 34).

The rice needs to be properly cleaned, cooked, and seasoned; and should be served at the correct temperature (Corson, 2007, p. 36). Sushi rice needs to be rinsed by cold clean water until the water runs clear, then the rice should be steamed and, it is most important that the “grains are firm, plump, and sticky” (Corson, 2007, p. 37-38). Traditional sushi chefs often add a small amount of *sake* and a strip of kelp which the rice is cooking to add flavor to the rice (Corson, 2007, p. 38). In Japan, sushi rice is cooked with less water than would be used for “regular rice” because too much moisture makes the grains too soft but too little moisture prevents the grains from absorbing the vinegar because the grains are too hard (Corson, 2007, p. 39). After the rice is cooked it is then allowed to cool, after which a

mixture of rice vinegar, sugar and salt should be applied by using a wooden or plastic paddle to gently break the rice apart, which is referred to as “cutting the rice” (Corson, 2007, p. 38-39). The ratio of vinegar and sugar applied to the sushi rice in Japan differs regionally, sushi rice in Kyoto tends to add more sugar and in Tokyo more vinegar is preferred (Corson, 2007, p. 40-41).

In the film, *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, Japanese sushi master Jiro Ono states that many people have misconceptions about the temperature at which the sushi rice should be served. He states that sushi rice should be served at body temperature, not chilled or hot (Weaver and Gelb, 2012). Even Japanese sushi chefs who have left Japan for the West agree that “proper” sushi rice is served slightly warm, despite a tendency in the West to serve rice cold. Chef Katsuya Uechi, owner of Kat-suya in Los Angeles, states: “I can tell a good chef from a bad chef by the sushi – the shape, the look. The fish should be cold, the rice a little warm. When you grab it, it doesn’t break, but when you put it in your mouth, it breaks easily” (Carlson, 2012, p. 24).

Traditionally, fish choices for sushi would include: boiled abalone, clam, saltwater eel, gizzard shad, or whitebait (Corson, 2007, p. 66). It was around 1840 that tuna improved its reputation as a “low-class” fish, but it was still disrespected by the upper classes for quite some time after (Corson, 2007, p. 66). After World War II, food rationing in Tokyo made chefs have to get creative with what they had and fish like mullet, toxic puffer fish, and snakehead were used (Corson, 2007, p. 67). The fish should be cut individually for each customer with a very sharp knife at a 30-degree angle, and the average size of a slice of fish is described as being “two fingers wide and four fingers long,” but it should be thicker for darker fish, and thinner for white fish (Feng, 2012: 208; Corson, 2007, p. 90).

As far as equipment to make sushi, sushi chefs also use very sharp, laminated, high-carbon knives and there are three knives that most have: a *yanagi* (for most of the work behind the sushi bar), a *usuba* (for cutting vegetables), and a *deba* (for filleting fish) (Corson, 2007, p. 7). They also use a wooden bowl called a *hangiri* which is used in the final steps of making sushi rice as it absorbs extra moisture from the rice while it is cooled with the help of a folding fan (Szwilius and Mitani, 2000, p. 7). The bamboo mat used to create rolls is called a *makisu* (Szwilius and Mitani, 2000, p. 7).

For *nigiri* the amount of rice should be “the size and space of a wine cork,” be squeezed into shape by hand into a rectangle (Corson, 2007, p. 91-93). A small smudge of wasabi should be placed on the rice rectangle on the top where the fish will be applied, and in Japan extra wasabi is not provided to costumers (Corson, 2007, p. 26, 321). Japanese sushi should be a simple but delicious meal that is comprised of few, but perfectly prepared, elements that work together to bring out the individual flavors of each element.

Public Opinion about Japanese Sushi

Japanese food that is prepared elsewhere in the world, in general, seems to maintain its Japanese identity by evoking images of an exotic and delicious amalgamation of traditional tastes and flavors, and sushi is certainly no different. Japanese sushi tends to have a great amount of prestige around it as it travels abroad and makes a home in new places. Yet, many feel that the traditional construction of the dish is an important aspect of enjoying sushi. Trevor Corson believes so deeply in the Japanese style of sushi that he hosts educational dinners to teach American sushi fans about “authentic” sushi (Corson, 2009, p. 9). He feels deeply that Americans can learn to love this form of sushi. He states, “these items can take some getting used to, and require knowledge about what to look for and how

to appreciate it...I've never met a sushi lover who didn't want to acquire more expertise and experience with the authentic sushi tradition" (Corson, 2009(a), p. 9). Corson also believes that an authentic Japanese sushi experience is becoming more highly sought-after than Americanized sushi (Corson, 2009(b), p. 24). It seems that the overwhelming opinion of sushi enthusiasts is that Japanese sushi may not be as likeable to the American mainstream right away, but with proper guidance and adherence to Japanese tradition, Americans can find a new and delicious way to eat sushi.

Sushi History and Trends in America

"American sushi" is not simply just a sushi dish that was made in America. "American sushi" is a dish that uses different proteins, rice, vegetables, fruits, sauces, condiments, and preparation styles (i.e. cooking and plating) than in traditional Japanese sushi practices. For example, an Americanized sushi menu item could be *nigiri* that is made with quinoa instead of rice, topped with seared scallop, avocado, and a drizzle of a jalapeno infused soy sauce. This sort of sushi is clearly different than the sushi that originated from the Edo period, and reflects the different flavors, ingredients, and cooking styles that Americanized are used to eating.

History of Sushi in America

Sushi arrived in the United States the same way many of America's other favorite foods did – through immigration. In 1910, more than 50,000 Japanese migrant workers made their way to California to work on farms, constructing railroads, and in canneries (Corson, 2007, p. 44). At this time, Japanese immigrants were very poor and faced discrimination, which caused many to desperately miss home (Corson, 2007, p. 44). For many poor railroad workers a proper meal consisted of a monthly "bottle of bourbon, a can of salmon and some

rice...[that] they'd squeeze together [into] what they considered 'extravagant' rice balls and covered them with slices of fish" (Corson, 2007, p. 44). However, by the 1940s the Japanese immigrants established themselves in the agricultural industry - dominating the growth and sale of snap peas, celery, tomatoes, onions, and green peas – which provided them with the start-up capital to get into the importing business (Corson, 2007, p. 44 - 45). Many Japanese farmers-turned-businessmen entered into the "homesickness trade" in which they would import Japanese foodstuffs and sell them to other Japanese immigrants in America. Unfortunately, the homesickness trade was interrupted by the negative feelings Americans had toward the Japanese people after the attack on Pearl Harbor (Corson, 2007, p. 45).

Despite political tensions, Japanese cuisine in America was still accepted, and in 1966, Noritoshi Kanai and Harry Wolfe opened an "authentic" sushi bar in the pre-existing Kawafuku Japanese restaurant in Los Angeles, that featured "proper, Tokyo-style *nigiri*" (Corson, 2007, p. 45). While Kawafuku was making traditional sushi in that same year Los Angeles' Tokyo Kaikan's chef, Ichirō Mashita, invented the staple of the American-Japanese hybrid species of sushi, the California roll (Corson, 2007, p. 81-82). This shows that even when sushi was first in America, there was both a desire to keep sushi the same as it was in Japan and to alter it to suit American tastes.

By 1972, sushi had crossed America when a sushi bar opened in an elite establishment in New York, the Harvard Club (Bestor, 2000, p. 55). Popularity of sushi soared in the 1970s and 1980s due to a rejection of the American high-fat, red-meat diet, in favor of the aesthetically pleasing, and perceived "healthiness" (i.e. the idea that rice, vegetables, and fish are healthy) of certain ethnic traditions, like sushi, which soon made it a *haute* cuisine (Bestor, 2000, p. 55; Gvion and Trostler, 2008, p. 965). Sushi became a symbol

of “healthy” Japanese food, which had an interesting affect on the perception of Japanese immigrants working in the sushi industry now.

Today, instead of discriminating against Japanese immigrants, American society holds a bias against non-Japanese chefs working in Japanese restaurants – especially in the case of sushi chefs. Bestor acknowledges the “ethnic biases” that Americans have toward sushi chefs, and notes that sushi in the minds of Japanese and non-Japanese consumers remains “firmly linked with Japanese identity” (Bestor, 2000, p. 59). In other words, many Americans feel that only Japanese chefs have the specialized knowledge and skills to create a proper sushi dish. It is a shameful fact that ethnic biases are present and apparent in American culture.

The ethnic biases against several different ethnic groups are formed by stereotypes that are based on the presumption that ethnic groups have shared cultural practices and knowledge that are tied to their biology rather than the learned and practiced by a group of people. As an anthropologist, I challenge the presumption that biology defines ethnicity and the culture of a particular ethnic group. I favor the idea that culture is learned, shared, and practice by groups of people with a shared affiliations and histories, and while a certain physical appearance may be a present, even prevalent, in an ethnic group is does not indicate that a person possesses the cultural knowledge or performs the cultural practices associated with an ethnic group. Further, those who may not have the particular physical appearance common in an ethnic group does not preclude them from the ability to learn and perform cultural practices. Simply because someone looks or does not look a particular way does not define what they know or what they are capable of doing.

Economic factors also bolstered sushi's proliferation and increased popularity in America. Fish is clearly a key element for sushi, thus changes in the fishing industry affect sushi-making practices. The bluefin tuna is the most highly sought-after fish in the sushi trade, and the fatty cut (called *toro* in Japanese) is one of the most expensive cuts of fish that sushi bars offer (Bestor, 2000: 56, Corson, 2007: 343). The bluefin market opened up to America in the 1970s when fishing policies changed in order to reduce overfishing by Japanese fishermen who were instructed to catch less fish, but the Japanese demand for tuna was so great that Japanese fishing industries began looking elsewhere for suppliers (Bestor, 2000, p. 56).

In the 1980s, the Japanese economy was experiencing an economic bubble of success, and the demand for sushi, particularly featuring tuna, soared in Japan (Bestor, 2000, p. 56). This kick-started a global race among bluefin tuna fishermen to cash-in on Japan's high demand for tuna, and the United States rose to the challenge by providing 531 of the 957 metric tons of the tuna imported into Japan (Bestor, 2000, p. 55-56). Unfortunately, in the early 1990s, the Japanese economy came to a standstill and the U.S. suppliers experienced a "high-end export market collapse" as the demand by the Japanese trickled off (Bestor, 2000, p. 56). Luckily, the sushi craze in America was raging, and the bluefin tuna trade in America survived because of Americans' newfound love of sushi. The sushi craze did not only affect the sushi trade but it also influenced immigration to the United States, specifically an influx of Japanese sushi industry professionals.

Bestor (2000) reported that the "U.S. consular offices in Japan granted more than one thousand visas a year to sushi chefs, tuna buyers, and other workers in the global sushi business" and that young Japanese immigrants were being encouraged to find jobs abroad as

sushi chefs (p. 59). Japanese restaurants, particularly sushi restaurants, were popping up all over the United States, and advertising their authentic Japanese sushi. Korean-, Chinese-, and Vietnamese-run sushi restaurants would maintain a Japanese identity in order to benefit from the prestige of their cuisine (Bestor, 2000, p. 59). Even in Europe, Japanese restaurants offered Japanese immigrants and Europeans “a taste of Japan” (Cwiertka, 2005, p. 241).

By the 1990s, sushi had become a global product, so much so that sushi was being marketed less as an upscale “food for sophisticated cosmopolitan customers” and more as “an affordable ‘fast food’...sold on conveyor belts or picked up in supermarkets” (Feng, 2012, p. 101). American sushi is now so ingrained in United States food culture and is both appealing to the American palette, and reflects American consumer’s value of creativity and innovation (Edwards, 2012, p. 216). It has become a local and recognizable product, yet it still has an exotic appeal.

American Sushi Chefs

Training a chef to prepare sushi in America is markedly different experience than training as a sushi chef in Japan. Trevor Corson’s book, *The Story of Sushi*, the experience of a young aspiring sushi chef, Kate, is discussed. Kate’s education began at the California Sushi Academy, a school opened in 1998 by Toshi Sugiura, who is also executive chef of popular Los Angeles sushi restaurant, Hama Hermosa (Corson, 2007, p. 3-4). After years in the sushi restaurant business, Toshi opened the California Sushi Academy because he was never an apprentice and sought to help “others like him – who hadn’t had a traditional apprenticeship – learn proper technique” and to improve the low quality of sushi in America (Corson, 2007, p. 55). However, most of Toshi’s students were not professional chefs or recent Japanese immigrants who were encouraged to work in the sushi industry. While some

had a desire to be in the food service industry, several were non-Asian home-cooks and hobbyists who wanted to learn how to cook sushi for fun by studying a curriculum that required only a few months to complete (Corson, 2007: 4-5).

One of the most blaring differences in learning to prepare sushi in America versus Japan is the idea that sushi preparation can be learned in a classroom rather than the traditional method – working in a restaurant kitchen and behind the sushi bar. Now, it should be pointed out that it is not unlikely that an America sushi chef worked their way up in the kitchen without classroom instruction and that formalized sushi education exists in Japan. In fact, a sushi academy was opened in Tokyo in 2003 (Shuck, 2007, p. 32). But, it does indicate that expedited formalized education is thought to be the most efficient way to pass on this knowledge so that others can learn by actively participating in the process of making sushi. This could indicate that in this current fast-paced world we seek to know as much as we can as efficiently as possible.

Also, this sort of education does not seem to garner the same respect from American customers as a traditional apprenticeship in Japan. One of Toshi's former students and the first female graduate of the California Sushi Academy, Tracy Griffith, said that she had a hard time getting a job as a sushi chef, even with the certification, because she did not appear to have cultural knowledge to be a sushi chef – especially because she is a non-Japanese person (Shuck, 2007, p. 32). Prior to that she also faced discrimination as a woman with a desire to be in the sushi industry. At the California Sushi Academy, within five minutes of her first day there she was yelled at by a Japanese instructor: "You should not be here! You unnatural! No such thing sushi woman!" (Corson, 2007, p. 55). When she complained about this illegal treatment of a student in America, her complaints were shrugged off and she was

told she would “have to deal with it” because “that’s the way” Japanese sushi chefs behave toward women (Corson, 2007, p. 55).

A different female graduate of the California Sushi Academy, Fie Kruse, did not encounter the same hostility (in fact, she experienced the opposite) from the instructors, but one evening while she was working at Hama Hermosa a “big-mouthed Caucasian” customer she was serving proclaimed: “I don’t like women chefs. I want a Japanese man to serve my sushi” (Corson, 2007, p. 58). In a country that certainly thinks about gender, racial, and ethnic identities, it is interesting that American customers assume that a male Japanese chef will simply be better than a non-Japanese chef based on an assumed connection to the origins of the dish. Also, the illegal treatment of women is permitted by a business owner because this is how they would have been treated by chefs in Japan indicates that the traditional Japanese training methods for sushi are presumed to be so much better that they do not need to be altered, even when there is blatant discrimination. Further, the opinions of the American man in regard to female sushi chefs not only indicates that gender bias is palpable in America, and that male who is Japanese will provide him with the best sushi possible.

Despite the prestige associated with chefs in Japan, the United States does not have a shortage of “celebrity” sushi chefs. One of the best-known sushi chefs in the world, Chef Nobu Matsuhisa, owns and has worked in several sushi restaurants in America (Corson, 2009 (a), p. 9). Chef Nobu is so thoroughly ensconced in Western culture, that he even partially caters his menus toward Western tastes. In the past, Chef Nobu has refused to stop serving blue fin tuna, despite the pressure put on him by environmental activists to reduce overfishing blue fin (Corson, 2009 (a), p. 9). Chef Nobu did not want to remove blue from the menus of “his 24 luxury eateries around the globe,...because he believes connoisseurs

won't dine in his restaurants without it" (Corson, 2009 (a), p. 9). Trevor Corson scolds Nobu for forgetting about "the special joys of his own [Japanese sushi] tradition" and explains that at the educational dinners Corson hosts that he has "American sushi eaters ready to experience and understand a completely authentic Japanese meal" (Corson, 2009 (b), p. 9). Corson establishes himself as an authority of sushi equal to or better than Chef Nobu by stating: "I work with Japanese master chefs, and we provided sushi as it was served in Tokyo in the old days" (Corson, 2009 (b), p. 9). This assertion of authority based on accessing cultural knowledge that is tied not only to a culture and a place, but also to a time indicates that older practices in creating a cultural product somehow makes the product more "real" or relevant.

It is not only Japanese-born chefs who accommodate American tastes, but also non-Asian chefs have started to garner acclaim. In fact, in 2005, the award of "Best New Chef" from *Food & Wine Magazine* went to a "Caucasian sushi chef in Texas name Tyson Cole" (Corson, 2009 (a), p. 25). Tyson Cole's Austin restaurant, Uchi, is a restaurant that is conceived on using Cole's "traditional Japanese technique...[and]...local ingredients" in order to create something that is "of and for Austin" (Issenberg, 2007, p. 137). In other words, Cole, like many other American sushi chefs, are using techniques developed in the rigidity of Japanese sushi practice, and are replacing certain ingredients or cooking techniques with other ingredients or cooking techniques that are more familiar to the local environment and people. For example, at a local sushi restaurant in Houston, ingredients like crawfish and jalapenos could be included in a sushi roll, and neither are found in traditional Japanese sushi but ingredients readily found in cooking traditions that are more closely linked to the Houston geographic area (i.e. Mexican/Tex-Mex cuisine uses jalapenos, and

American Gulf Coast cuisines like Creole and Cajun use crawfish). This is important to the study of sushi as it leaves Japan, because it become evident that sushi becomes localized into a new food culture.

Aesthetic Norms of Americanized Sushi

Some of the most basic norms of sushi making and eating in America have raised the eyebrows of many sushi enthusiasts who hold steadfast to traditional Japanese sushi practices. Americans have the option to eat sushi in ways that totally disregards the traditional Japanese sushi protocol. For some health conscious consumers in America, using brown rice instead of the traditional polished short-grain white rice is thought to be a smart choice (Sakamoto and Allen, 2011, p. 102). Many Americans believe that “they are supposed to dunk all their sushi in soy sauce,” and do not deem this as a practice muddles the delicate flavor of the fish, and that traditionally chefs control for this with the production of *nikiri* (Corson, 2007, p. 22). *Nikiri* is a house sauce that is altered by every chef who prepares it but comes from a basic recipe – “to 100 parts soy sauce, the chef adds twenty parts dashi [a flavorful Japanese broth], ten parts sake, and ten parts mirin, a sweet rice liquor used in cooking” (Corson, 2007, p. 21-22). Many American sushi restaurants do not provide their clientele with *nikiri* at the table, opting for soy sauce instead, and merely brushing piece of fish destined for sushi preparation with the complex and flavorful house sauce (Corson, 2007, p. 22).

The best examples of Americanized sushi tends to come in the form of “rolls,” that is rice wrapped with seaweed or rice paper, and filled and/or topped with different proteins, vegetables, and condiments. Tracy Griffith, an American sushi chef, published a cookbook of American sushi (aptly titled: *Sushi American Style*), and she described her style of making

sushi as “using Japanese techniques with American fillings and toppings” and “everyday ingredients” (Shuck, 2007, p. 32). An example of Griffith’s dishes include her “cowboy roll,” which consists of: “grilled steak, double cream blue cheese, a little red onion and baby arugula, rolled up and stuffed with pink peppercorns” (Shuck, 2007: 32).

Sushi rolls are very popular in the United States, which is understandable because they are easily individualized to suit the palette of any particular audience. Florence Fabricant, a food critic for the *New York Times*, has written about numerous sushi restaurant in New York City and has documented some of the menu items from them. One such restaurant, Sushi Shop, had “150 choices of maki-style rolls, hand rolls, spring rolls and sashimi plates, all attractive and fashioned with imagination (Fabricant, 2012, p. 5). Some of these rolls include a chicken Caesar roll, a lox and cream cheese roll, and even a roll featuring *foie gras* (Fabricant, 2012, p. 5). Recent data projected that there are over nine thousand sushi restaurants in America, which tend to serve both Japanese-style and American-style sushi (Sakamoto and Allen, 2012, p. 144; Edwards, 2012, p. 213). It seems that sushi that cannot be considered “authentic” in the sense of adhering to traditional Japanese sushi making practices, and Americanized sushi has still achieved a large enough following because of its creativity and innovation, but still traditional Japanese sushi is often present at such establishments.

Public Opinion about American Sushi

Americanized sushi’s perception is a reflection of the values and opinions that Americans have toward food in general and the growing multicultural awareness that Americans have developed in the recent past. As previously discussed, sushi came to America and made a name for itself in the 1970s as a being a “beautiful” and “healthy” meal

option (Bestor, 2000, p. 55). The 1980s food scene in America was engaged in a new kind of multiculturalism that encouraged foods to be “transboundary” and fuse two or more culinary traditions together, but restaurants still tended to cater to the tastes of their American clientele (Gvion and Trostler, 2008, p. 961). Many ethnic restaurants in America the 1980s began to “stage authenticity” by offering explicit descriptions of exotic dishes on their menus, which gave diners the idea that the restaurant owners were knowledgeable of the out-of-the-ordinary cuisine they served (Gvion and Trostler, 2008, p. 964). By the 1990s, ethnic food patrons were familiar with menu items, and did not require a precise definition of what they were eating, which opened up the cuisine to the less suave consumer (Gvion and Trostler, 2008, p. 968). The “yuppie” culture of the 1990s continued mixing health food with ethnic food, so foods like sushi, with its perceived “healthiness” continued to thrive in the American food scene (Gvion and Trostler, 2008, p. 968). However, that is the perception of Japanese sushi in America. “Americanized” sushi is not what many would consider as healthy.

Rumi Sakamoto and Matthew Allen (2011) examined the works of Japanese scholars who studied American sushi, and both Japanese and American opinions on American sushi. Interpretations by these scholars who are studying American sushi say that Americans have an “internal ambivalence” toward their feelings about sushi – it is at the same time both fashionable and strange, traditional and modern to the American consumer (p. 103). The ideas are conflicting as the food undergoes a process of localization and hybridization in order to become palatable to the consumer (Sakamoto and Allen, 2011, p. 102). It should be noted that the hybridization of sushi in America is more of a blending of practices rather than a selectiveness of one practice over another. At that point, sushi in America’s definition is

based more on ideas than a concrete product. It is still recognized as being Japanese, when in fact it was created elsewhere and includes non-Japanese items, but it is based on ideas that were once Japanese. As Paige A. Edwards (2012) explained: “Sushi is a metonymy of Japanese cuisine as it began to be recognized as ‘Japanese’ outside of Japan” (p. 222).

Public opinions about American sushi are not particularly favorable in most settings. There are plenty of criticism and complaints about what kind of sushi Americans tend to eat, and how they eat it. Trevor Corson (2007 (b)) finds Americans to be caught between two extremes when eating sushi: eating “chef-driven omakase menus that cost a fortune and the cheap, predictable fare at neighborhood places;” and thinks that this forces Americans to depend on tuna as a sushi protein (p. 13). He states that both “extremes have deepened our dependence on tuna – at the high end, on super-fatty cuts of rare bluefin; and at the low end, on tasteless red flesh that has been frozen for months and treated with chemicals to preserve its color” (Corson, 2007 (b), p. 13). Corson’s opinion that Americans are dependent on familiar cuts of fish and served in ways that suit American tastes, makes him think that this practice should be changed. Corson begs sushi patrons to sit at the bar and ask the sushi chef questions so that they may better experience sushi. He suggests:

“We should sit at the bar and ask the chef questions about everything – what he wants to make us and how we should eat it. We should agree to turn our backs on our American addictions (for starters, try mackerel), globs of fake wasabi (let the chef add the appropriate amount), gallons of soy sauce (let the chef season the sushi if it needs seasoning) and chopsticks (use your fingers so the chef can pack the sushi loosely, as he would in Japan). Diners will be amazed at how following these simple

rules can make a sushi chef your friend, and take you on new adventures in taste”
(Corson, 2007 (b), p. 13).

In statements like those made by American food writers like Corson, a person can see that American preferences are not treated with absolute respect. It seems that people who personify themselves as “connoisseurs” of sushi, are fed up with American traditions for eating sushi and urge others to try the Japanese approach to dining in that fashion because it is “better.” I think that it also suggests that these individuals also see the Western, specifically American, influence on the evermore-connected global culture we are engaged in, as being pernicious. It appears that the Americanization of a now global item, like sushi, threatens a culturally and regionally distinctive dish’s identity, promotes environmentally unsustainable practices, and champions unhealthy dishes that do not even maximize the flavors of the ingredients.

Implications

Now with my argument supported by theory, history, and contemporary research; it becomes evident that sushi is an important global product, even though it is an everyday food item. Sushi, both in America and Japan, has different opinions associated with the perceived quality of the dish. Authenticity seems to be an issue that adds to sushi’s perception of quality, but authenticity seems to be more complex. Authenticity can refer to the long-practiced traditions of Japanese sushi, or can be something that is novel and localized, like Tyson Cole’s sushi that is “of and for Austin.” So, it would seem that aspects that make sushi distinctive add to the symbolic value of the dish. I would assert that Americanized sushi that is regarded as “creative” may obtain level of respect that is comparable to traditional Japanese sushi. However, as suggested by Trevor Corson, after an American sushi diner

gains knowledge about sushi, they value an adherence to the traditional Japanese method of sushi making rather than a creative interpretation of sushi. But are there other factors that make “authentic” sushi, both in the sense of being unique or of being traditional, appealing? If it is traditional, does it allow for an individual to simulate travel to a different time and place? Does the unique interpretation allow for the diner to have an experience that is totally original? Such questions can only be answered by delving more deeply into what consumers look for in high quality sushi.

Chapter Two: Analysis of Sites and Menus

In order to establish national trends in sushi dining, I examined the Zagat restaurant reviewing website, and chose to explore menus from Los Angeles, California; Las Vegas, Nevada; New York, New York; and Houston, Texas. These cities were selected in order to get a sample of the variety of ideas about sushi in different areas of the United States. Ideas about sushi had to take the place of the actual menu items, which I originally wanted to examine, because menus were not consistently detailed enough to confirm whether or not an item was “traditionally Japanese.” Some menus were detailed enough to make such assertions, and I have provided some examples of those dishes in the findings below. It also allowed me to obtain some quantifiable variables to measure, which I believed would help me to better understand the individuals I would interview in Texas and those who are consuming sushi elsewhere in the country.

Background on the Cities

Cities in this study were selected based role as large cosmopolitan areas and the city’s history involving their food culture. The city’s food history regarding Japanese cuisine was also considered. These histories undoubtedly affected what sort of sushi is available currently and what has influenced the idea of what sort of sushi is “high quality” or not. It seemed pertinent to look into a history of Japanese immigration in the area, the current density of the Japanese (both immigrant and heritage) population, and an examination of various sushi restaurant reviews from the area to see what sort of restaurants local food writers thought were worthy of interest. In these cities’ histories, there is an apparent interaction between the local and the global as there are circuits of cultures, as the “home” or “original” culture (i.e. Japanese) travels to a new culture (i.e. American) and a new transnational identity of sushi is

formed and develops its own standards of quality. Similar to Christopher Steiner's research regarding African art in transit, there is a "trade in cultural information" and "a mediation of knowledge" taking place as sushi production is now a kind of performance on the world stage (Ravenhill, 1995, p. 16). Sushi's fluidity in this cultural movement from one place to another serves as a focal point where cultural knowledge and information meet while they are traveling across the globe.

Since the history of sushi in the Los Angeles area was discussed previously in chapter one, it seems more important to discuss the density of Japanese people in the area and the current restaurant reviews in the area regarding sushi. Japanese culture is more prominent in Los Angeles than most other major cities in the United States. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, California has the largest population of Japanese-Americans and Japanese immigrants in the continental United States, and the Greater Los Angeles metropolitan area has the highest number of Japanese-Americans and immigrants in the state (Hoeffel et al., 2012, p. 21). Los Angeles has had a long history involving Japanese immigrants and absorbing them and their cuisine into the mainstream Los Angeles culture. In a 2005 *LA Weekly* magazine, the restaurant critic Jonathan Gold claimed that "sushi is not only *in* the mainstream of Los Angeles cooking, it *is* the mainstream" (Issenberg, 2007, p. 87). While Japanese cuisine, particularly sushi, is now part of the mainstream food scene in Los Angeles, but it initially found its home in a particular area of town and over time other Los Angeles locals discovered it and promoted it. The Los Angeles' Little Tokyo neighborhood is recognized as a historic enclave where "descendants of first-wave immigrants mingle with pop-culture tastemakers, and American health nuts with Japanese corporate expats" which

propelled sushi into the forefront of routine meals for the citizens of Los Angeles (Issenberg 2007, p. 87).

Ten years later in 2015 another *LA Weekly* magazine food critic, Garrett Synder, explained that Los Angeles locals spend their “waking hours obsessing over” sushi, that “sushi is ingrained in the Southland’s DNA,” and that the “upper-echelon of sushi in Los Angeles competes with the best in world – outside of Japan, of course”(Synder, 2015, para. 1 and 2). Synder provided a list of some of the most revered sushi restaurants in Los Angeles, but he added a caveat that consuming sushi in Los Angeles “is a pricey endeavor” but is a bargain “for those looking for the most exciting sushi available without a passport” (Synder, 2015, para. 2). Interestingly, this idea of using sushi as a means to simulate a similar experience of traveling to Japan may contribute to some of the trends of the renowned sushi chefs in the area.

For example, Chef Kazunori Nozawa has been called a “sushi Nazi” and a “sushi bully” for his uncompromising refusal to allow patrons to experience sushi “improperly” (i.e. outside of “traditional” sushi practices), which includes his tendency to refuse service to customers who would dare to order a California roll or who plunge their sushi in extra soy sauce (Synder, 2015, Nozawa Bar section, para. 1; McLaughlin, 2008, para. 1). Surprisingly, this behavior has not turned customers away, and Nozawa owns the successful “Sugarfish” chain of sushi restaurants, which are very highly rated on Zagat. This would indicate that people in the Los Angeles would pay a \$150 *omakase* tasting and are prepared to be scolded or thrown out for making alterations to their meal (which is a common practice at American restaurants) in order to learn what sushi is “supposed to taste like” (Synder, 2015, Nozawa Bar section, para. 1). Chef Andy Matsuda, head of the Sushi Chef Institute, agrees that it is

“agonizing” to watch American diners who are unfamiliar with “centuries-old Japanese tradition” harkening it to pouring ketchup all over a fine French entrée or bringing pizza to your grandmother’s Thanksgiving dinner (McLaughlin, 2008, para.12). It is apparent that there is a clear demand for more traditional sushi in Los Angeles. I believe that Los Angeles’ long history with Japanese cuisine and culture, encourages the sushi enthusiasts in the city to make themselves aware of the traditional Japanese sushi eating practices and to engage in those practices because this helps to identify the diner as knowledgeable and fashionable. They are identified as knowledgeable because they are aware of specific cultural practices, and they are fashionable because the dish is a symbol of the values that the Los Angeles population deems as important (i.e. a healthy dish that is produced in the area to a nearly comparable level of quality to that of the originating culture).

In New York City, people of Japanese descent make up a modest proportion of the city’s Asian population. In the 1970s, midtown Manhattan near Grand Central Station became the city’s “defacto Japanese food district,” but today New York City’s Japanese immigrants are more “thinly dispersed” (Issenberg, 2007, p. 103; Dolnick and Semple, 2011, p. A23). In 2011, a *New York Times* article described the Japanese population in New York City as an unusually “disparate, fluid population” who have settled thinly across the region without a focal point, like, say, Chinatown” (Dolnick and Semple, 2011, p. A23). Dolnick and Semple (2011) described New York City’s Japanese population as better educated, more affluent, and more transient, as many of the Japanese in the city are international business executives or other white-collar workers, study abroad students, and globe-trotting artists (p. A23). But, there are small, “vibrant pockets of Japanese residents [in New York City].” The largest populations are in the Astoria, Queens (approximately 1,300 Japanese residents), and

in Yorkville on the Upper East Side (approximately 1,100) (Dolnick and Semple, 2011, p. A23).

Food is an important component in these pockets of Japanese culture. Dolnick and Semple (2011) reported that: “the sushi restaurants and sake bars along St. Marker Place and Ninth Street in the East Village probably form the most prominent outpost of Japanese culture, though the census estimates that only 500 Japanese people live in that area” (p. A23). Denser populations of Japanese people in the New York City area are near Japanese business, markets, and cafes in the Midtown East area, in the Westchester and Bergen counties’ suburban area, and in the Edgewater, New Jersey area (Dolnick and Semple, 2011: A23).

Still, the food scene in New York is very well respected and competitive, after all the city has the most Michelin star-rated restaurants (817 establishments) in the United States, including six restaurants that received a coveted three star rating from the Michelin guide – one of which is a sushi restaurant, Masa (“ViaMichelin,” n.d.). Thus, with such great competition with modest influence of an immigrant or heritage population of Japanese people, the Japanese restaurants in the area must be of a particularly high caliber to compete in such a market. Interestingly, the sushi trends in New York City include an abundance of sushi restaurants with a wide variety of different interpretations of sushi, and have a reported tendency to have superior quality ingredients. The Michelin guide’s three-star rated restaurant Masa was described as “the continent’s best sushi” and that famous chef, Masa Takayama’s *omakase* menu is a “parade of sushi showcasing the best of Tokyo’s Tsukiji market” (“Masa– New York: a Michelin Guide restaurant,” n.d.).

In a 2013 article in the *Village Voice*, Zachary Feldman stated that “sushi in New York is as diverse a cuisine as the city itself” (Feldman, 2013, para. 1). He went on to explain that “whether it’s meticulous, traditional *edomae*-style, or a modernized, experimental take, New Yorkers are fortunate enough to have some of the best seafood available” (Feldman, 2013, para. 1). In regard to the number of sushi restaurants, Portia Crowe (2014) stated in an article in the *Business Insider* article that “New York may have a sushi restaurant on every other block,” which while that is likely a hyperbolic statement does indicate that sushi restaurants are abundant in the area (Crowe, 2014, para. 1). Since there is a presumption that the New York food scene is open-minded (if the product is especially good) some food industry professionals have left other parts of the United States in order to set up shop in New York City. Chef Sotohiro Kosugi closed his Atlanta sushi restaurant, Soto, and opened a new restaurant in New York because he developed a love-hate relationship with Atlanta patrons of his restaurant because he acted similarly to Chef Nozawa in Los Angeles (McLaughlin, 2008, para. 16-18). Kosugi felt that New York provided him with an audience that was “more conducive to serving only traditional, high end food” (McLaughlin, 2008, para. 18). I believe that Kosugi came to the conclusion that New York would be a better location for his type of restaurant because New York City is a large cosmopolitan known for its ethnic diversity and large population of immigrants. I suggest New York City’s food scene is presumed to be more open to traditional types of cuisine because the New York City population is assumed to be exposed a tremendous variety of traditional cuisines and are thus more likely to venture to try different cuisines than what they were raised around.

Las Vegas, Nevada is a tourist Mecca in the United States, and food has been one of the great attractions of the city for decades (Chung, 2012, p. 9). While locals and tourists

have enjoyed the extensive variety of restaurants that popped up after the first casino/hotel resort was built in 1941, the patrons of Las Vegas restaurants today have access to “*haute* cuisine restaurants are run by celebrity chefs” (Chung, 2012, p. 9). This makes dining at these restaurants a stylish activity that allows the diners to identify themselves as wealthy (as many of these restaurants are very expensive) and knowledgeable of “high quality” cuisine. Many of these restaurants are associated with the hotel/casino resorts are touted to have some of the most unique dining experiences for their customers. From 1941 to 1970, the city of Las Vegas saw a tremendous amount of development on “the Strip” and elsewhere in the city, and accompanying that development were some notable restaurants (Chung, 2012, p. 9).

While some of the earliest hotel/casino resorts (e.g. El Rancho Vegas and The Last Frontier Hotel and Casino) built on the Strip upheld a “Western” theme, both in décor and dining experience, other resorts saw an opportunity to adopt a more exotic theme, in order to set themselves apart from their competition (Chung, 2012, p. 10). Caesars Place opened in August of 1966, and while it provided decadent Greco-Roman décor and food to its visitors, it also provided a touch of “exoticism” by including a Japanese restaurant called “Japanese Ah-So” (Chung, 2012, p. 10). The restaurant was established by Nat Hart, “a food expert with an international reputation who had once served as a consultant to the Japanese government and who actually trained the entire kitchen staff in the art of Japanese cooking” (Chung, 2012, p. 10). The University of Nevada – Las Vegas’s Digital Library Collection (2016) has a copy of Ah-So’s menu which shows that Ah-So did not offer sushi, but instead provided a *teppan-yaki* style of menu (i.e. Japanese-style food that is cooked on a hot iron griddle) (Dining in Las Vegas section, International Flavor section, para. 1). Today, sushi in Las Vegas is well-respected and widely available. A 2011 article by Ty Treadwell stated that

while “the nearest ocean may be hundreds of miles away, but Las Vegas still manages to serve up some of the best sushi in the country,” and that “it’s hard to find a hotel or mall [in Las Vegas] that doesn’t contain at least one fabulous sushi restaurant” (Treadwell, 2011, para. 1). It appears that Las Vegas has a tradition of high-end sushi, usually based on the quality of the chef and the education of the kitchen staff, but now is also widely available in a number of different locations.

Houston was selected to be examined not only because it is where the Sushi Club of Houston (i.e. the focus of my participant-observation) is based, but also because it is a very culturally and ethnically diverse metropolitan city with a very diverse food scene. Also, the Houston area has its own unique history with Japanese immigrants. In the early 1900s, some wealthy and educated Japanese immigrants were interested in places like Texas where they could develop rice colonies. According to the Texas Almanac, around 1900 the Houston Chamber of Commerce and Japan’s Consul General, Sadatsuchi Uchida, developed a relationship in order to improve Gulf Coast rice farming techniques (Plochek, 2016, para. 8 and 9). Uchida was also instrumental in increasing the number of Japanese colonists in the Gulf Coast area.

In 1903, Uchida encouraged a Japanese theology student living in Connecticut, Seito Saibara and thirty other Japanese colonists interested in staying in the United States to move to Texas (Plochek, 2016, para. 10 and 11). The colonists settled in Webster, in southern Harris County, and with the gift of rice seed from the Japanese emperor, they began a rice colony that was so successful that within three years the harvest in the area nearly doubled. Saibara has been credited with establishing the Gulf Coast rice industry (Plochek, 2016, para.

11). Over the years, the rice industry gained more attention from Japanese colonists, which lead to other areas near Houston to develop various rice colonies.

By 1920, there was a second wave of Japanese immigrants that fled the anti-Japanese discrimination in California, but most of these families settled in the lower Valley area of Texas (Plochek, 2016, para. 13 and 14). Initially, Japanese immigrants in Texas experienced less prejudice and discrimination than those in California, but historians have attributed this to the small number of Japanese people in Texas. By 1921, Texas Legislature thought it best to change their policies to be more similar to other western states and restricted the land ownership rights of Japanese immigrants. However, the lobbying efforts of Houston area entrepreneur, Saburo Arai, blunted the legislation with his newly-formed Japanese Association, and had the bill amended to “grandfather” in all Japanese already living in the state to be able to maintain land ownership (Plochek, 2016, para. 15).

Unfortunately, these Japanese immigrants did meet discrimination in Texas, particularly during World War II when they were suspected of being spies for the Japanese government. With the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, hostility toward Japanese people mounted, and this fear during World War II had people of Japanese descent in Texas under a kind of “house arrest in which they faced restriction on travel, on financial transactions, and group gatherings” and the confiscation of “suspicious items,” like cameras, binoculars, and guns. (Plochek, 2016, para. 16 and 18). Under federal policy, many Japanese people were arrested by the FBI and forced into the Immigration and Naturalization Services’ (INS) internment camps in Texas (Plochek, 2016, para. 19). After the war, most of the internees left Texas, but a few elected to stay, and some who lost their properties in California elected to move to Texas (Plochek, 2016, para. 19 and 20).

In the 1950s, the Japanese-Texan population moved into larger cities to find work in professional business fields. In 1952, the ban on Japanese naturalization was lifted, but this did not dramatically influence Japanese people to start immigrating to the United States (Plochek, 2016, para 21). In Houston in 1968, the Japan America Society of Houston (JASH) was established by Houstonians General Maurice Hirsh, Bernard Sakowitz, and R.W. Smith; who sought to “deepen understanding of Japan by Americans and of America by Japanese” (Japan America Society of Houston, 2016, History of Japan America Society of Houston section, para. 2). Such efforts certainly depict a softening of the harsh perspective of Japanese people held by Americans during World War II and by the 1970s and 1980s, businesses from Japan opened in Texas and Japan exported employees into Texas cities, but most of those individuals were temporary employees who would later return to Japan (Plochek, 2016, para. 22). The influx of Japanese people into major Texas cities seemed to be a lasting trend and by 1990, more than two-thirds of Japanese-Texans lived in the Houston, San Antonio, and Dallas-Fort Worth areas (Plochek, 2016, para. 23).

In recent years the Japanese presence in the Houston area has continued to grow. The *Houston Business Journal* reported in 2015, that a new 11,000-square-foot Japanese supermarket was planned to launch in Houston, which is the first time the city will have a major Japanese supermarket available to consumers (Takahashi, 2015, para. 1-3). The journal explained that over past few years there has been “an influx of Japanese immigrants [who] flocked to Houston’s booming energy, chemical and medical sectors,” and “in the past two years, membership to the Japanese Business Association of Houston increased by 50 percent to 681 members” (Takahashi, 2015, para. 7). During this time Hoshūkū, a Japanese supplemental school in Houston, has seen its student population grow 71 percent to 480

students (Takahashi, 2015, para. 7). With the growth of the Japanese population in Houston, I wonder what are the trends on sushi preferences in the Houston area, and how have Japanese immigrants impacted those trends? Do Houstonians have any desire to have traditional Japanese sushi?

In 2004, *Business Wire* reported that Houston's Kubo's Sushi Bar & Grill was named one of the best sushi restaurants in America, according to John Mariani, "renowned food and wine authority and author" who wrote this in an article featured in *Delta Sky* which recommended sushi restaurants in the United States' eight largest cities (Handy, 2004, para. 1). The *Business Wire* reported that Kubo's embraced a "near religious devotion to freshness and quality [that] is part of Japanese culture" and Kubo's owner, Yoichi Ueno, stated that their "commitment to traditional Japanese techniques" as well as their "insistence on food freshness and quality" were the factors that contributed to their success (Handy, 2004, para. 2). The article continued to explain that executive chef Manabu Horiuchi and sous chef Yu Suzuki had been "trained in Japan's finest restaurants" and that though they were "under the age of thirty...their combined artistry, experience and Japanese culinary skill is unmatched in Houston" (Handy, 2004, para. 4). Interestingly, the article points to their age as an indicator that while early in their careers, they have still accrued such a tremendous amount of cultural knowledge in Japan that they could replicate it in America.

According to the article, chef Horiuchi received his license in Japan from the "prestigious Tsuji Culinary Institute in Osaka" and when he came to Houston in 1999 he was "chef to the Consulate General of Japan before joining Kubo's in 2001 as sous chef to Executive Chef Hajime Kubokowa, the restaurant's namesake" (Handy, 2004, para. 4). While this article exulted the restaurant's commitment to tradition, it provided an important

piece of insight. The article stated that Ueno is “one of only a few Houston Japanese restaurateurs offering traditional *nigiri*...and hot Japanese cuisine reminiscent of his native Japan” (Handy, 2004, para. 5). Ueno stated that it was his desire to educate Houstonians “about the nuances of authentic Japanese cuisine” (Handy, 2004, para. 8). He is quoted stating: “I opened a restaurant to introduce Japanese food to the people of Houston” (Handy, 2004, para. 8). I believe that this interest in educating Houstonians about Japanese food shows that there is an assumed lack of cultural knowledge that needs to be bridged in order for Houstonians to better enjoy Japanese food, rather than reinterpreting Japanese food to appeal to Houstonians.

In 2012, a *Houston Press* article reported “two world-class sushi restaurant were headed” to Houston (i.e. Uchi and Katsuya by Starck), which the author predicted would “undoubtedly” and “dramatically” change Houston’s “sushi landscape” and would render the list compiled of “Houston’s best sushi restaurants” in the article to be “moot shortly” (Shilcutt, 2012, para. 1). The list begins with a statement that Houston is “a city filled with swanky, upscale sushi restaurants serving up overpriced, Americanized fare” but then goes on to describe several of the ten cited restaurants as “traditional” and “authentic,” while still praising others for being “highly modern” and adding a contemporary flare” (Shilcutt, 2012, Oishii section, para. 1, Kaneyama section, para. 1, Kata Robata section, para. 1, Sushi Miyagi section, para. 1). Such statements indicate that while there is “good” sushi that deviates from tradition, there is still a desire for “authentic” sushi when one is looking for the “best” in Houston. Also, there appears to be a backhanded insult to Americanized sushi, which reinforces the idea that Americanized sushi does not generate the same respect as traditional Japanese sushi.

In a 2015 article by *Culture Map Houston*, journalist Eric Sandler stated: “Houston doesn’t lack for sushi restaurants. Of course, that is true for most cuisines in this bustling city, but determining what is best presents a bit of a problem” (Sandler, 2015, para. 1). Sandler continued to explain that there are plenty of options of sushi restaurants with the various price ranges and locations of sushi restaurants in the city, but “Houston lacks a super-expensive sushi destination like Masa in New York or Urasawa in Beverly Hills” (Sandler, 2015, para. 2). He stated that Houston is in a transitional moment regarding its sushi landscape and stated that the opening of several new sushi restaurants may bring Houston into a new era of quality sushi (Sandler, 2015, para. 4). He compiled a list of sushi restaurants to offer a sample of the variety available, which he based on price point and geography; but he noted that the list would likely be “shredded by the experts at the Sushi Club of Houston” (Sandler, 2015, para. 5).

The restaurants on the list were praised for a variety of reasons: the restaurant’s adherence to tradition, the quality of the chef or staff’s education, the quality of the ingredients, the uniqueness of the sushi, or the restaurant’s affordability. However, it should be noted that only four of the ten restaurants highlighted on the list were specifically noted for having some relationship to traditional Japanese food or appealing to Japanese clientele. I take this to indicate that Houston does have an interest in adhering to traditional Japanese sushi, but it still is interested in Americanized sushi for its uniqueness and assumed “fair prices” compared the extraordinarily expensive restaurants in New York City and Los Angeles, Masa and Urasawa.

Findings

Examining both food writing and criticism of each city's sushi (as in the histories above) and the opinions of local sushi diners (as in the examination of Zagat rankings below), it becomes more apparent what the criteria for "high quality" sushi in each area entails. Chefs, critics, and consumers play important roles in the determination of "high quality" sushi, particularly with the easy availability of this information by way of the internet. But, not all of these players are thought to have what Bourdieu would refer to as "good taste." His idea that "good taste" is the consecration of certain cultural practices" that "reflect the ability of dominant class factions to legitimate their tastes as superior" brings me to the conclusion that the trends of restaurants' intentions when creating and marketing their business and the reception it receives from the public (i.e. critics and consumers) shows what "good taste" is defined as in American sushi (Johnston and Bauman, 2010, p. 33). So, differences in the rankings of the restaurants in the cities and the types of sushi shows the public's perception of what criteria "high quality" sushi must have to be perceived as such.

Below is a list of all of the sushi restaurants in all of the cities that were analyzed (Figure 1). The data used was collected in 2013. The average scores for the various metrics for all the of Houston restaurants were twenty-six for "food," twenty for "décor," twenty-three for "service," and "cost" was approximately \$73. Houston had the most restaurants with lower ratings for their "food" compared to the three other cities. The average score in Houston for "food" was 24, for "décor" it was 20, for "service" it was 22, and the average cost was \$35. The standard deviations for these measures were fairly modest. The standard deviation for Houston sushi restaurants for "food" was 2.36, for "décor" it was 2.15, for "service" it was 2.39, and the standard deviation for the cost was about 7.66 (about \$8).

Approximately, 80 percent of the Houston sushi restaurants reviewed fell into the “very good to excellent” for “food,” and three fell into the category “excellent to perfection.” These findings suggest that Houston’s sushi restaurants are considered slightly lower quality than the sushi restaurants in the other cities that were examined.

The highest rated sushi restaurants were Sushi King, Uptown Sushi, and Uchi (the most highly rated sushi restaurant for “food” in Houston). After reviewing the *nigiri* items on their online menus at these restaurants I am led to believe that Americanized sushi is quite popular in Houston. Uptown Sushi does appear to offer “traditional” sushi, but also has an Americanized “Signature *Nigiri-Zushi* with toppings” menu which offers items like “*nigiri* with salmon, youghurt, green tea, preserved lemon, and mint leaf” or “yellowtail with ponzu, parmesan, jalapeno, and habanero tobiko.” Uchi similarly offers “traditional” *nigiri* items like tuna loin or black tiger shrimp, but it also offers several “non-traditional” *nigiri* options like *foie gras nigiri* made with quinoa (as opposed to rice) and seared *wagyu* steak *nigiri*. Sushi King does offer “traditional” *nigiri* such as mackerel and sea bass, but it also offers *nigiri* items like soft shell crawfish and beef tenderloin.

For the sushi restaurants in the Las Vegas area the average score for “food” was 26, for décor it was “21,” for “service” it was 23, and an average meal cost \$51. The standard deviations for various measures were fairly modest, but the standard deviation of cost was more pronounced than of sushi restaurants in Houston. The standard deviation for “food” was 1.22, for “décor” it was 2.44, for “service” it was 1.74, and the standard deviation for “cost” was 27.37 (about \$27). Fifty percent of the Las Vegas restaurants reviewed were categorized as “extraordinary to perfect.” These findings indicate that the sushi restaurants in Las Vegas ranges more in cost than for its “food” score. This likely means that the reputation of the

restaurant as being of superior quality is appealing, but the experience of eating that sushi is not entirely unique to that particular restaurant. However, it should be noted that most of these restaurants were highly rated for their food, indicating that high quality sushi is rather common in Las Vegas.

The highest rated Las Vegas sushi restaurants were I Love Sushi, Sushi Mon, Nobu, Kabuki, BarMASA, Yama Sushi, and Sen of Japan (the most highly rated sushi restaurant for “food” in Las Vegas). The menus from these restaurants indicate a taste for both “traditional” and “non-traditional” sushi, but with a bit more emphasis on “traditional” sushi. I Love Sushi does not offer an explicit list of their *nigiri* sushi items, as the menu appears to predominately offer “Americanized” entrees, but it does offer “Sushi Dinner” option that appears to be fairly traditional *nigiri* options. Unfortunately, due to the lack of detail it is hard to whether the restaurant’s *nigiri* adheres to tradition or not. Sushi Mon seems to have mostly traditional *nigiri* offered on their menu, with an exception of “Cajun albacore.”

Nobu offered a mainly traditional *nigiri* with a few exceptions like “smoked salmon” and “sweet shrimp with fried head.” Kabuki also offered mostly traditional *nigiri* with the exceptions of “smoked salmon,” artificial crab (“krab”), and two items called “Volcano sushi.” BarMASA had several traditional *nigiri* items, but also had a few additions of non-traditional “luxury” items like truffles and “seared Victoria beef.” However, I would mostly describe the *nigiri* items as traditional. Yama Sushi does not appear to serve *nigiri* at all, and instead focus on rolls without descriptions, but names like “Yama Crunch Roll” or “One Minute Man.” This would indicate to me that their menu is fairly Americanized because the use of the word “crunch” indicates that the roll includes a fried element, which is not used in traditional Japanese sushi. “One Minute Man” is name that does not immediately tell the

customer what is in the roll, which similar to other names of common Americanized sushi rolls like the “California roll” or “Spider roll” (includes fried soft-shell crab on top). Sen of Japan offers the most traditional *nigiri* items of all the menus, but does not offer very much description, which makes it difficult to say that with absolute certainty that then menu adheres to traditional Japanese sushi practice. Further, the rest of the menu indicates that the restaurant itself is very eclectic in what it serves, which makes me apprehensive on stating that the *nigiri* is traditional. At any rate, since the highest rating Zagat in Las Vegas for “food” went to Sen of Japan, it would appear that a more traditional sushi menu is certainly sought out by sushi connoisseurs in the area, but creativity and uniqueness are certainly contributing factors to luring in customers.

For the fifteen restaurants in the New York City area the average score for “food” was 27, for “décor” it was 19, for “service” it was 23, and the average “cost” was \$115. The standard deviations for “food” and “service” were fairly small (1.06 and 1.94, respectively). The standard deviation for “décor” ranged a bit farther at 4.76. The standard deviation of the cost at these restaurants was \$132.73, which is understandable because of the tremendously high price at Masa (\$585). All but one of these New York sushi restaurants had a “food” score that put them into the category of “extraordinary to perfection,” with Sasabune with the highest score in the “food” measure. Interestingly, it is the second most expensive sushi restaurant in the New York City area examined in this study, and also had the lowest rating for “décor” (11).

Sasabune has a very traditional menu, with only the possible exception being “stuffed squid.” The second highest rating for “food” went to Sushi Yasuda and Ushiwakamaru. While Sushi Yasuda does not offer an explicit list of their *nigiri* items, the proteins described

in their “Combination Meals” (i.e. a meal that is composed of a choice of five pieces of sushi and two rolls) appears to be traditional. Perhaps, this is a menu that is arranged in a confusing manner and the list of aforementioned proteins are the choices of *nigiri* or *sashimi* offered by Sushi Yasuda. Ushiwakamaru appears to offer a mainly traditional *nigiri* options, however it is also a menu that is difficult to read as the rolls, *sashimi*, and *nigiri* are all listed together. This makes it especially difficult to see what a *nigiri* menu option is and what is not. However, I would still assert that a fairly more traditional menu tends to garner more respect in New York City. These findings indicate to me that there are several high quality sushi restaurants in New York City, and among some of the most popular are sushi restaurants that are fairly traditional.

For the thirteen restaurants in the Los Angeles that were reviewed the average score for “food” was 27, for “décor” it was 18, for “service” it was 23, and the average cost of a meal was \$98. The standard deviation for “food” was the smallest for all the cities at 0.83. The standard deviations for “décor” and “service” were fairly small (2.61 and 1.77, respectively). The standard deviation for “cost” is the largest among the four cities, at 115.18 (about \$115), but this is likely due to the incredibly expensive menu at Urasawa (\$488). In order to get a better idea of the cost of a sushi restaurant in the Los Angeles area it may be fairer to look at the median “cost” which was \$69. All of the Los Angeles restaurants examined in this study fell into the category of “extraordinary to perfection.” Urasawa’s *nigiri* offerings stay in the traditional prescriptions for *nigiri*. Other restaurants with the same “food” rating also include Sushi Zo, Asanebo, and Echigo. All of which seem to also stay within a traditional also seem to stay traditional in their *nigiri* offerings, with the exception of “wagyū beef” at Asanebo. This would indicate that the more traditional sushi is in Los

Angeles, the more the menu is respected and sought-after and generally well-respected as all of these restaurants are rated as “extraordinary to perfection.”

Figure 1

Zagat Restaurant Ratings (All Restaurants in All Cities - 2013)					
City	Restaurant	Food	Décor	Service	Cost
Houston	Aka Sushi House	24	20	22	27
Houston	Uchi	29	25	27	56
Houston	Sushi King	27	21	23	32
Houston	Uptown Sushi	26	22	22	45
Houston	Kata Robata	25	21	22	41
Houston	Soma Sushi	25	22	25	36
Houston	Aka Japanese Cuisine	24	20	22	27
Houston	Azuma Downtown	23	22	20	33
Houston	Azuma Sushi & Robata Bar	23	22	20	33
Houston	Japaneiro's Sushi Bistro & Latin Grill	22	18	17	26
Houston	The Fish	22	21	18	36
Houston	Kubo's Sushi Bar & Grill	21	20	20	37
Houston	Benihana	21	18	22	37
Houston	Benihana Japanese Steakhouse	21	18	22	37
Houston	Osaka Japanese Restaurant	21	16	21	27

Las Vegas	I Love Sushi	27	23	25	31
Las Vegas	Sushi Mon	26	17	21	30
Las Vegas	Makino Decatur	25	19	21	35
Las Vegas	Naked Fish's Sushi & Grill	25	19	22	38
Las Vegas	Nobu	27	23	24	88
Las Vegas	Sushi Samba	25	23	22	56
Las Vegas	Koi Restaurant	25	23	20	56
Las Vegas	Island Sushi & Grill	23	18	21	20
Las Vegas	Yellowtail Japanese Restaurant and Lounge	25	24	23	72
Las Vegas	Sen of Japan	28	19	26	53
Las Vegas	Kabuki	27	25	25	29
Las Vegas	BarMASA	26	23	24	122
Las Vegas	Shibuya	25	23	23	65
Las Vegas	Yama Sushi	26	21	22	25
New York	Sasabune	29	11	23	113
New York	Sushi Yasuda	28	22	24	89
New York	Ushiwakamaru	28	19	24	92
New York	Kurumazushi	28	15	24	151
New York	Sushi of Gari 46	27	16	22	82
New York	Gari Columbus	27	16	22	82
New York	Sushi of Gari	27	16	22	82
New York	Jewel Bako	26	23	23	78

New York	Morimoto	26	27	24	86
New York	Nobu Fifty Seven	27	23	24	83
New York	Masa	27	24	25	585
New York	Blue Ribbon Sushi	26	20	23	59
New York	Momo Sushi Shack	26	23	25	30
New York	Tomoe Sushi	26	11	17	48
New York	Sushiden	25	18	23	65
Los Angeles	Urasawa	28	25	27	488
Los Angeles	Sushi Zo	28	15	20	116
Los Angeles	Asanebo	28	18	25	84
Los Angeles	Sugarfish by Sushi Nozawa	26	20	22	41
Los Angeles	Sugarfish by Sushi Nozawa – Brentwood	26	20	22	41
Los Angeles	Sugarfish by Sushi Nozawa - Santa Monica	26	20	22	41
Los Angeles	Sushi Gen	26	18	22	46
Los Angeles	Matsuhisa Restaurant	28	19	24	87
Los Angeles	Echigo	28	19	24	87
Los Angeles	Mori Sushi	27	17	24	88
Los Angeles	Omino Sushi	27	15	24	38
Los Angeles	Sasabune Express	27	16	22	69
Los Angeles	Sushi Masu	27	16	25	47
	Average	26	20	23	75

	Median	26	20	22	48
	Mode	27	23	22	41
	Maximum	29	27	27	585
	Minimum	21	11	17	20
	Standard Deviation	2.07	3.39	2.10	93.85

Of the 57 examined sushi restaurants, 40 of those restaurants outwardly stated on their menus available on their business website or on the Zagat website that they had an *omakase* menu. These restaurants are listed in the table below (Figure 2). While this does not technically mean that the other restaurants absolutely do not have *omakase* menus, it does provide a starting point for examining the trends of *omakase* menus since that information is explicitly provided by the 40 restaurants in Figure 2. The average ratings for the various measures on the Zagat website for these restaurants do not vary greatly from the averages for all 57 sushi restaurants.

This trend is likely the result of the threshold for the “food” rating for restaurants had to be over 26 for restaurants to be examined. The few noticeable differences between the restaurants with *omakase* menus and the all of the other analyzed sushi restaurants were the median score for “food” and the cost. The median “food” score for these *omakase* restaurants was slightly higher than the entire sample of sushi restaurants at 27. The average and the median cost for restaurants with *omakase* menus were also higher, at \$106 and \$75, respectively. These findings could be interpreted as sushi restaurants with *omakase* menus are viewed as “higher quality” because the food is expected to be better than those without

omakase menus (as assumed by the higher “food” score) and contribute to willingness for customers to pay slightly more than they would at restaurants without *omakase* menus.

The unintended difficulty of researching these *omakase* was how they are described on menus. Since *omakase* menus are based on the chef’s choice of protein or vegetable, many of the menus are often simply described as a certain number of courses picked out by the chef, and are listed as “market” price. Unfortunately, examining the trends of the a la carte sushi available on the menu also proved difficult in defining what could be considered “traditional” and what would not be termed as such, because similar to the analysis of the *nigiri* menu items for many items there was only limited description, sometimes only stating the protein. Therefore, any trends in the *omakase* menus would have been based on very limited knowledge because of the lack of detail.

Figure 2

Sushi Restaurants with <i>Omakase</i> Menus					
City	Restaurant	Food	Décor	Service	Cost
Houston	Uchi	29	25	27	56
Houston	Kata Robata	25	21	22	41
Houston	Soma Sushi	25	22	25	36
Houston	Aka Japanese Cuisine	24	20	22	27
Houston	Azuma Downtown	23	22	20	33
Houston	Azuma Sushi & Robata Bar	23	22	20	33
Houston	Japaneiro's Sushi Bistro & Latin Grill	22	18	17	26

Houston	Kubo's Sushi Bar & Grill	21	20	20	37
Las Vegas	I Love Sushi	27	23	25	31
Las Vegas	Nobu	27	23	24	88
Las Vegas	SushiSamba	25	23	22	56
Las Vegas	Kabuki	27	25	25	29
Las Vegas	Sen of Japan	28	19	26	53
Las Vegas	Yellowtail Japanese Restaurant and Lounge	25	24	23	72
Las Vegas	BarMASA	26	23	24	122
Las Vegas	Shibuya	25	23	23	65
New York	Sasabune	29	11	23	113
New York	Sushi Yasuda	28	22	24	89
New York	Ushiwakamaru	28	19	24	92
New York	Kurumazushi	28	15	24	151
New York	Sushi of Gari 46	27	16	22	82
New York	Gari of Columbus	27	16	22	82
New York	Sushi of Gari - Tribeca	27	16	22	82
New York	Jewel Bako	26	23	23	78
New York	Morimoto	26	27	24	86
New York	Nobu Fifty Seven	27	23	24	84
New York	Masa	27	24	25	585
New York	Blue Ribbon Sushi	26	19	22	64
New York	Momo Sushi Shack	26	23	25	30

Los Angeles	Urasawa	28	25	27	488
Los Angeles	Sushi Zo	28	15	20	116
Los Angeles	Asanebo	28	18	25	84
Los Angeles	Sugarfish by Sushi Nozawa	26	20	22	41
Los Angeles	Sugarfish by Sushi Nozawa – Brentwood	26	20	22	41
Los Angeles	Sugarfish by Sushi Nozawa - Santa Monica	26	20	22	41
Los Angeles	Sushi Gen	26	18	22	46
Los Angeles	Echigo	28	19	24	87
Los Angeles	Sasabune Express	27	16	22	69
Los Angeles	Sushi Masu	27	16	25	47
	<i>Average</i>	26	21	23	106
	<i>Mode</i>	27	23	24	33
	<i>Median</i>	27	23	24	75
	<i>Maximum</i>	29	27	27	585
	<i>Minimum</i>	21	11	17	26
	<i>Standard Deviation</i>	1.89	3.84	2.02	131.59

Since this does not offer great detail about what the chef would like to provide to the customer, other resources describing the chef’s intent for the menu were taken into account. I pulled some descriptions about the restaurants from their websites and the Zagat website (depending on which was available), and tried to look at how the restaurant was described

and how it was rated for its food. Three of the 40 sushi restaurants with *omakase* menus did not provide any description of the restaurant, so they could not be analyzed, but of the 37 remaining restaurants a few trends emerged. I pulled out nine different themes that could be used to define what the main idea of the description. The table below (Figure 3) will show the theme, its definition, and the number of times this theme was found in description of the 37 restaurants. The next table (Figure 4) will show the restaurants with their Zagat scores and the theme ascribed to them.

Figure 3

Theme	Definition	Number of Times Theme Found
Traditional/Modern Japanese Blend	A combination of both modern and traditional Japanese fare	4
Creativity/Freshness	The creativity of the food and freshness of the ingredients were cited.	4
Creativity/Delicious	The creativity and the delicious taste of the food were cited.	2
Traditional	The menu's adherence to tradition v cited.	8
Unique Experience	The uniqueness of the experience (i.e. food, service, and décor)	6

	were cited.	
Multicultural Fusion	The menu's blending of two or more different cultures was cited.	4
Delicious	The delicious taste of the food was cited.	5
Delicious/Freshness	The delicious taste of the food and the freshness of the ingredients were cited.	2
Unconventional	The lack of adherence to tradition was cited.	1

Figure 4

***Omakase* Sushi Restaurants with Description Themes**

City	Restaurant	Food	Décor	Service	Cost	Description
Houston	Uchi	29	25	27	56	Traditional/Modern Japanese Blend
Houston	Kata Robata	25	21	22	41	Traditional/Modern Japanese Blend
Houston	Soma Sushi	25	22	25	36	Traditional/Modern Japanese Blend
Houston	Azuma Downtown	23	22	20	33	Creativity/Freshness

Houston	Azuma Sushi & Robata Bar	23	22	20	33	Creativity/Freshness
Houston	Kubo's Sushi Bar & Grill	21	20	20	37	Traditional
Las Vegas	I Love Sushi	27	23	25	31	Creativity/Freshness
Las Vegas	Nobu	27	23	24	88	Unique Experience
Las Vegas	SushiSamba	25	23	22	56	Multicultural Fusion
Las Vegas	Kabuki	27	25	25	29	Delicious
Las Vegas	Sen of Japan	28	19	26	53	Multicultural Fusion
Las Vegas	Yellowtail Japanese Restaurant and Lounge	25	24	23	72	Traditional/Modern Japanese Blend
Las Vegas	BarMASA	26	23	24	122	Creativity/Freshness
Las Vegas	Shibuya	25	23	23	65	Unique Experience
New York	Sasabune	29	11	23	113	Unique Experience
New York	Sushi Yasuda	28	22	24	89	Unique Experience
New York	Ushiwakamaru	28	19	24	92	Traditional
New York	Kurumazushi	28	15	24	151	Traditional
New York	Sushi of Gari 46	27	16	22	82	Delicious

New York	Gari of Columbus	27	16	22	82	Delicious
New York	Sushi of Gari - Tribeca	27	16	22	82	Delicious
New York	Jewel Bako	26	23	23	78	Delicious/Freshness
New York	Morimoto	26	27	24	86	Delicious
New York	Nobu Fifty Seven	27	23	24	84	Multicultural Fusion
New York	Masa	27	24	25	585	Unique Experience
New York	Blue Ribbon Sushi	26	19	22	64	Multicultural Fusion
New York	Momo Sushi Shack	26	23	25	30	Uncoventional
Los Angeles	Urasawa	28	25	27	488	Unique Experience
Los Angeles	Sushi Zo	28	15	20	116	Traditional
Los Angeles	Asanebo	28	18	25	84	Creativity/Delicious
Los Angeles	Sugarfish by Sushi Nozawa	26	20	22	41	Traditional
Los Angeles	Sugarfish by Sushi Nozawa	26	20	22	41	Traditional

	– Brentwood					
Los Angeles	Sugarfish by Sushi Nozawa - Santa Monica	26	20	22	41	Traditional
Los Angeles	Sushi Gen	26	18	22	46	Creativity/Delicious
Los Angeles	Echigo	28	19	24	87	Traditional
Los Angeles	Sushi Masu	27	16	25	47	Delicious/Freshness

As evidenced above, menus that were described as traditional were more common among the *omakase* menus and average scores of 26 for “food,” 20 for “décor” and 23 for “service,” as well as an average cost of \$79. Of the eight restaurants that were described as “traditional,” one was in Houston, two were in New York, and five were in Los Angeles. The prevalence of this theme would indicate to me that “traditional” sushi is certainly sought-after more often than non-traditional sushi.

In Houston, the six *omakase* serving restaurants had three that fell into the “traditional/modern Japanese blend” category, two fell in the “creativity/freshness” category, and one fell in the “traditional” category. This would lead me to believe that traditional sushi is appealing to sushi diners in Houston, but creativity, modernity, and the freshness of the

ingredients certainly also play a role in making a sushi restaurant appealing to a diner in Houston.

In Las Vegas, the eight *omakase* serving restaurants fell into five different themes. Two fell into the category of “Creativity/Freshness,” two were “Multicultural Fusion,” two were “Unique Experience,” one was “Delicious,” and one was “Traditional/Modern Japanese Blend.” It is clear since these menus are described in such terms that uniqueness and creativity are likely what people in Las Vegas would term as “high quality” sushi and adherence to traditional practices is much less important.

In New York City, of the thirteen restaurants that were serving *omakase* menus, four were categorized as “Delicious,” three were categorized as “Unique Experience,” two were categorized as “Multicultural Fusion,” two were categorized as “Traditional,” one was categorized as “Delicious/Freshness,” and one was categorized as “Unconventional.” These trends would lead me to believe that the actual taste of the sushi and its “distinctiveness” (based on the trends for restaurants to be called “unconventional,” “unique experience,” and “multicultural fusion”), regardless of its adherence to tradition would be the leading factor in selecting a sushi restaurant in New York City.

In Los Angeles, of the nine restaurants that were serving *omakase* menus, five were described as “Traditional,” two were categorized as “Creativity/Delicious,” one was categorized as “Delicious/Freshness,” and one was described as a “Unique Experience.” Now, while it is apparent that adhering to tradition is very appealing in the Los Angeles area, it should be noted that the most expensive sushi restaurant in the area, Urasawa, was

described as a unique experience. So, while traditional Japanese sushi is certainly sought out, people are will to pay top dollar for a unique experience, as well.

Implications

It is clear that among these cities with their different histories and tastes regarding sushi, there is still an interest in traditional Japanese sushi. However, at the same time the uniqueness of Americanized sushi is something that is alluring to American sushi diners. If Baudrillard is correct on his evaluation of “kitsch” versus “authentic” items (i.e. authenticity makes an item more valuable), then traditional sushi-making practice and creative reinterpretations of Americanized sushi could be thought of as two sides to “authenticity,” as both make an food item distinctive and rare (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 111). This has made me believe that “Americanized” sushi may not necessarily be viewed as “low quality” as long as the creation of sushi as a food item is thought of as pushing creative boundaries or uses “high quality” or “luxury” ingredients like waygū beef or *foie gras*.

Yet, the tendency for the analyzed *omakase* serving restaurants to call their menus “traditional” does indicate there is a desire to have an experience that connects the diner to Japan’s culture. Perhaps what is most appealing for consumers attracted to this concept is that this is a way to simulate travel. By simply eating sushi made in this way, a person can be transported to a different place, whether that place is foreign and exotic, or a place that the diner could call “home.”

A desire to “revisit” a home country and culture could be the reason why a city like Los Angeles with a longer history and greater number and density of Japanese people would have a desire for more traditional sushi as the individuals who brought sushi into the city’s

purview were Japanese immigrants. These immigrants brought with them cultural knowledge of Japanese sushi and sought to recreate that experience in their new home. Since they opened the first sushi restaurants in the city, they likely defined “high quality” sushi in the area for many years, as they exposed their culture to a people from different backgrounds and continued to share their culture through their food. It could also explain why cities like Houston with less robust histories of Japanese people immigrating to the area and fewer Japanese people in the population do not adhere nearly as strongly to traditional practices.

Cities like Houston, New York City, and Las Vegas seem to be slightly more divided on what is important regarding “high quality” sushi, but still seem to show an interest in the traditional Japanese sushi practices. It could be that without the wealth of cultural knowledge that established sushi as a staple dish in Los Angeles makes eating sushi in these cities is a sophisticated and cosmopolitan way to eat, rather than as a way to experience Japanese culture or revisit home. Perhaps it is for this reason that “Americanized” sushi is not necessarily termed “low quality” if it can be defined as “forward thinking” or “innovative.” Also, without a history of a large amount of immigrants establishing businesses and making food items, like sushi, a staple (as it is in Los Angeles), the people in these cities care less about tradition because they are already trying something that is exotic and different. Thus, experiencing the dish as reminiscent of a home culture would be not nearly as important in establishing the value of the dish. However, I would still assert that the idea of sushi being “traditionally Japanese” is still appealing to the sushi diners in these cities.

Chapter Three: Field Research with the Sushi Club of Houston

In an effort to discover what ideas were most appealing qualities sushi can have to the sushi enthusiasts in the United States, I followed the Sushi Club of Houston. The Sushi Club of Houston is the largest sushi-based group in the United States and has more than 15,000 members. There is no cost to join the Sushi Club of Houston, which can be done online, but there is a cost associated with attending their events. The organization hosts several events including dinners at various Japanese restaurants, cooking classes, trivia nights, and trips to Japan to allow members to learn more about sushi. From the events that I attended, I found the membership to be ethnically diverse, but interestingly I did not see or meet a great number of Japanese people. Also, it seemed to me that members tended to be between the ages of 20 and 50, but as always, it is hard to judge age without taking a census.

Over the years, I have watched the Sushi Club grow from a small class taught at a local community center to a brick-and-mortar location in the Montrose area of Houston. I have attended two sushi dinners (one of which was preliminary research that initially got me interested in the Sushi Club), and five cooking classes. I met individuals from these events, and interviewed five individuals to provide some insight on why they are interested in the Sushi Club, what their sushi preferences are, and what are the qualities they look for in a sushi restaurant.

The History of the Sushi Club of Houston

The Sushi Club of Houston was founded in October of 2006 Carl Rosa and his wife, Sonya. The Rosas are originally from New Orleans, Louisiana, but they were forced to relocate to the Houston area from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina destroyed their home and Carl's dental practice. After moving to Kingwood, Texas, the Rosas thought it was

important for them learn how to navigate Houston's freeway system, so they decided to drive around the area so that they could explore their new home.

During their exploration, they stumbled across a sushi restaurant, which delighted Carl, as he had been an enthusiastic sushi fan for many years. With high hopes that a city as large and culturally diverse as Houston would provide them with a fantastic meal, they ventured into the restaurant only to be met with disappointment. In his classes, Carl described the disgusting flavor of the sushi at this restaurant as "something you wanted to scrape off of your tongue." Despite this horrendous experience, Carl did not lose hope that he could find an exceptional or at least acceptable sushi experience in the Houston area.

He began to scour the internet in order to find a "website, newsletter, or group that would be dedicated to sushi in Houston," in order to find information about where to find "good sushi" in Houston. After weeks of searching, he came up empty, but he refused the idea of not finding good sushi in Houston so he decided to create his own sushi group. He purchased a website domain name (Houston-Sushi.com) and designed a simple website. After that, he began introducing himself to the local Japanese restaurant owners and chefs around Houston, and getting to know the local sushi restaurants. Soon, other likeminded individuals were stumbling onto Carl's website in search of the city's best sushi, and Carl soon started hosting dinners for the sushi enthusiasts. Thus, the Sushi Club of Houston was born.

Today, the Sushi Club of Houston is the largest sushi-based group in the United States and hosts several events from cooking classes to trips to Japan. Carl has also established a name for himself as a knowledgeable resource regarding sushi and other Asian

cuisine, particularly Japanese cuisine. After his success with the Sushi Club of Houston, Carl established the “Asian Dining Group,” and a ramen enthusiast group called “Ramen in Common.” He has been the focus of two different documentaries, was hired as Executive Director of a Japanese society and was the singular logistics manager for the largest Japanese festival in the United States. He also works directly with Takashi Ono (son of the famous Jiro Ono, one of Japan’s premiere sushi chefs and the focus of renowned documentary, *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*) to host exclusive dinners in Tokyo for attendees on the Sushi Club of Houston’s trips. He not only teaches his “Sushi 101” cooking class in Houston, but also throughout Texas (Dallas, Richardson, Austin, and San Antonio), Colorado (Denver, Colorado Springs, and Pueblo), Illinois (Chicago), Georgia (Atlanta), and Louisiana (New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Metairie).

The Sushi Club of Houston – Events

In order to establish themes and tell the story of my experience with the Sushi Club of Houston, it seemed pertinent to explain how each of the events I attended built on one another and began to give me insight on the preferences of Houston area sushi diners. Thus, I am outlining the major highlights of the various events I did participant-observation research at over the years with the Sushi Club of Houston. Now, while I most frequently went to sushi cooking classes, which had limited social interaction, as most of those students were respectfully attentive to Carl’s lesson and most often talked with those they elected to attend that class with, I was still able to find some important ideas that would later come up in the interviews I conducted with members of the Sushi Club.

Preliminary Research and the First Event – Dinner at Osaka

As I stated before, I have watched the Sushi Club grow over the time I have been studying them. During that time, I have seen individuals interact with new people at Sushi Club events, but more so I observed that they more often came to the events with companions who they bonded with while enjoying and making sushi. One event where I witnessed interactions among individuals meeting for the first time and talking about sushi was my very first event that was preliminary research that I did in 2013. I met the Sushi Club for a sushi-tasting dinner at Soma Sushi in Houston. I was observing the event to see if the Sushi Club was a group that was appropriate for research. At the dinner, fourteen members of the Sushi Club gathered to have some appetizers, *nigiri*, sushi rolls, and a dessert. During the dinner, Carl told the Club members about some of the developments regarding the Club and then let them know that I was here to study American opinions about sushi. I then had a chance to sit at the table with the Sushi Club members and talk to them about what they like about sushi.

This was the first time that I met *Erica (pseudonym) who explained that she was a “foodie” that would spend “way too much money” on food because she was always looking for a new eating experiences. We bonded over the fact that we are ardently invested in exploring food and trying to find the best eating experience that we could manage. I would ultimately interview her later and I would discover that Erica was a thirty-year-old job recruiter who is originally from Chicago and moved to Houston in 2011. However, at this point, she was just one of the fourteen Sushi Club members who was fascinated by sushi, actively trying to learn more about it, and frequently eating it. I was genuinely pleased at the end of the meal while I was jotting down notes about my evening that a few of the members

that I was not able to talk to during the meal walked up to me to explain that the “only reason that this club exists is because of Carl.” These comments indicated that his expertise, the way he conveyed that expertise (i.e. his friendliness and sense of humor appeared to be very popular with the Sushi Club members), and the events he put together were something special, and I knew then that the Sushi Club was a valid group to research.

After obtaining Internal Review Board approval from the University of Houston, I was fortunate enough to come across Erica again at another Sushi Club dinner in January of 2014. It was Osaka Sushi in Houston at a sushi tasting dinner with nine Sushi Club members. At the dinner, I was seated next to *Nick (pseudonym) a nineteen year-old college student who was getting his bachelor’s degree in engineering from University of California, Berkeley, but had returned home to Houston to visit his family over the winter holiday. While we were seated next to each other, we started talking about how we were both college students and discussed our experiences. I told him that I was majoring in Anthropology and he mentioned he had taken an Anthropology class while at Berkeley. We talked about some of the renowned anthropologists that he had learned about, including E.E. Evans-Pritchard and Margaret Mead. Eventually, our conversation turned to how he found the Sushi Club of Houston, particularly since he did not live in Houston most of the year.

He told me that his mother found out about the Sushi Club’s cooking classes and told him about the classes because he enjoys sushi very much. He was interested to learn more about sushi, so he signed up for the Sushi 101 class, which he thought was very informative and enjoyable. He was particularly interested in the concept of sushi rice being served the way that Carl described in his cooking classes, specifically that “the rice should be served at body temperature”. In fact, he took that lesson so deeply to heart that he said that it was

extremely hard to find “good sushi” in Berkeley because the rice was not served warm. After I suggested he take a road trip to Los Angeles to try some of the sushi restaurants that I had been reading about, he said that he was very interested because Los Angeles was more “materialistic” than Berkeley. Materialism (i.e. the desire to collect expensive items for the sake of doing so, similar to conspicuous consumption) seemed to be very appealing to Nick as he went on to explain that he liked (as he put it) “nice things” that were expensive, like nice cars (particularly Lamborghinis) and sushi.

I thought that it was interesting that he related the quality of the restaurants in a city with the city’s reputation for materialism, and that he seemed to assert that sushi was similar to the automobile industry, in which you pay more for a vehicle with a distinctive look or a superior performance. He indicated that paying more for sushi would result a better meal. Nick found that “good sushi” is defined by the information provided to him in Carl Rosa’s class, which is based on traditional Japanese sushi practices, rather than his own experience with sushi. Also, it seems that for Nick, sushi knowledge is an identifier for those with the esoteric knowledge associated with wealth. By stating that there is a similarity between Lamborghinis and sushi as far as “liking nice things” indicates that pursuing what is considered the best (which is expensive) is important to Nick. This experience with Nick certainly evidenced that some American sushi diners are eating expensive and purportedly traditional Japanese sushi as a way to display wealth and knowledge, similar to Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption.

Nick’s appreciation for cars caught Erica’s attention, as she is also interested in cars, particularly vintage American muscle cars. She told him that at one point she owned three cars: one for daily driving, one she was fixing up, and another that “was just for fun.” Nick

asked her when she got a new car if she was ever compelled to modify the car because a “stock” vehicle felt unsatisfying. She said that she did like the idea of modifying new cars, but that she did not want that many cars again. This conversation gave me some insight into Erica and Nick’s personalities. While Nick seemed to enjoy collecting icons of wealth for the sake of collecting them, Erica seemed to collect expensive items because of the potential she sees in getting an experience or use out of them, rather than just having the “best” version of an item for the sake of owning the “best.”

Just before Nick and Erica’s conversation about cars, I heard Erica discussing with a few other members of the Sushi Club about the trips that they took to Japan with Carl. During the conversation, Erica stated that while she travels that sightseeing or attending a performance does not resonate with her the same way as having a great meal. Eating is Erica’s preferred way to experience other cultures, because it is more impactful emotionally to her. I thought this shows how deeply Erica cares about food and eating and that she is not a simply satiating hunger, but instead she is looking for a meaningful way to connect to a new culture when she eats while she is traveling.

Another man, *Ben (pseudonym), who attended a different trip to Japan with the Sushi Club than the one Erica went on, told a story about his trip. On his trip he decided to drink sake (a drink he is not especially fond of) with the rest of the Club and it became “the mission” of several members to get him intoxicated. Erica said that if she had been there, she would have seen to it that Ben drank that night. The entire table laughed at that comment.

Nick then asked Erica if she had been to “the sushi restaurant with the best sushi chef in the world?” while in Japan (i.e. Jiro Ono of Sukiyabashi Jiro sushi restaurant in Tokyo,

and focus of the famous documentary *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*). She stated that she had, and Nick then asked if the restaurant was as good as reputed. She confirmed it was very good, but said that it may have been better if she had gone when Jiro's son, Takashi, was working. Whether or not that means Jiro served her a meal is unclear because I could not hear every word she said when she was answering him. Then, Ben chimed in and stated that he also got to go to Sukiyabashi Jiro, and then said that Carl Rosa had been escorted out of the restaurant for taking pictures. Everyone at the table laughed and asked questions about Carl being escorted out of the restaurant.

This interaction showed that there is comradery among the Sushi Club members because they have shared interests, knowledge, and experiences. Beyond their shared love of sushi, they related to one another over the *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* documentary, which is indicated because they knew who was being referred to as the "best sushi chef in the world," and they were able to share stories about Jiro Ono. Also, the shared experience of knowing Carl made the story about him being escorted out more interesting to the Sushi Club members. This ability to relate to each other is important as it makes the Sushi Club not only a place where members learn more about sushi, but also where they can bond with others and share their experiences.

This conversation spurred the table to have a discussion about how several people in other countries do not like Americans because Americans often unknowingly perform some behaviors that are considered rude in other cultures. I thought this was an interesting idea for the group to share as it positions Americans as global citizens that are not readily accepted because of their gaps in cultural knowledge. It seems as it is common for Americans to know (as indicated by the lack of objection in this conversation) that their cultural knowledge is

limited, especially when it comes cultures that are not geographically nearby and will often not recognize when they are acting inappropriately.

Then, the conversation at the table turned to what Carl Rosa had taught them about sushi. The table discussed the “right” ratio of fish to rice in a piece of *nigiri*. A middle-aged man, *Jack, said that he was always looking for the “balance [of fish and rice] that Carl was talking about.” I thought that this conversation spoke to the group’s acceptance of information from an “expert” (i.e. Carl) in order to find a “better” or more satisfying experience. This seems to indicate an acceptance of the gaps in their cultural knowledge about sushi, and a desire to fill in those gaps.

Second Sushi Club Event – Cooking Class at the Bayland Community Center

In 2014, I arranged to participate in a “Sushi 101” cooking class at the Bayland Community Center with fifteen members of the Sushi Club. I was the first student to arrive, and I took my place that was assigned by Carl. At both the dining experiences and the cooking classes, Carl assigns seating in order to foster more conversation between Club members. Making connections with people who also share a love of sushi is very important to the premise of the Club, which is, of course, common in just about any club, but Carl is specifically making an effort to provide an experience that lends itself to making connections with others. I had a short conversation with the man and woman seated next to me about how I was studying American attitudes toward sushi for my Master’s thesis in Anthropology at the University of Houston. Unfortunately, our conversation was cut short when class began, and during most of the class, the students were respectfully quiet and attentive while Carl was speaking.

Carl began his lesson by explaining that over the course of this single class, the students will learn more about sushi than what most people in America know about sushi. He stated that there are certain behaviors that diners can display to set themselves apart from other sushi diners. He claimed these behaviors can convince sushi chefs that they are knowledgeable diners who are people that should be impressed because they could be a food critic or a competitor in the restaurant industry. He said the behaviors alert the chef to know they are dealing with “someone to reckon with,” and they will make the rest of the staff aware of such a person, in order to provide the diner with the best experience that they can, in order to protect the restaurant from negative publicity.

Carl told a story about such an event that happened to him while he was in Las Vegas. He described that he was seated at the sushi bar, and there was a mirrored wall behind the chef working behind the bar. After eating the sushi in particular way, Carl noticed the chef go to the back of the restaurant to make the owner aware of Carl. A few moments later, Carl was amused to see the owner standing behind him flagrantly pointing at Carl while mouthing to the chef, “Is this the guy?” Carl then began to explain what behaviors could be used to “terrify sushi chefs,” as Carl put it. He said that sushi experts like Sasha Issenberg (author of *The Sushi Economy*) order a piece or two of *nigiri*, remove the fish from the rice, and then examine the rice. They will smell, touch, and taste the rice by itself to determine if the rice is the proper temperature (i.e. warm), taste (i.e. properly washed and seasoned with rice vinegar and sugar), texture (i.e. sticky but with intact grains), and density (i.e. packed tight enough to move from the plate to the mouth, but should be on the verge of falling apart).

Then Carl stated that one of the most commonly overlooked aspects of making proper sushi is to make sure the rice is completely rinsed in cold water prior to cooking the rice.

“The rice should be rinsed until the water runs completely clear,” Carl stated. This seems to be a commonly recognized practice in the process of preparing sushi among connoisseurs. In Trevor Corson’s (2007) book, *The Story of Sushi*, Corson explains that there is some extra starch on the outside of the grains of rice as a result of the milling process, and this starch can be make the rice too sticky for sushi, so chefs rinse it off (p. 34). Carl elaborated that since people are often unaware of the importance of cleaning the rice, and that it takes several rinses for the rice to be properly cleaned that there is often bad information available to people interested in making sushi in their homes in America. He explained that a particular host of a Food Network television show told his viewers that the rice only needed to be washed once or twice in cold water, but Carl explained that the rice he prepared for class was washed about ten to fifteen times and that two or three rinses will likely never clean the rice well enough.

He demonstrated the need to wash the rice by putting some unwashed rice into a clear jar and added some water. He agitated the jar and the water turned a milky color, which caused some of the individuals in class to groan with disgust. He explained that often when people have “bad sushi” that tastes like something that has the potential of making them sick, and that this is taste is often the result of improperly washed rice. I found this to be especially powerful example of Carl asserting himself as an expert of sushi for two main reasons. He highlights that experts (i.e. Sasha Issenberg) start to assess sushi by examining the rice, and that many people have incorrect information (i.e. from the Food Network host) or are unaware of the importance of the rice being properly cleaned. Also, he makes his knowledge seem more necessary to the students with his demonstration of the amount of extra starch on the outside of the rice, which caused several students to appear repulsed.

Third and Fourth Sushi Club Events – Cooking Class at Private Residence in Museum District

I observed a “Sushi 101” cooking class with six members of the Sushi Club at a private residence in the affluent Museum District in Houston. While the students were mostly quiet during class, there was some interaction that led me to believe that Carl’s knowledge about sushi was a resource for these members to learn how to best enjoy sushi. Carl made several statements about how Americans are not maximizing their experience because they lack the knowledge about what “good” sushi and are accepting a lower quality product. As a result the students asked him questions about how to eat sushi appropriately as dictated by Japanese cultural tradition. During the class, one student asked shortly after making a piece of *nigiri* if it was “bad to take more than one bite of a [piece of] *nigiri*?” Carl responded that, “in America, it can’t be [bad] because they make them [*nigiri*] one size fits all, which is often too big for some people. In Japan, it is [bad to take more than one bite] because they make it that way [i.e. small enough for a single bite].”

After being encouraged by Carl to be creative with making their sushi rolls, a student asked Carl if they could put wasabi on their roll, which Carl said was acceptable. After the class had discussed what sushi restaurants around Houston that they liked, Carl told a story about going to one of those restaurants, and being served cold sushi rice as their first customer. He explained that this meant that the rice was made the day before, which is actually against the health code restaurants are meant to abide by law. Carl said that restaurants like this used their old rice because Americans care more about making a profit rather than creating a high quality product, and since most Americans do not know very much about sushi they are often not able to discern quality in sushi.

Carl said that Japanese culture does not appreciate the idea of creating a lower quality product for the sake of making more money, which they believe is the prevalent way that Americans conduct business. The students in the class seemed to absorb this comment without any debate. I feel that this comment establishes the Japanese practice of making sushi as superior because there is an expressed desire to create a “quality” product rather than to create a product that will generate revenue. Also, it implies that because Japanese sushi diners have greater cultural knowledge and that sushi chefs are forced to create a better product because they serving a more knowledgeable clientele. The idea that American sushi diners should bolster their sushi knowledge to use as leverage to “force” a chef to produce the best sushi they can is a recurrent idea that Carl brought up in classes and one that the classes seemed to absorb with no perceivable debate. The ready acceptance of this idea shows that Americanized sushi is not viewed as valuable as traditional Japanese sushi.

Carl commented a few minutes into that class that he preferred to teach smaller classes for the increased social interaction, which I thought was actually best exemplified in a particular conversation at the fourth Sushi Club cooking class I attended at the same location. Shortly after arriving to this “Sushi 101” cooking class, I met *David (pseudonym) and *Kristin (pseudonym), a couple who I would later interview. David is an art director in Houston, and Kristin had worked in advertising for several years, but was currently studying to become a nurse. I discovered that David and Kristin had lived in California for a few years, so I asked them what they thought the difference between sushi in California and Texas. Andrew explained that because there are so many Japanese immigrants in California, that the sushi is more traditional than it is here. He did not seem to be criticizing more “Americanized” sushi in Texas, because he said that he liked some of the more Americanized

sushi in Houston. I felt this really challenged my assumption that those with more experience eating sushi would be more interested in a traditional menu. For David and Kristin, despite living in a place with long history with sushi, more Americanized sushi was more appealing than traditional Japanese sushi. So, while a traditional experience may be appealing to many, there are still plenty of individuals that do not find that as palatable as Americanized sushi.

Fifth and Sixth Sushi Club Events– Cooking Class at Sushi Club of Houston’s Location in Montrose

The fifth and sixth Sushi Club events I attended were at the Sushi Club’s brick-and-mortar location in the Montrose area of Houston. This location is shared by the Sushi Club and the Tachibana School of Ikebana, which teaches the fine art of Japanese flower arranging. As a result, the space has a combination of requisite items for arranging flowers (which included several shelves with different kinds of pottery and vases, and books on *ikebana*) and for making sushi. There were three long tables that were set up with the ingredients that Sushi Club members would use to make their sushi, and rice cookers on a counter near the sink. At this particular event, there were twenty Sushi Club members that attended the class.

Carl taught the Sushi Club that most Americans do not know enough about sushi so they are often “scammed” by restaurants with word choices for menu items and the naming of certain proteins. He again said that if more Houstonians displayed more knowledge regarding eating sushi that sushi chefs would be terrified into producing better sushi. After that statement, a woman at the middle table asked Carl, “Do the [sushi] restaurants around here hate you?” Carl responded in the affirmative, which caused the class to quietly laugh. A man at the same table asked Carl, “Where [for sushi] do you like to go?” Carl responded

that he liked to go different places for different sushi experiences. He said that he liked Kata Robata if he was seated at the bar, Kubo's for more traditional Japanese sushi, and Redfish for their sushi rolls. Carl's lesson and the questions students asked reinforced the idea that having more knowledge about sushi and behaving in a manner that reflects that knowledge about sushi forces the restaurant to provide the consumer with a better product for fear of poor reviews from costumers. This indicates that there is uneven access to high-quality sushi because of the effort the chef puts into a dish. It also means that American sushi chefs are viewed as less likely to put forth the effort into creating a great dish because they are more concerned with generating a profit.

Later in the class, Carl showed the Sushi Club members his collection of Japanese Kit-Kat candy bars. His impressive collection includes one hundred and forty-seven different flavors of Kit-Kats that are only available in Japan. Many of the flavors are fairly unusual and include flavors like wasabi, baked potato, and red bean paste. While Carl was pointing out some of the more unusual flavors, people in the class made comments like: "Ew." "Can I sample?" "Not going to lie, I want to try wasabi." After that, Carl passed out some samples of three Japanese Kit-Kats (Tokyo Dark Chocolate Truffle flavor, Green Tea flavor, and Wakayama Orange Grove flavor) and all of the students accepted the samples. Then he polled the class to find out their favorite flavor, which was green tea. The willingness of the class to try something that they likely had never had before indicated that this class is made up of students who are actively trying to learn more about a different culture by trying that culture's food and are willing to try something different or even "strange" to learn more about that culture. This openness to trying what other cultures have to offer shows that these Sushi Club members are not resistant to new experiences and in fact readily accept such

experiences. Perhaps, this is the partial reason why sushi connoisseurs, like Carl, seek out more traditional menus because it is dissimilar to what is readily available locally and is thus more unique and interesting. Also, the idea that more traditional sushi is prepared for someone who “knows what good sushi is” may make the experience of eating more traditional Japanese sushi more appealing, particularly to those who are open to discover what that may mean.

While the “Sushi 101” class taught students about traditional Japanese sushi practices, it also encouraged students to try to tailor their sushi to their personal tastes. At the sixth Sushi Club I attended, students asked questions about different sushi ingredients in order to enjoy their sushi more. After the class was told by Carl that they would start to make their sushi rolls, a woman asked him about the seaweed sheets (*nori*) that they would use to make their sushi rolls. Specifically, she asked, “why are some of these [*nori*] so nasty?” To which, Carl replied that some of the *nori* taste different because there are about thirty different companies making *nori*, so each brand can be a little different, and finding a brand that tastes best to her may take trying out a few different brands. Shortly after that, Carl explained how to make “Japanese mayo,” which is actually a condiment found primarily in Americanized sushi, and is made by combining mayonnaise, *sriracha* sauce, and sesame oil. Carl joked about Japanese mayo’s not-so-Japanese roots. “This is Japanese mayo and it comes all the way from Los Angeles, Japan,” he quipped, which caused the class to laugh.

After Carl explained that this condiment is often added to sushi rolls in America, and that it is often an addition to a simple roll that is responsible for making the roll more expensive. He explained that there are often two sushi roll sections on the same menu: regular and specialty. Regular sushi rolls will have roll with a simple description on the menu

that is a list of ingredients. For example, California roll would have the description “artificial crab, avocado, cucumber.” The specialty sushi rolls would essentially be the same rolls as the regular rolls with more adjectives in the description, a catchy name for the roll, and often the addition Japanese mayo, but will be several dollars more than the regular rolls. So, a specialty roll may be called “The West Coast Roll,” and it would have a menu description that read: “creamy California avocado, succulent artificial crab, crisp cucumber, and savory Japanese mayo.” Carl again explained that sushi restaurants will often make strategic choices about how they present sushi that is often overlooked by those with less sushi knowledge in order to make a larger profit.

After Carl finished making the Japanese mayo, he gave it to Sonya to pass out to students in the class. While she was passing out the mayo, a Sushi Club member asked Carl, “Are there other things that you can add to the spicy mayo, like *ponzu*?” Carl said that she should try it and see if it is a tasty combination. The way that Japanese mayo was presented strengthens the idea that American sushi seeks to make a profit, rather than a great product. However, most people in the class ended up adding the Japanese mayo to their rolls, and altering it further was not discouraged. It appears that Americanized sushi is not universally disliked by sushi connoisseurs, but it does not receive the same respect for being “high quality” as traditional sushi because of the presumption that Americanized sushi seeks to generate as much profit as possible.

The Sushi Club of Houston – Interviews

At the various Sushi Club events I attended, I met and interviewed five members. I asked them about their most memorable sushi eating experiences, their definition “high quality” sushi, and what made sushi especially appealing to them. I also tried to assess what

resources they use to learn about new restaurants and whether or not a more traditional Japanese or more Americanized style of sushi was appealing to them. While analyzing the interviews, I found themes that explained parts of the Sushi Club members' emotional connection to sushi, including the social bonding that they had while consuming it and using food as a way to relive memories. This helped to explain not only what they value about sushi, but also why they feel especially drawn to learning more about sushi and how to enjoy it better.

Theme: Eating as an Experience

The most prevalent theme that I found from analyzing these interviews was the view that eating was an experience. It seemed that eating for these individuals was more than just a way to satiate hunger, but was a way to explore the world around them. Eating food is a way to share knowledge and experiences with other people, both those who are sharing the meal with them (like friends and family members) or those who created a dish that they enjoy (like chefs). Also, eating was an experience that should be maximized by these individuals by using research, particularly online research to find restaurants that are better or more different than what they may find by exploring their neighborhood. I found that there were four sub-themes that emerged from the theme of eating as an experience, and those sub-themes were: researching restaurants, trying new foods, sharing with family and friends, and reliving dining experiences. Each of these sub-themes indicated that eating well (i.e. eating the highest quality meal that is available and can be afforded) required gaining knowledge and having an emotional connection to the dining experience.

Researching Restaurants

Since eating, particularly eating out at a restaurant, is important to Sushi Club members, one of the sub-themes that arose was the importance of researching online restaurant reviews in order to select the best restaurant available to them. Online restaurant reviews were preferred to the use of print guides like the Michelin or Forbes travel guides in finding information about what restaurant are available to them. Erica stated that it was important for her to use online restaurant reviews when she was traveling, because she wanted to make sure that she was getting the most current information that she could access. She explained:

“Whether I’m in a new city or in, like, a new country I, I do tend to look at reviews and guides and stuff like that, but I usually use a lot of online boards than I use books and guides, unless they’re really easily searchable on the web. The reason I don’t use them as much as is, granted over the long period of time, a restaurant is going to probably be better than average, you know, than, than the one next to it if, you know, they had good [print] reviews. But, I’ve seen a restaurant be great the first year, um, first year out-of-the-gate, trying to prove itself, and then just the quality goes down so drastically that something printed, you know, printed material – I don’t know if I necessarily trust from anything [that has been published] in the past six to nine months.”

Kristin stated that since she does not have a great deal of free time that she explores restaurant reviews in order to ensure she is getting the best experience that she could because she does not want to use her limited time on something that is not satisfying. She stated that her limited free time and her attention to detail may be the result of her profession that she is

pursuing (i.e. she is training to be a nurse). Her husband, David, also thought that using online reviews helped him to identify which restaurant that he would go to, particularly when going out to lunch with his co-workers, which he does regularly. His experience however may better relate to another sub-theme within the theme of “eating as an experience,” which is “trying new foods.” But, it should be considered that the need for current and readily available information for consumers to make dining choices is indicative of the fast-paced and evermore connected global community that globalization has created. Since people like Erica can visit different cities or countries and obtain very recent information from local consumers rather than travel or food experts who publish print guides for restaurants, this allows Erica to connect to the lived experience of a local rather than only use the opinions of an “expert.” Also, the desire to have the most current information possible and not to “waste time” by going to sub-par restaurants indicates a fast-paced lifestyle that uses technology to make choices in the most effective and efficient manner possible.

Trying New Foods

The idea of trying new foods was an especially common concept that the interviewees shared. Sushi Club members were very interested in trying new kinds of sushi, as well as other foods. David stated that he and his co-workers will try new restaurants in the Chinatown area of Houston (where he works), where they will find new restaurants to try in the area by reading online reviews. They have eaten at restaurants with less than favorable reviews even if after entering the restaurant they have some concerns about the restaurant’s level of cleanliness. David explained that if the review has given a restaurant: *“four stars and more than twenty reviews then, ok we’ll go try that one. But, there’s not a lot that holds us back, I mean, we’ve gone to some pretty dirty places (laughs) in search of the next best lunch*

meal.” He also said that restaurant reviews are helpful because: “when you branch out and you want to try something, you don’t want it to be like a bomb, like, you don’t want to go there, and be like, disappointed.” He also said that restaurant reviews can provide information that helps the diner assess whether or not the meal was especially good. He said that “you have to give yourself some basis for judging it [the restaurant], having never been there before.”

To David, online reviews do not only provide him with a suggestion for where to find a certain type of food, but encourage his coworkers and him to try restaurants that they may not try under other circumstances. It also provides him with a frame of reference by which to judge the food. This concept indicates that trying to understand the chef’s intention and the context of the food he is seeking to eat before judging the quality of the food is necessary. It would also indicate that if a restaurant makes food in a certain way that it is not necessarily “low quality” or “bad” food, but could be a variation of a type of cuisine that is not palatable to the individual. This idea is reinforced by David’s statement that a diner does not want to be disappointed when trying to explore new restaurants, and should have a frame of reference to avoid being disappointed. So, the overall theme of David’s explanation about why he uses online reviews is in order to try new foods, which can be judged for quality but only by what defines that type and variation of cuisine.

Another person I interviewed was a native Houstonian, *Beth (pseudonym), who I met at the sixth Sushi Club event I attended. She works as an environmental regulatory compliance officer for a midstream oil and gas company for a living and recently moved to the Midtown area of Houston. When I talked to her, she said she was looking forward to finding sushi restaurants in the area, as this area has several well-reputed restaurants. When I

asked Beth what the most important advice she would give to someone eating sushi for the very first time, she said that she would *“just try to tell people to have an open mind. Since people are so stigmatized by ‘it’s raw’ and that kind of thing, and just have an open mind. It’s going to be fishy and it’s going to be a weird texture, but if you just get over that then you’ll be fine.”* She also said that after the Sushi Club cooking class, she and her friend that attended the class went out for sushi at a nearby sushi restaurant because they were excited to apply some of the new knowledge they learn. I asked her what she ordered, and she reflected positively on the experience while she said:

“We got the sushi platter, the one with nigiri, so it was good we were sampling random things that we would have never tried before. After we figured out what it was because they like, they told us like right when they put it down, and we like needed a labeled version if we’re going to figure out what anything is. Well part of it was just their sushi platter with the tropical mango roll or whatever tropical terrible something like that, and then it was just like ten pieces of nigiri that randomly the chef selected, so I was like, “Oh that’s great. We’ll try new things,” and I didn’t know what any of it was, but we ate it. We just didn’t know what it was. I would order it again.”

Beth’s positive reaction to trying new proteins and encouraging other to get past the stigma of the rawness of the fish seems to indicate that trying new things is an especially appealing aspect of eating that sushi. Like David, she encouraged the pursuit of trying what is new, even though there is a risk of being disappointed. While David mitigated this risk by using online reviews, Beth increased the risk by letting the chef pick the proteins that she and her friend would eat. While she is still not entirely sure what she ate, she is certain that she

appreciated eating that sushi. Both examples, show that trying new food items is more about expanding culinary knowledge (i.e. Beth and her friend getting sushi after the sushi cooking class) and exploring a common interest with friends, rather than just trying something new for the sake of breaking up monotony in everyday life.

I also interviewed *Erin (pseudonym), a native Houstonian and college student majoring in English Literature with a teacher's certification for grades seven through twelve. She moved to Texas three years ago from Arizona. Erin had a remarkable first experience eating sushi with her father when she was vacationing in Las Vegas. She stated:

"It [eating sushi] started when I was nineteen and I was in Las Vegas with my Dad and he treated me to the restaurant, Tao (T-A-O). And um, we started with like sashimi and it was just amazing. I had never had raw fish, I had never had anything sushi-like, just anything like it and it was just, it was the best thing I ever had. Like, we could hold up the fish and you would see right through it. Like you could see the light. It was amazing. It was like salmon and you could see right through it. And, and, that was just. It was amazing. I mean I don't know how else to explain it. And, um, that's how I fell in love with it at first sight. And then, you know, back in Arizona you can't really find this Las Vegas fancy restaurant. So, I'm like, "ok, well, sashimi is obviously not going to work. So, I started kind of going to sushi because I was like, you know, "You can't mess that up too much." And, um, so I just starting going to get sushi and trying all these different rolls and stuff like that, and that's kind of how it started though was sashimi in Las Vegas."

Erin's "love at first sight" experience with eating sushi for the first time was such a remarkable experience that she stated that she had a great desire to return to the restaurant, but noted that financial constraints prevented her from returning. The distinctiveness of trying something completely new that she did not perceive as something that she could not easily get elsewhere made eating sushi for the first time a very memorable experience. It also made it an experience that she wanted to relive by making her own sushi. The idea of reliving an eating experience is another sub-theme that I found to be recurrent in the interviews and will explain more in a later section.

Sharing Sushi with Friends and Family

Many of the most memorable sushi experiences that these individuals had were shared with their friends and family. The sharing of a meal with people they are especially fond of adds an emotional element to the experience of eating sushi, which may help them reflect on the experience so positively, but the food shared was also highlighted for its delicious taste. Interestingly, sharing the eating experiences with people they have close relationships with allowed them to relive their exceptional eating experience later. It was common for a Sushi Club member and their friends or family members to reminisce about that meal, and this memory seemed to be another way for them to bond with these people. It also makes them want to have similar experiences with other friends. For example, Erica told me that sushi is meant to be enjoyed and shared with others, which was an instrumental experience that allowed her to find the Sushi Club of Houston. Sushi is brought up organically in her conversations with others because it is so often on her mind. She said that sushi is "*just something like a gluttonous, like if you enjoy wine, you talk about that too. So it would come up in conversation, she [a friend] would invite me along [to a Sushi Club event],*

and I went to an event, and then just kept going to events. And then, you know, kind of secretly bringing people along, and, just kind of kept doing that, and then she even moved away and I just got more involved with it.”

I asked her if she had a particularly memorable moment eating sushi. *“I do have one. I did an omakase, um, with a girlfriend of mine, actually, the one that told me about the club,”* she replied. She continued: *“And we had eaten at a restaurant that I think is not, no longer, I think, in business, but we had eaten there and um, we just kind of let it, let things go, and just go, ‘ok, just feed us whatever.’ And so, we just try a little bit of everything, and I just, I love being outside of my comfort zone, and then I just – I think it was ‘ocean trout’ that I had for the first time. And I was like, ‘oh my gosh’ and we just looked at each other and had that moment where we’re like, ‘OH, THIS IS GOOD!’”*

She then explained that she and her friend would often reminisce about this meal. She explained, *“And, you just kind of like, we keep, keep referring back to that, keep thinking about that. And then it was raw scallop, I had raw scallop there for the first time, for the first time ever. So just trying all these different things and then just being done so well, um, that you will still, you know you get on the phone with this person and you know, it can be three years ago – we’ll still talk about that meal. Uh, you know, that’s something that, that’s why those experiences are, are I think there a high you constantly chase.”*

Erica’s passion is overt in this story, and it appears to be strengthened by having a friend to reflect with about that experience. Looking back on an experience that they both enjoyed can certainly romanticize that memory and make the idea of eating that food all the more appealing. Also, similar to David and Beth in the previous section, trying new food

items has made this memory a situation more distinctive and allowed for social bonding between people.

During the interview I did with Kristin, she told me that when she first tried sushi she was tried it with her friend in her mid-twenties (she is forty years old now). She said:

“We were working at an ad agency and she [her friend] was actually my boss, and we became really good friends. So she loves sushi, and I thought she was nuts, because, you know the thought of anything raw, I was freaking out, but she’s like ‘No, no. We’ll start out slow.’ So, I remember it was Miyako on Westheimer. That little one that, like... And um, so she started me out basic, you know, like those California rolls and I don’t know what else we got too. And I loved it. And since that day, I got to the point where I actually craved it. And so, then we formed, it was kind of silly, a ‘sushi gang.’ And I felt like almost weekly we would get together and so I met a bunch of people that she knew and her sister I’d worked with, and you know, so we got together and we just started going all the time. And then the more we went, the more we craved it. It was crazy. Then I met my husband and brought him in to the group.”

The social bond of friendship made her friend’s passion for sushi more approachable to Kristin. She was initially repulsed by the idea of sushi, but since she had a close friend encouraging her and guiding her while she tried sushi for the first time, Kristin ended up really appreciating sushi. Her friend’s ability to expose Kristin to a new cuisine by selecting more Americanized options like California rolls shows that while traditional Japanese sushi may enjoy more prestige, Americanized sushi is a conduit for initially connecting Americans to sushi. As her love for sushi grew, Kristin sharing sushi was something that she did with

several people, including her then-boyfriend/now-husband. Her statement shows that at the time eating sushi was a way for her to take time to relate to other people.

Kristin also shared a story with me about a friendship that she and her husband developed with a sushi chef in the Houston area. She said:

“Well, um, I don’t know if you remember me telling you, this was again back in my twenties when Nara was open, they’ve been closed for over a decade, but, yes, so there was a chef there from Japan named “Shoe” [pronounced: “showy”]. And so, we went there some much that he got to know us...so we would sit at the bar, obviously, get a lot of attention and over time, he knew our likes and dislikes and even if we didn’t go for a month or so he still remembered. And so, he would create, you know, rolls based on, you know, our likes all the time and they were just amazing. He was just really, really good and (clears throat), uh, he eventually, uh, moved back to Japan, which was really sad but – yeah he would drink with us – we’d buy him shots, he’d buy us shots and everybody was having a good time, so yeah, that was, that was the best place that I had ever been. I really, really miss that.”

Kristin and David’s experience with befriending their sushi chef is interesting, because in the Japanese *Edomae* tradition chefs are encouraged to interact like that with their customers. This kind of interaction bonds the customers to the chef because he is warm and outgoing which makes the customer feel more welcomed by the chef than if he were standoffish. Many hospitality industry professionals will point out that this kind of service can set apart any dining experience for a customer because the diner feels a personal connection to the restaurant staff. The personal connection to the staff increases the

emotional value of eating at that restaurant and makes the experience more meaningful to the diner.

Similar to his wife, David's first experience with sushi included sharing sushi with friends in his twenties. He explained that when he first tried sushi that he had just graduated from college and had moved from Texas to Chicago to work for a publishing company. However, he said that he did not "really" have sushi until he was working in San Francisco a short time later. He told me:

"All the friends that I made there [in Chicago] were sort of like my – kind of became, like my college group, because I was just out of college. And, uh, so we kind of – you know, there were people from all different areas that worked there and we got to go, I guess, try sushi. And, um, I think, you know, probably stuck to like California rolls for the very first time, but I went –um- and the thought of it was probably weird to me.

Uh, I don't remember a whole lot about it. Uh, because I was there for four years and then the '.com' boom happened and I moved to San Francisco. So, uh, one of the websites had recruiters looking for people in the publishing industry to come out and do writing and design for, uh, the websites. And, so, a couple of us got sort of poached from our jobs and they flew us out to California and gave us jobs there.

And that's when I really got my first real taste of sushi. Um, California has got a lot of people from Japan, because it's right across the coast. Right across the ocean there. So, that's where a lot of immigrants come to. And, and, uh, so, I – that's when I started eating sushi regularly. Groups of people would get together and go for sushi. So, that's when I started branching out, trying other things."

Sharing a meal with friends and coworkers is a common way for people to bond, and David does shares meals with others often. David, as he regularly goes out to lunch with his co-workers in the Chinatown area of Houston to explore the various different Asian cuisines found in that area and to spend time together. One of his coworkers is even interested in one of Carl Rosa's other Japanese cuisine groups for enthusiasts ("Ramen in Common"). This shared love of Asian food is a way that David and his coworkers bonded. When I asked him about how he discovered the Sushi Club of Houston, he explained:

"Uh, actually, my mom got, um, got us a gift certificate to try out the sushi class. And, I didn't know there was a Sushi Club until, uh, that class. But, interestingly enough, one of my friends that I work with, he's kind of a foodie, him and I go try every place we can get to. We actually work near Chinatown. And, so there's a couple Japanese restaurants around there. Of course Korean, and, um, some other, other cuisines – Malaysian. So we try to experiment a lot, go to different places. And, um, uh, we had actually found, uh, Miagi Sushi, which turned out to be really good. But, um, he, he's a fan of ramen and he had found the ramen club online. And we started talking after the class and then realized that, uh, the same guy [Carl Rosa] was running both of them (laughs)."

Not all of the interviewees had a memory of eating out at sushi restaurants with friends, but their friends were still an important component in introducing them to sushi. Beth explained that she actually first tried sushi when a friend brought her some while she was working. She said:

“I mean don’t remember the exact year...like... it was approximately 2007, and I was waiting tables and a friend of mine brought sushi over from a place across the street and I thought it looked weird, but then she made me eat it and I thought it was amazing. And I’ve been hooked ever since then. Yeah, and she was my sushi partner for a couple of years actually. She was almost like the only person that I would ever eat sushi with, and then I went to college, and we branched out quite a bit.”

Beth’s experience shows that social relationships with others can make us open to trying new things even when we are not specifically seeking out such an experience. While Beth’s first time eating sushi was while she was at work, she does regularly go out for sushi. When I asked Beth what her favorite aspect of eating sushi, she replied: *“Um, well I think I like the social aspect of it too. Everyone your with and you usually eat like family style, kind of, and everybody kind of shares.”* The idea of sharing and experiencing a meal with others is key in the enjoyment of eating sushi in the minds of these Sushi Club members. Their friends and family members influenced them to try sushi for the first time, eating sushi together gave them a reason to get together and have new experiences together, and the memories of eating sushi together bonded them together.

Reliving an Experience

As indicated in previous sections, reliving memories of eating especially good sushi is a personal experience for Sushi Club members. Similar to Proust’s experience eating *petite madeienes*, the idea that food can connect us to our past lived experiences has been explored and promoted by several researchers (Holtzman, 2006, p. 362). Erica’s *omakase* experience with her friend, and the fact that they discussed that meal for many years after having it, relates to the theme of reliving an eating experience. Erica stated that she frequently wants to

rely on dining experiences because they are emotional experiences for her. Erica identifies herself as a “foodie,” and says that because she is a foodie when she reflects on a meal that *“regardless of what is going on I will always trace back to that one meal where I just, just like, you know, just always chasing that high of a meal that was just **perfect** where, you know, everything was delicious. Maybe it was the wine was perfect to go along with it, whatever it is, there’s a fact that – whatever you did at the time – it was just this perfect moment.”*

Erica said that she not only was passionately looking for exceptional food experiences, particularly sushi, that she encouraged others to try sushi while traveling, even when traveling outside of Japan because there may be a uniqueness to that region’s sushi. Tourism has been noted as playing “an important role in the global knowledge about culinary cultures” (Phillips, 2006, p. 44). When I asked her what ideas about sushi that she would want to share with others, she stated:

“I just encourage to tell people, to encourage people, every city that you go to try their sushi out, because, I mean, I’ve been to...South Africa and um, you know, tried that sushi and I’ve been to California and had that. There’s a lot of things when you go someplace and you really have a passion for making sure that you’re trying it, don’t just try the local-fare because usually you’re a little bit surprised by something different that they can bring to the table. So, it can kind of be a fun challenge if you’re willing to explore.”

This comment struck me, which made me ask her if she thought that eating and traveling were intrinsically linked to one another for her. I think that she uses food as a way to connect more deeply to a culture, particularly when she stated:

“I think that that’s why I live my life. Um, food and travel together, um, are probably, and again, I’m, I’m contemplating a very silly twenty plus hour trip just to go to that restaurant that I had the experience where I was literally overwhelmed where I barely talk because of how amazing the food was. So, I think that there’s, the great thing about travel and food is that you’re travelling but you get a snapshot of that moment, that second, that culture, all in one, and you’re stuck with a feeling that – because even if you’re not an emotional person, you know what’s good. And, you’re, you’re going to take something away from it. I, I still talk about meals that I’ve had and I always try to go someplace special every time I go overseas. So just, and I think that it’s absolutely an intoxicating thing that will keep someone motivated for a very, very long time if they ever get into a combination of food and travel together.”

The way that Erica explains that food and travel are connected in such an emotionally impactful way proves that eating is a very important aspect of her life. It indicates that it is a way for her to explore and to learn about a location and what that place has to offer in terms of culture. Food is, of course, not going to provide her with knowledge of all that a culture has to offer, but allows her to imagine what it is like to be a part of that culture. This idea supported by academics like Appadurai and Caldwell, who feel that “food can play a role in imagining nation” (Phillips, 2006, p. 43). Kearney (1995) also noted that tourism promotes “the consumption of fleeting images, experiences, and sensations” which are “patched”

together to provide the tourist with a “collage-like” experience and knowledge of a culture (p. 556).

For others, reliving an eating experience is not so much about reminiscing on a time they experienced a different culture, but instead focused on being able to recreate a pleasurable experience again. Erin wanted to relive her memory of the first time she ate sushi, but unfortunately financial constraints will prevent her from doing this for quite some time. When I asked her if she could define “high quality sushi” she stated:

“Oh my Gosh. I’ve been trying so much, like I’m kind of feeling like I just have to go back to Vegas and go to that restaurant, like I have not found anything that gets close to that experience. And, I feel like maybe by taking like sushi classes and stuff like that and then experimenting on my own at home, I can get that. One day, I won’t be able to get to sashimi quality, but hey! At least with the sushi rolls, I can get there, because, like, I don’t know, I just, I haven’t found anywhere that like that’s blown me away. I mean like, Michi-ru is really good, but it doesn’t blow you away. And, Tao—that just—it blew me away and I can’t recreate that experience, which is very frustrating for me. So, I just, I feel like I have to go there or I’ve got to become a pro. (laughs) Yeah, but now I’m also mad at my Dad for introducing this delicious stuff into my life that I can’t get again, like, you know what I mean, a blessing and a curse... It’s just like, it’s so expensive. That restaurant is just really expensive but it is so good! And the cost of getting it! Like, and my boyfriend just bought a house – the likelihood of us going to Vegas and splurging at Tao is pretty unlikely right now. Yeah so I just keep dreaming. That’s 4 years of dreaming. And I’m going to do a couple more.”

Erin's and Erica's desire to relive food experiences has fueled their passion for learning more about sushi and trying new sushi when they are able. While Erica's expendable income allows her to access the restaurants that she would like to revisit, and Erin must look for a more affordable alternative, both are actively looking to have an exceptional experience. Further, this shows the emotional impact that food leaves on a person's life and how that can lead them to making serious economic decisions in order to enjoy a particular food item.

Theme: Likes and Dislikes Regarding Sushi

Since the intent of this research is to look at how Americans define "high quality" sushi, a dominate theme found in these interviews is what they like and do not like with regard to sushi. Certain themes like preferences about fish or the perceived healthiness of sushi were common likes among the Sushi Club members, while the dominate dislike that they shared was a distaste for expensive menus. Also, the members' opinions about whether they prefer Americanized or traditional Japanese sushi became evident.

Fish Preferences

While Carl's "Sushi 101" class lesson highlighted the importance of rice in regard to sushi, most of the Sushi Club members I interviewed more frequently stated that the type and quality of the fish was a more dominant defining factors for "good" or "high quality" sushi. When I asked Erica what attracted her to a new sushi restaurant, she stated: *"one of the things that attracts me to different restaurants is the ability to get in different types of fish and to try something new. So, if I tend to really, and then you'll see the difference of, like, you know, freshwater eel and then saltwater eel. And freshwater or farm-raised salmon and how different those can be."* Her knowledge she has gained through experience guides her taste in

fish, but she is still interested in trying new proteins. The desire to seek variety despite knowing what she likes indicates that exploring with food is an appealing experience for Erica.

Kristin also was interested in trying a variety of different fish, however she wanted to have a variety of different fish together. When I asked Kristin what she would like to know more about after taking the sushi class, and she stated:

“I would, you know, it’s kind of weird, I would like to, because I like all the different, I like the rolls with all the different fishes, like some places call it a “rainbow roll” kind of the different...so I’d like to know more about what we’re eating. Because I know I eat the tuna and salmon but I know there’s other stuff they throw in there.”

Like Erica, Kristin’s interest in trying a variety of different fish is appealing, because it will allow her to know more about what she is eating, and find new proteins that she enjoys. However, unlike Erica, Kristin is less familiar with determining different types of fish, but still she is open to learning more about sushi. This seems to be a desire to access the cultural knowledge of the Other in order to discover a food that she finds truly enjoyable.

Not all of the Sushi Club members were especially drawn to a restaurant for its variety of fish. For example, when Beth was asked what a “high quality” sushi restaurant would offer, she stated that she is disappointed if a sushi restaurant does not provide her with enough fish in her sushi order. She explained:

“I’m not that experienced with like the good sushi restaurants so, I would say, generally, what I look for when I depict a good sushi restaurant is it is something that.. I don’t want cold sushi... but I also kind of judge it off the fish. Like sometimes

their stingy on the fish I get a little pissed off. I'm like, "I'm paying decent money for this, [and] I expect the fish to be there."

Beth's desire for a "reasonable" portion of fish is related to how she thinks about the sushi as an economic choice. If she feels like she is not getting enough of the protein then she feels like she has been cheated by the restaurant. It is more common for Americans to consider the cost-benefit ratio than to consider that they being given a "balanced" dish in terms of ratios of ingredients. She also had very definite ideas about what she wanted in regard to types of fish she prefers. I asked her what she would include if she could put together her ideal platter of sushi. She explained:

"My thing is tuna. I like tuna. And before I knew that sushi is all about the rice I would just have said give me a piece of tuna raw and that'd be it. But, um, so I mean, if I were making it I would include a lot of tuna."

Tuna is one of the most commonly chosen proteins for sushi, especially fattier cuts of the fish are popular among Americans. Similar to Erin's thoughts on learning to make sushi at home in order for her to have affordable sushi that she likes, Beth also makes economic decisions in order to enjoy her sushi eating experience. Beth thoughts on quality of sushi are largely based on the economic value of the sushi, which is interesting because sushi is known for being a rather expensive meal. The Sushi Club members seem to think more economically about their fish, as they would like for a restaurant to provide them with an incentive to go there by having a wider variety of fish (while still providing favorites, like Beth's tuna) and to provide it at an affordable price.

Perceived Healthiness

A recurrent favorite aspect of sushi among the interviewees was the perception of sushi's "lightness," "freshness," and presumed "healthiness." Sasha Issenberg (2007) pointed out that this is one of the aspects that made sushi very popular in the health-driven culture of Los Angeles when sushi was introduced, and it seems that the reputation of sushi as a health alternative to American staples has endured over the years (p. 88). The Sushi Club members stated that the ability to enjoy a meal that "feels" healthy was very enjoyable. For example, Erica stated that what she liked least about sushi was the "*Americanized*" sushi rolls "*where they [the restaurant] douse things with you know, a tremendous amount of mayo, and is taking something that isn't necessarily the healthiest in the world, but it is not unhealthy, and, and made it ...calorie-bombs.*"

The idea of making sushi unhealthy was very unappealing to Erica, but others did not consider the addition of Americanized elements to sushi as making it unhealthy. I think that the assumption that Americanized sushi is less healthy than traditional Japanese sushi may also be the result of an assumption that Westernization is a pernicious influence in globalization. Franco Le Cecla described that as regional cuisines travel from their origins and become mixed with other cultures that the cuisine becomes increasingly homogenized and can result in certain "aberrations" of "authentic" cuisines (Edwards, 2012, p. 222-223). From Erica's perspective, Americanized sushi rolls have become abhorrent attempts to make sushi more popular to a non-Japanese audience by making it an unhealthy dish. Other Sushi Club members said that they thought of sushi as a healthy alternative to the options that are readily available to them in America. When I asked David what was his favorite aspect of eating sushi, and he replied:

“The thing that I like about it, I guess why I like to eat it is [because] so many things these days are fried or cooked in butter or, um, as much as I love butter...There’s something about the freshness of it, it’s like eating a substantial salad. You know? It’s like just, just kind of has that clean, fresh [feeling].”

David’s comparison of sushi to a salad and appreciation of sushi not being cooked in fat or oil certainly drives home the point that he enjoys sushi because it feels healthy, but that is not the only aspect of perceived healthiness that Sushi Club members enjoyed. For example, Erin stated that she enjoyed that sushi because she felt that she did not need to stuff herself with it in order to feel satiated. When asked what her favorite aspect of sushi was she stated:

“It is definitely all about the taste for me, like I’m a big foodie person, which is actually really bad for my waistline. But, I love food so if it tastes really good and I don’t have to like, and I like it tastes really good and you don’t have to eat a lot of it to feel full. If you try like one sushi roll and split that with somebody and you guys can try another and split that one and then you’re done. You don’t need an appetizer, you don’t need dessert, you don’t need anything else, you just need two rolls and splitting it with someone and you’re good to go.”

While Erin appreciates sushi for its palatability and the ability to exercise portion control by sharing sushi with a companion, it is interesting that while sushi is not categorically a “low-calorie” food it has the perception of being a less fatty and “daintier” portioned dish than typical American fare. This may not reflect so much the healthiness of Japanese cuisine but the presumed unhealthiness of typical American foods, like hamburgers

or macaroni and cheese. The desire to eat healthfully may be one of the stylish appeals of sushi, as many Americans are more interested in a healthier diet and lifestyle, as indicated by certain food trends in America like eating “organically.”

Expensiveness of Menu

While many of the Sushi Club members agreed that a very expensive menu may be intriguing because they want to know why a meal is priced so high, the dominant dislike shared by the interviewees was for expensive menus. Erica stated that the expensiveness of a particular menu has “definitely deterred” her, even though she has paid an exorbitant amount in the past. She explained:

“I just learn that with experiences that I’ve spent, you know, three hundred dollars on a meal, including drinks, and I’ve spent, you know, twenty five dollars on a meal, and I still could have had as fantastic of an experience as the other experience. So, price point, and this is more as me talking as, like, a marketing major... price point, um, I would say it really doesn’t influence me that much, it’s, it’s not going to.”

Erica’s experience in marketing and with eating out often has taught her that price does not equate to quality, particularly since she has had very good meals that were affordable. However, certain occasions like birthdays and anniversaries can make the cost of an expensive restaurant seem more bearable. Kristin stated that she may be willing to spend more on certain occasions but, more often a high price tends to be off-putting. She explained:

“Yeah, I mean, price would be a deterrent, but, you know, if it’s a special occasion, you know, like, an anniversary or something. We’ve gone to a pricier place, but as far as just a regular date-night. Yeah, that would kind of steer me away.”

This statement indicates that while price is certainly a consideration for most meals, for those deemed “special,” the expensiveness of a menu can be overlooked. This could mean that if the meal is meant to celebrate an occasion, then paying more for a meal can add to the emotional value of the occasion in an effort to make the occasion more memorable.

The assumption that a more expensive meal is more memorable would indicate that there is an expectation that meals that are more expensive should be in some way perceivably better than other more affordable options. David agreed that he would go to a more expensive restaurant on a special occasion because of the idea of having a more luxurious experience at the restaurant. He stated:

“For an anniversary or birthday I think, you know, we [David and Kristin] always try to go do something a little fancier, something like you can’t take the kids to, something where it feels a little more adult. You know, a little more about you. A little pampering.”

He also agreed that an expensive menu is still a deterrent for him if he is planning on going to a restaurant under regular circumstances, particularly because the meal he most often goes out for is lunch with coworkers. He said that when choosing where to go for lunch, he tries to “*work within a budget*,” because he does not “*want [the meal] to go over ten bucks*,” so price is a “*heavy influence on where we [he and his coworkers] go and what we eat*.” While his regular eating options are specifically affordable, he did admit that an expensive menu can make him curious as to what a restaurant is serving, particularly when talking about sampling Jiro Ono’s sushi. David explained:

“It’s so inspiring to watch, to watch him work and, um, just how he, uh, is dedicated his life to perfection and perfecting the process of creating a meal for somebody. Like, I’ve never seen any restaurant put that kind of dedication into a meal.”

His willingness to pay more appears to be based on the idea that he is receiving a superior meal that strives to set itself apart from other similar meals or has an increased emotional value, like his feelings about Ono’s dedication to perfecting his sushi. Sushi’s reputation as an expensive meal can also prevent an individual from trying sushi for the first time. Beth stated that the expensiveness of sushi was one of her initial hesitations about trying it. She stated:

“The first time I tried sushi I was a little hesitant because I heard how expensive it was, but we went for happy hour and got a lot of stuff, so it was ok. But yeah, expense kind of gets a little outrageous.”

After Beth was able to find a more affordable way to try sushi (i.e. happy hour menus), she felt more comfortable trying more types of sushi. Perhaps the reason that many Americans do not try new ethnic cuisines is due to the idea that they may end up paying a significant amount of money for something that they do not truly appreciate. While affordably priced sushi can be found, the idea of the inevitability of its expensiveness is prevalent. When I asked Erin what she liked least about eating sushi and she said:

“I would have to say that it’s definitely like cost. So, like, I got a Michi-ru, like it’s in League City, and so it’s barely good but like a lot of people when I used to work, I really wanted to go to Masa Sushi and it’s disgusting. It’s the worst sushi I ever had. And it’s like, “why do people like going here?” So, but it’s like cheap, and that’s why

Masa, but if I want good sushi I go to Michi-ru. But then, you spend quite a bit of money.”

Erin’s opinions about going to a restaurant that she deems as “barely good” speaks to idea that Americans will think economically while making food selection choices on a regular basis, even if it means sacrificing quality. However, when planning a meal for a special occasion, Americans will spend more if there is a perceivable difference in the quality of food they will receive. As Erica stated she can get just as good of a meal for \$25 as \$300 in many circumstances, so a high price is not an initially appealing aspect because it does not guarantee a superior experience. For a sushi diner there is an emotional value added by certain aspects, like the chef’s vision or the feeling of being pampered (as David indicated), that can make an expensive menu seem more reasonable, but does not necessarily translate into actually enjoying high-quality food.

Traditional Versus Americanized Sushi

The crux of this research is to determine whether traditional Japanese or Americanized sushi is preferred by American sushi connoisseurs. There were mixed feelings about Americanized sushi, as some preferred it, another disliked it, and others actually enjoyed both types of sushi. Erica explained that Americanized sushi is to be actively avoided by a sushi connoisseur, as they accrue more cultural knowledge about sushi and learn traditional hallmarks of quality as dictated by traditional Japanese sushi practices. When asked about her least favorite aspect about sushi she stated:

“Um, really how Americanized the sushi is...and at this point now that I’ve spent more time appreciating it and educating myself about sushi, how many people, you

know, and granted there's snobs with every food, food, like wine, you know, anything, but once you realized what's good sushi, you really want to distance yourself from it, or distance yourself from the bad sushi and really go toward the good sushi, which is, you know, someone who spends time focused on, you know, the mixture. Uh, making sure that it's a good cut [of fish], you know, making sure it's the right, you know, temperature, just all those different things. So, I'd say, my least favorite aspect is really that and the rolls, I guess, that come out of it."

For Erica, Americanized sushi misses the mark because it does not pay attention to the subtleties that traditional Japanese sushi practices champion. Erica often referred to herself as a "foodie" and a "sushi purist," so while some of her opinions may be based simply on how palatable she finds traditional Japanese sushi; she still connected the idea of Americanized sushi to a disregard for creating a high quality dish. The idea that Americanized sushi, particularly sushi rolls, should be avoided because its creators do not care about making an especially great product reinforces the idea that some American sushi diners have less respect for Americanized sushi than traditional Japanese sushi.

On the other hand, Kristin and David do not especially appreciate traditional Japanese and do not think that most people have enough cultural knowledge to assess whether they truly appreciate Americanized or traditional Japanese sushi. I asked Kristin if she thought that Americanized sushi was homogenized compared to Japanese sushi. She responded, "*I can't answer that*" and that the idea of Americans thinking that Americanized sushi is homogenized actually surprised her because "*most people don't even experience going out of their state that they were born in*" so having the cultural knowledge of traditional Japanese

sushi and enough experience with Americanized sushi is unlikely. She then harkened the idea of eating traditional ethnic cuisine to her experience with traditional Chinese food. She said:

“The traditional, you know, Chinese food that most of us, you know, get and then – which I like – you know, its fine, but then you go to a restaurant where it’s very traditional, you know. Chinese people and they are getting all this raw stuff a la carte and we tried that one time and it’s the most grotesque thing. So, then I think, well maybe in Japan it is very different than it is here, so.”

While Kristin states that traditional Japanese cuisine may be different than traditional Chinese cuisine, she does state that the Americanized version of Chinese food is much more palatable to her than the traditional Chinese food. Such thinking reinforces the idea that the Americanized version of an ethnic cuisine is easier for Americans to appreciate because it is more familiar and less challenging than traditional ethnic cuisine. Similarly, David stated that he preferred the Americanized sushi as opposed to traditional Japanese sushi. However, he explained that could be the result of American restaurants not making traditional Japanese sushi especially well. I asked him what components were necessary for his definition of “high quality sushi” and he explained:

“I mean, the main thing for me is, you know, uh, after that class, I never really thought of rice being, like, the main thing, I’d always seen it as like, quality of fish, the cut of fish, like how fresh it was, you know, when you ate it. Um, you know, I’ve had sushi at a couple, um, kind of more traditional Japanese places and I actually like that less than sort of the Americanized... Um, I think there’s just too many places that just don’t do it well,”

David then said later in the interview that he did like traditional Japanese sushi, but he seemed to find the Japanese ambiance of a restaurant more alluring than the food itself. He described a Japanese restaurant in Houston to me as such:

“It really has the ambiance of Japan, or what I would think as Japan, not having ever been there. It’s actually run by, it’s actually run by Japanese people and a lot of Japanese business men eat there. And um, it, um, it has that very Japanese feel to it. When you go into it and you have lunch there, you know, everybody is bowing to you and whatnot, and it is uh, uh, more traditional sushi, they don’t really have rolls. They may have a couple but they are very simple ones. Um, but, I, I, I like, I like to see that, to try that.”

The idea that Japanese people own, operate, and frequent this restaurant that has “a Japanese ambiance” (which seems to be defined by him as the customers, décor, and service at the restaurant), was alluring to David. Although he stated earlier in the interview that he did not like traditional Japanese sushi as much, it does appear that sushi’s Japanese identity is still intriguing to David. Interestingly, David admits that he does not have firsthand knowledge of Japan or Japanese culture, but still feels that he found something similar to it and appreciates it. I think that his ideas reflect ideas he has toward globalization. Arjun Appadurai (1990) described the massive popularity of American popular music in the Philippines and the impressive similar renditions of songs by Filipino musicians, and used this as an example to introduce the idea of “nostalgia for the present” (p. 3). Appadurai (1990) explains that these Filipinos seek to present a “hyper-competent reproductions” of cultural images and ideas that they have a sense of nostalgia for even though they have no real memory attached to those cultural images and ideas (p. 3). I believe that David’s

assumption that the restaurant maintains a “Japanese ambiance” and his interest in experiencing that is David having a sense of nostalgia for a culture he has not experienced, but has imagined.

Beth also felt that she did not have enough cultural knowledge to assert whether she felt she liked Americanized sushi or traditional Japanese sushi more. She stated that she is not sure what “Japanese” sushi technically is, but she does not think all Americanized sushi is necessarily the same or of the same quality. She described a menu at a highly-rated and more Americanized sushi restaurant (although the restaurant is reputed as more *avant-garde* style production of sushi) in Houston, and said:

“I’ve never been to Japan so I don’t know what “Japanized” would be. So, I don’t think it [the sushi restaurant in Houston] is typical American, I don’t think it’s typical sushi for what I’ve seen at other restaurants, I mean you can get the rolls, and the rolls they can be a little bit more, I guess, Americanized, a little more normal. But, their small bites, anything on the hot and cold off of the rolls menu and you get a yucca chip with sashimi, not sashimi, sashimi ceviche kind of so it’s a little different.”

Similar to my examination of menus in the previous chapter, Beth’s interpretation indicates that not all Americanized sushi is regarded with different levels of respect. She points out that the restaurant’s sushi is “not typical” compared to other American sushi restaurants, and states that their unique appetizers makes the restaurant more interesting place to eat. While these appetizers are not actually sushi, she does indicate that the restaurant’s creativity makes it distinctive and appealing. Later in the interview, she stated that she would choose to eat at Americanized and traditional Japanese restaurants based on different

circumstances. When asked if she would choose an Americanized over a traditional Japanese sushi restaurant she said

“I think it depends, I like Uchi for the happy hour, it’s just a really nice place to go to, because their cocktails are pretty good and it’s got really good sake. Um, but if I was actually going to because I was hungry I would go to someplace more traditional.”

The desire to go to the more Americanized sushi restaurant has less to do with the restaurant’s food and more with its affordable and tasty cocktail menu. But, Beth is not alone in the desire to have both Americanized and traditional in different situations. Erin explained that she likes both traditional and Americanized sushi and will pick a different style based on the company she brings with her to go and eat sushi. She said:

“I actually like them both, like, I like the funky crazy stuff that people come up with and then I also like the whole like kind of clean and simple traditional. I’m, like I’m drawn to both. It’s just dependent on the mood that I am in or like who I’m with. If I’m out with friends and we’re sharing kind of like, “oh let’s get the tempura sushi” and I’ll be like: do I really have to? I want to do something a little more basic. It depends who I’m with and the mood I’m in but usually when I’m with my boyfriend like we’ll get something traditional and then we’ll get something a little funky. So we do them both. Yeah, because I mean you got to try the fun stuff and you want the basic, that’s always fun too. Because you know it’s good.”

While Sushi Club members state that they do not know enough about Japan and its culture to truly assess which version of sushi they like the most, that statement does indicate that they understand there is a difference between the two types of sushi. Erin’s openness to

enjoy both Americanized and traditional sushi is likely why there are sushi restaurants in America that sell both kinds of sushi. Interestingly, it seemed that among Sushi Club members that traditional Japanese sushi is thought of as being simple, yet hard to produce, and Americanized sushi is regarded as “fun” or creative. These concepts are likely the root reasons why an individual many prefer one kind of sushi over the other, or why they deem certain kinds of sushi as more valuable than others.

Implications

This research has led me to believe that Americans are concerned with both the economics of their food choices and the emotional value they place on food products above all else. While these two ideas seem to be very different, they appear to relate to one another (when examining food choices) in interesting ways. The quality of food ingredients and the taste of food can be overlooked if the food item is too expensive and does not have a perceivable incentive in regard to paying that price (e.g. created by a chef’s whose life is dedicated to creating the “perfect” meal). Particularly, if an American is eating a meal that does not have any particular emotional significance to the person, they are less likely to be willing to pay more for a meal, which indicates that they do not perceive it as particularly valuable. This is an interesting idea, which also speaks to the frequency Americans dine out at restaurants. Everyday eating is treated like a requirement to be done as affordably as possible, but eating out on a special occasion is part of a celebration that permits the sushi diner to spend more than they normally would.

Since, the meal is planned as part of a celebration, the price of the meal becomes less important to an American and other factors like a chef’s mission and the restaurant’s ambiance become more important. Interestingly, it seems that sharing expensive sushi can be

an experience that bonds individuals, like the members of the Sushi Club who ate at Sukiyabashi Jiro or Erin's experience in Las Vegas, provided that the sushi is considered "high quality." This emotional bond can lead to individuals to find more affordable ways of experiencing sushi that is similar in taste to the more expensive sushi, like Beth's choice to go out for the more affordable happy hour menus at reputable restaurants or Erin's desire to learn how to make sushi to create a similar experience to the one she had in Las Vegas. Or, it can lead to ideas like those shared by Carl and Erica that indicate that sushi that does not fall into the category of "high quality" that it should be avoided.

With regard to whether or not Americanized sushi falls into the categories of low or high quality, it seems that it can be either. But for it to be deemed as high quality it must set itself apart creatively. It should not be the "typical" American fare that is regularly seen at various sushi restaurants in American because this makes the sushi less distinctive, which ultimately makes it less valuable. Likewise, traditional Japanese sushi can be viewed as beautiful and simple as Erica felt, or has the potential to be grotesque as Kristin asserted. For traditional Japanese sushi to be appreciated by American diners, it does seem that Sushi Club members pointed to requisite cultural knowledge to really confirm how a person feels about traditional sushi, while Americanized sushi does not seem to require this knowledge for someone to enjoy it. It seems from these interviews that a person needs a certain level of cultural knowledge to appreciate and understand traditional Japanese sushi, which gives the impression that it has more respect than the Americanized sushi, but that Americanized sushi is still respected.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

While assessing American opinions on sushi, it became relevant to examine how Americanized sushi is viewed in Japan. This is because in today's world of constant connection via technology and increased abilities to transport and travel, the Japanese opinions on sushi have a greater likelihood of getting back to Americans and influencing how they view their own products like they have never been able to do so before now. Also, it provides further insight into how Americanized sushi can create a variety of attitudes. Rumi Sakamoto and Matthew Allen (2011) point out in their article, *There's something fishy about that sushi: how Japan interprets the global sushi boom*, that the discourse among Japanese food writers regarding the hybridized sushi made outside of Japan is ambivalent (p. 103). While this hybridized sushi is regarded as "stylish" and "fashionable," it is also "strange" while being "simultaneously modern and traditional."

This idea is similar to the experience that I had while analyzing menus, as well as observing and interviewing members of the Sushi Club of Houston. There were some who felt that Americanized sushi was abysmal, while others found it intriguing. Beth's opinions about a positively reviewed Americanized sushi restaurant in the Houston area reflected that while the menu may not be traditional Japanese sushi, the restaurant menu's uniqueness made it a high-quality eating experience. Online reviews of this restaurant also applaud its atypical approach to sushi regarding it as innovative and exceptionally high-quality, which is likely due to its reputation for creativity and selecting high-quality ingredients. Johnston and Baumann's (2011) book, *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape*, explained that this respect the restaurant earned is likely due to the "new markers of high-status foods" that have emerged in recent years (p. 2). These markers include, "quality, rarity,

locality, organic, hand-made, creativity, and simplicity” (Johnston and Baumann, 2011, p. 2). These ideas, specifically rarity, quality, and creativity, explain why an Americanized sushi restaurant received a certain level of praise and respect from sushi aficionados.

However, it does not mean that all Americans feel this respect for Americanized sushi which is evidenced in many of the lessons taught in Carl Rosa’s classes and Erica’s refusal to ever go to the restaurant Beth was fond of because she is a “sushi purist” who “distances” herself from Americanized sushi. Johnston and Baumann (2011) explain that “foodies” (which Erica identifies herself as) “engage in identity politics and status distinctions through their eating practices” and that “particular qualities of food ... are used to draw boundaries between the worthy and unworthy culture” (p. 4). Rosa and Erica’s opinions can also reflect feelings that they have regarding globalization. It seems that Carl and Erica see the Americanization of sushi as diluting a cultural practice, because they are fans of traditional Japanese sushi and believe that Americanized sushi creates a product that is not especially good. The idea that the Americanization of sushi is diluting a cultural practice may be due to that it is common in America for ethnic identities to be maintained and performed through foods (Holtzman, 2006, p. 366). Due to this it is only natural that deviation from the tradition will draw criticism from those who believe the tradition is valuable and important to ethnic identity.

One of the social consequences of globalization is the threat of cultural homogeneity and the survival of regional identities (Edwards, 2012, p. 222). This along with the view of globalization as Western domination can make the Americanization of sushi appear to be a form of cultural appropriation and even an agent of cultural destruction. Yet, Erica also encouraged trying sushi in other states in the United States and in other countries in order to

explore what is uniquely available in that area and to discover what a person truly loves about sushi. So, while rejecting the idea of the Americanized sushi, she also encouraged exploring it, which speaks to ideas about sushi's distinctive Japanese identity, but a willingness to bend the rules of traditional Japanese sushi practice. Edwards (2012) agrees and explained that "sushi through globalization has come to be an emblem of Japan, even as it has evolved in the US, and has then in turn become an emblem of American interpretation, which shows an increasingly complex definition of globalization that can no longer be encompassed by ideas of homogeneity" (222).

Further, the trends among sushi menus in Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Houston, and New York show that while cities with a larger populations of and longer history with Japanese immigrants have a tendency to be more drawn to traditional sushi, there is still a demand for both hybridized and traditional sushi. Johnston and Baumann (2011) explained that those who define themselves as food aficionados (specifically those who refer to themselves as "foodies") have a contradictory "democratic openness to exploring new food cultures, alongside the continued existence of exclusion, inequality, and exploitation in the gourmet food scene" (p. 2). This is certainly evidenced in Erica's stance on Americanized sushi and encouragement of trying regionally specific sushi leads me to believe that while Americans appreciate both Americanized and traditional sushi, those interested in traditional Japanese sushi are interested in exploring a different culture through its food. This shows that Americans' relationship with both types of sushi shows an attitude that reflects a bilateral relationship of influence between the Eastern and Western cultures as a result of globalization.

Appreciating Both – A Reflection of Global Attitudes

While many Americans certainly appreciate Americanized sushi, traditional Japanese cultural knowledge about sushi is still important to American consumers. In the past nearly thirty years, Americans have been exposed to more food from other cultures as a result of globalization. Johnston and Baumann (2011) cited that:

“Throughout the 1990s, an increasing range of consumers welcomed new ‘ethnic’ cuisines, a world of tastes cultivated by heightened processes of globalization and the diversifying cultural make-up of the population... In continuation of a long-standing trend of growth, over the 1990s international travel by Americans increased considerably, from fewer than 16 million trips overseas in 1990 (excluding Canada and Mexico) to 26,853,000 overseas trips in 2000” (p. 12, 13).

Today, the world is more connected than ever before, which changes the way cultural imports and exports are viewed and experienced by those giving and receiving them as exposure to such cultural capital is ubiquitous. Sushi is not a food item only found in areas with a higher density of Japanese immigrants, but is in all sorts of locations from high-end restaurants to shopping malls. Information about sushi restaurants is readily accessible in the form of online forums and restaurant reviews. Documentaries, travel television programs, and cooking television programs have made intricate details of the sushi industry and the preparation of sushi something anyone can learn about or enjoy from their homes. What is most important to remember is that these aforementioned cultural imports and exports are not just goods, but also are ideas and knowledge that can become infused or attached to a new culture. Sakamoto and Allen (2011) explained that:

“Many theorists of globalization point out today’s world is characterized by accelerating flows of people, material goods, information, images and so on from multiple points of origin and multiple destinations. New communications and transport technologies can connect geographically distant areas, often creating new cultures that are translated, hybridized, transformed, or indigenized” (p. 101).

Therefore, reinterpretations of these pieces of what Bourdieu would call cultural capital, in this case sushi, is an expected outcome as it crosses geographic boundaries and becomes a global product with Japanese roots. However, as will happen when a cultural product is reworked, the acceptance of these items will vary, particularly with varying amount of cultural knowledge among individuals. For example, Erica’s trip to Japan with the Sushi Club, her knowledge she has gained from her own research and that she has learned from the Sushi Club, and her regular experience eating sushi (which she stated can mean several times a week) may make her feel as though she has the cultural knowledge to know what sushi “should be” and rejects sushi that does not meet that definition. I suggest that her opinions reflect her experience in a world that is more connected and aware of cultural difference. Edwards (2012) supports this idea and explained that “globalization connects people through contact and cross-cultural awareness which is also creates awareness of difference and locality” (p. 221). For some individuals the awareness of different interpretations of global products with clear cultural identities that are tied to a specific geographic region, like sushi, is troublesome because of the idea of simply being exposed to sushi does not mean that a person truly “understands” sushi. For these individuals displaying Japanese cultural knowledge in their sushi choices identifies that person as more aware of the

global sushi practices and that they have a greater understanding of the importance of the dish's cultural identity.

For example, in my analysis of sushi menus I cited a review in an article in *LA Weekly* by Garrett Synder (2015), in which he explained that sushi was a staple among people in Los Angeles, and that the city's finest sushi restaurants are among the world's best "—outside of Japan" (para. 2). Synder's praise of the quality of sushi in the area also seemed to be the result of Japanese chefs who discouraged the Americanization of sushi. Synder's depiction of Chef Nozawa as a "sushi bully" indicated that that eating of sushi in Los Angeles is a similar experience to what one may have in Japan, where they "know" what "good" sushi is because it is "theirs" and they "know" how to enjoy it (Synder, 2015, Nozawa Bar section, para. 1). This alludes to the idea that for American sushi diners to achieve comparable experience to that in Japan, they need to be educated and guided by someone with a great deal of Japanese cultural knowledge. This makes the traditional Japanese restaurants seem genuinely rare to American consumers, which as discussed before is a new marker for food status. The rarity of experiencing Japanese culture outside of Japan, is further reinforced by the selecting quality of the ingredients (often cited as being from Tokyo's *Tsukiji* Fish Market) and the rarity for the a diner to afford an exorbitant rate for a meal.

Also, the American fascination with the *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* documentary speaks to a respect for the stringent adherence to simplicity and tradition, as well as Americans being impressed by the training of Japanese sushi chefs who have to yield a superior product rather than a profitable one. It also allows Americans to enter a global imaginary by being exposed to a snapshot of what it is like to live in Japan, and lets them imagine what it is like to eat and

experience life there. I agree with Phillips (2006) who explained that “food ‘feeds’ globalization as an imagined construct” because food is relatable and evokes emotion, but is varied so people develop affinities for different cuisines and food items from different places, even when we have not experienced them firsthand (p. 38). They imagine that there is a food that exists somewhere else is better or more heartfelt than what they have available to them. Many Americans’ romanticized attitude towards the idea of seeking to create a superior product indicates that is practice is assumed to be uncommon in America, and also is a depiction of certain American cultural values, like working hard. For example, David stated in my interview with him:

“Like it’s so inspiring to watch, to watch him [Jiro Ono] work and, um, just how he, uh, is dedicated his life to perfection and perfecting the process of creating a meal for somebody. Like, I’ve never seen any restaurant put that kind of dedication into a meal.”

Erin explained that after watching the documentary, she and her boyfriend were desperate to go to Sukiyabashi Jiro (despite the fact that the menu is very expensive and the experience would be short-lived) because of the tremendous amount of effort the chef puts into a simple dish is a distinct rarity, and creates a romanticized appeal to her. Terrio saw a similar effect in the memoirs and public histories of French chocolatiers that romanticized the craft of chocolate-making (Holtzman, 2006, p. 368). She explained:

“I watched that documentary on Netflix that guy, Jiro or Jaro, or whatever his name is – Dreams of Sushi. I watched that with my boyfriend and we were like ‘We need to go.’ (laughs). Even though it is three hundred dollars per person. And you’re in there

for like ten minutes only and you hurry up and eat because it is so awkward. I was just like, ‘we have to do it one day!’ Like, that would be amazing! And that’s probably like the one that we’re really like ‘We have to do that!’ And I guess if we watched documentaries on the other ones [sushi chefs] we’d probably be doing the same exact thing, just ‘We have to go!’”

However, similar to Beth’s opinions on the Americanized sushi restaurant in Houston, others feel that the traditional practice of making sushi is not the sole manner of producing sushi that makes the dish rare and alluring. Kristin and Erica’s described that when choosing a new sushi restaurant to try that having “variety” was a major selling point, and trying new food items was an influent for Beth and David to find new restaurants. Their desire to try new things speaks to an understood level of difficulty of obtaining the new item and openness to different experiences. This would make trying new things and variety factors of finding a restaurant alluring because of a sense of rarity about the experience. Also, when I analyzed the descriptions of restaurants with *omakase* menus, creativity, uniqueness, and blending (both cultures and traditional/modern practices) were often mentioned as descriptors for the menu. As these descriptions were found on the restaurant’s or Zagat websites, it can be assumed that the words used are intended to be appealing toward potential customers. These are also markers of food status and make Americanized sushi seem appealing, particularly when it is considered exceptionally creative.

Sasha Issenberg (2007) pointed out that American sushi chef, Tyson Cole, astounded the American sushi community by being non-Asian, a Texan (in landlocked Austin, no less), and an exceptional sushi chef with a rule-breaking and mouthwatering sense of creativity. Issenberg (2007) explains that in the early stages of his career, Cole’s ethnicity worked

against him, including an employer refusing to make him a sushi chef because it would “break the sushi-bar color line” which was “the restaurant’s most direct assertion of its authenticity” and customers, including Caucasian ones, walking out of the restaurant after seeing him (p. 132).

This discrimination and stereotyping indicates that authenticity is important to Americans, and that they view sushi production and knowledge as specifically Japanese. For American sushi chefs, an Asian, preferably Japanese, ethnic identity is a symbol of the chef’s cultural knowledge. After mentoring under Smokey Fuse (whose given name is Takehiko), a sushi chef known for his creativity “with ingredients and flavor combinations, and his traditionalism was concentrated on technique, not etiquette and affection” at Musashino and Cole proving himself to sushi chefs in New York, Cole would later return to Texas and be called one of the most demanded sushi chefs in America (Issenberg, 2007, p. 134-147).

Chef Cole’s food is marked by its lack of traditional Japanese practices, because as he explained: “I can never make real Japanese food, because I’m not Japanese” (Issenberg, 2007, p. 136). However, his style does “include both a reverence for tradition and rebellion against it, in a mixture that varies daily as Cole is forced to improvise with whatever products and people the global economy happens to make available to him” (Issenberg, 2007, p. 137). Cole’s story and success point to the idea that Americans are open to rule-breaking in regard to food production, provided that their experience is one-of-a-kind.

Further, it is important that he admitted, outright, that he does not have the cultural knowledge to produce traditional Japanese sushi, particularly because he worked his way up in a sushi restaurant, learned to speak Japanese, and frequently spent time in an environment

that was mainly comprised of Japanese people. Surely, this much exposure to making sushi and regular interaction with Japanese culture must have taught him a fair amount about Japanese cuisine, particularly sushi. His identification of not having the required Japanese cultural knowledge to produce what he defines as “real Japanese food,” despite having a substantial amount of experience with Japanese culture and food, shows that he views sushi as a part of Japanese cultural capital. This concept is similar to research done by Abarca that provided insight on the “problematizing notions of identity through a contrast of notions of ‘the authentic,’ an overly essentialized historical identity, versus ‘the original,’ which acknowledges the agency of cooks within that identity” (Holtzman, 2006, p. 366). In other words, he knows Japanese food like a person who is conversant in a foreign language – he can understand what they are trying to achieve but he does not understand all the nuances so he cannot recreate what they make because he is not fluent enough in their culture.

The ability to produce “real Japanese food” is similar to ideas Pierre Bourdieu had regarding “good taste,” which states that “good taste” is “the consecration of certain cultural preferences” that “reflects the ability of a dominant class fractions to legitimate their tastes as superior” (Johnston and Baumann, 2010, p. 33). Bourdieu also argued having a lower socio-economic status made it difficult for such people “to develop this ‘good taste’ – or to put it differently, to acquire the cultural capital required to appreciate cultural artifacts associated with good taste” (Johnston and Baumann, 2010, p. 33). I suggest that Cole sees himself has not having enough of the cultural capital to develop the “good taste” that Japanese sushi chefs possess regarding traditional Japanese sushi, so he must do things differently in order to remain relevant in the sushi industry. I also borrow logic from Holtzman (2006), who stated: “everyone has origins and ancestors, but not everyone performs them through food”

(p. 366). Even though Cole is not Japanese, that does not mean that he cannot make Japanese food.

It seems that many Americans feel this way about sushi. David, Kristin, and Beth recognized that they do not have the cultural knowledge to assess what “traditional” sushi was because they had never been to Japan. Perhaps, this feeling that they do not have the cultural knowledge to make this assessment is tied to globalization. Many scholars have described food as “used to constitute boundaries of belonging to cities, nations, and diasporas, particular in light of transnational flows of capital and people” (Johnston and Baumann, 2010, p. 33). In America, there is also a tendency for stereotyped versions of ethnicities that are maintained and performed through foods, so individuals who produce food but do not fit into that stereotype will likely have to face scrutiny (Holtzman, 2006, p. 366).

So, although sushi has been a dining option in America since the 1960s and they eat sushi regularly, Beth, Kristin, and David claim to not truly understand traditional Japanese sushi because it is a cultural item that is bound to Japan and is not prevalent in America. The ideas that traditional Japanese sushi is not readily available in America and cannot be produced by a non-Japanese chef may explain the openness to Americanized sushi by the Sushi Club members. Their willingness to try it may be due to viewing that Americanized sushi is the available option while traditional Japanese sushi is not. Further they could view Americanized sushi improving recent years.

P.A. Edwards (2012) stated that all fusion sushi “will continue to evolve and reinvent itself in accordance to the different cultures to which it is introduced,” and I believe that Americanized sushi has evolved and that American sushi aficionados have noticed (p. 213).

Americanized sushi is not just California rolls or the mayonnaise-coated “calorie bombs” Erica described, but also the innovative sushi that Chef Cole creates at Uchi. It is changing and evolving, and to several people it may be better than ever before. Additionally, the reinterpretation of staple American dishes projected onto sushi may also allow Americans to experience their favorite foods in a new way. For example, luxury ingredients like *foie gras* or truffles can now be found on the menus of some American sushi restaurants.

As established previously, the idea of trying new food items was very appealing to the Sushi Club members, as evidenced in interviews and seen at the sushi cooking classes when the club members were very willing to try Japanese Kit-Kat bars. So while there is an observable respect for traditional sushi, there is also a growing respect for Americanized sushi, particularly as it continues to be refined (usually with superior ingredient selection and improved technical abilities producing it) and to push the envelope creatively. While not all Americanized sushi is treated with the same respect by sushi aficionados, like those in the Sushi Club, the adherence to tradition or the breaking away from it to make a superior product makes the products distinctively authentic and thus valuable. Therefore, American sushi aficionados are distinctively interested in an exceptional authentic experience, regardless of whether that means that the sushi adheres or rejects tradition. Such views indicate that globalization does not mean the creation of a homogenized global community, but rather that both innovation and traditional cultural maintenance are important values in today’s global community.

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