

# Explore the Appeal of Sushi, a Global Healthy Food that has Travelled Over the Sea

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Sushi is healthy food that is now well-known all over the world.

In Japan, when you hear the word “sushi” you usually imagine *nigiri-zushi*, which consists of foodstuff like tuna sashimi placed on top of a small ball of vinegared rice. What kinds of sushi are popular overseas?

In this article, I would like to focus on how sushi is accepted abroad, why sushi is so popular worldwide as a representative Japanese food, and the history of sushi.

## The “sushi” popular around the world is not the same as the sushi you see in Japan!

In Japan, when you hear the word “sushi” you usually imagine *nigiri-zushi*, but what kinds of sushi are eaten worldwide?

### The “sushi” that became popular in the U.S.

In the U.S. in the 1970s, when sushi first arrived there, “California roll” became a smash hit. It uses avocado and imitation crab meat and rolls *nori* inside for people who are not used to eating raw fish and seaweed.

On the other hand, Japanese food started to gain attention as healthy meals along with increasing concerns on obesity and awareness for health in society. It is also said that partly being influenced by mass media, people in the upper class tried *nigiri-zushi* using sashimi out of curiosity, realized how delicious it is, and sparked the boom.

### Contemporary state of sushi in London

Now, let’s take a look at an example of how sushi is accepted now in London.

In restaurants offering sushi in London, especially those targeting wealthy people, customers tend to prefer ordering “authentic” sushi, similar to what we eat in Japan. There are also many people with the impression that Japanese food is healthy, and it seems that sushi using a grain-rice mix or vegan sushi using vegetables are frequently ordered.

Of course, sushi is enjoyed not only among wealthy people but also widely among London

citizens. For instance, “YO! Sushi” is a franchise of “sushi train” Japanese food restaurants that originated in UK. “YO! Sushi” considers sushi as a certain genre of Japanese cuisine, and offers various original dishes. There are not many varieties of *nigiri-zushi*, and instead, many kinds of sushi rolls are offered. Dishes dressed with tiny fish roe and some crispy materials are popular, instead of simple rolls using vinegared rice and *nori*. Rolled ingredients are not limited to seafood and you can enjoy various types, such as vegetables, fried food, and chicken.

Similar to Japan, there are also takeaway-style sushi stores. At “Wasabi,” a Japanese fast-food store mainly offering sushi and *bento* boxed lunches, there are many customers who select individually-wrapped sushi and pack them in a box to pay.

Sushi is also a popular party food abroad, usually served in a colorful style such as finished with sauce or adding beautiful toppings.

## **Why did sushi change after being exported?**

Why did sushi, a typical Japanese food, become so popular worldwide, and become commonly recognized under the original name of “sushi?” Also, while *nigiri-zushi* is the general image of mainstream sushi in Japan, why did that change after being exported?

### **Sushi became popular with people’s increased awareness of health**

The first country to which sushi was exported large scale was the U.S. It was first offered at sushi restaurants targeting Japanese people who migrated to the U.S., but it gradually became known widely among local residents.

Thereafter, in the 1970s, obesity and high-calorie foods become a social issue in the U.S., mainly among the upper-class people. Non-fried and healthy Japanese food, especially sushi, became very trendy with people’s increased awareness of health. The trend further spread out to Brazil, Singapore, UK, etc., and the name recognition of sushi as a typical Japanese food increased.

Japan is known as a country of good health and long life, and one of the reasons is healthy Japanese food. It also seems that the delicate style of Japanese cuisine that focuses on the taste of the foodstuff itself instead of relying on the taste of seasonings like salt or ketchup stimulated the interest of the intellectual class.

In fact, Japanese cuisine attracting attention due to its healthiness, was inducted into UNESCO's Cultural Heritage list in 2013 as *washoku*, recognized for its style of respecting the natural aspects of the various foodstuff used, while maintaining a nutritional balance supporting healthy dietary life.

### **Transformation in line with the food culture of each country**

Although sushi became well known throughout the world as a part of healthy *washoku*, because

culinary culture differs largely from country to country, it is necessary to be served in a style that matches the culture. The transformation of dishes in conformity to the culture or preference of the country is called “food fusion.”

In the U.S., where sushi first was first diffused abroad, *nigiri-zushi* dishes similar to those in Japan became popular mainly among upper-class people, who expected healthiness. However, it is a quite natural evolution for people to create and enjoy sushi with their familiar foodstuffs and flavors in the course of being spread widely among general society. Not only in the U.S., but also in Latin America and Europe, sushi is not the same as that in Japan. While incorporating the essence of Japanese style, various forms of sushi were created with a flexible mindset and took root in different places.

### **Learning about the mainstream of sushi culture in Japan**

As I have talked about the trends of sushi around the world, maybe you gained an impression like “Sushi overseas sounds a bit strange,” or “It’s very different from the real sushi in Japan.” However, is *nigiri-zushi*, which is the authentic sushi that springs to mind, really a tradition that was handed down from ancient times without its form and recipe being unchanged? From here on, let’s look back at history and track the changes of sushi that took place one after another, according to movements among ordinary people.

## **The origin of the acidic taste of in sushi is fermentation; *Hon-nare***

It is said that sushi was introduced to Japan more than 1300 years ago, from the current Southeast Asia via China. It was originally a food made from fermented fish and rice.

Back then, rice was used merely for fermentation and was not for eating, so it was wiped off from the fish when eating. Such fermented sushi, which is the original style of sushi, is called *hon-nare*. One of the existing foods that is most similar to *hon-nare* is *funa-zushi*, a specialty product of Shiga Prefecture. The acidic taste of sushi comes from this traditional style of old fermented sushi.

### **Why not shorten the fermentation time and eat sooner! The change to *nama-nare***

Entering the age of the samurai, such as the Kamakura Era and Muromachi Era, ordinary people start eating rice, and many changes were induced to sushi as well.

Back then, rice was very valuable. Based on a very common-sense approach that you shouldn’t throw away such a precious foodstuff when eating, or you can’t wait as long as six months to eat sushi, people thought of a way to shorten the fermentation period and eat rice with the fish. That resulted in a sushi called *nama-nare*. Although it still looks quite different, it can be called the

mainstream sushi of modern times, with rice and fish eaten together.

### **From fermentation to sushi using vinegar; Emergence of *haya-zushi***

The idea that the acidic taste generated from fermentation is the key to sushi was maintained thereafter. However, from the desire of ordinary people to eat sushi even sooner, they thought of a way to make the acidic taste more quickly. Through trial and error, they came up with using vinegar.

Entering the Edo Period, sushi changed from fermented food to food using vinegar, based on an idea by ordinary people, and became enjoyed widely. In contrast to fermented sushi, sushi using vinegar is called *haya-zushi*, leading to the modern sushi using vinegared rice.

### **The form of sushi invented in the Edo Period has been handed down to modern times**

*Nigiri-zushi*, which is what we imagine when hear the word “sushi,” is the latest style in the long history of sushi, and it was born after going through major changes from sushi in the past. *Maki-zushi* and *chirashi-zushi*, which are the popular styles of sushi along with *nigiri-zushi*, are also relatively new styles in the history of sushi.

In the past there were two different types of sushi: one was *sugata-zushi*, which uses a whole fish fermented with rice, and *hako-zushi*, which was made by stuffing a fillet of fish and rice inside a box, but the wisdom and ideas of the common people also greatly changed the form of sushi.

### ***Maki-zushi* stems from the playful mind of ordinary people**

The origin of *maki-zushi* is *sugata-zushi*.

*Sugata-zushi* was made by stuffing fish with rice. However, with the development of food culture among ordinary people in the Edo Period, a new style of wrapping a fish with rice was born from the playful mind of people in Edo. However, the surface of uncovered rice sticks to your hands, which triggered the idea of wrapping the entire roll with nori or a pickled leaf vegetable. That was the prototype of *maki-zushi*, which is a roll of foodstuff and rice wrapped with nori.

### ***Chirashi-zushi* was a result of cutting corners**

*Chirashi-zushi* developed from *hako-zushi*, which was also generated from an idea by ordinary people. *Hako-zushi* was made by filling a large box with fish and rice and pressing them, and then removing the sushi from the box after a while and cutting it into pieces for serving. However, it required great care to neatly cut the large piece of pressed sushi to serve on a dish. Ordinary people tried to “cut corners,” by eating directly out of the box instead of removing it from the box and cutting it. Gradually, people even stopped pressing the sushi, resulting in *chirashi-zushi*, which you make inside a serving bowl from the beginning.

## ***Nigiri-zushi* was a result of improving the efficiency of work**

It is believed that *nigiri-zushi* was also developed from *hako-zushi*.

Although *hako-zushi* is removed from the box and cut into pieces before serving, people thought of improving the efficiency of work by pressing sushi with your hands instead of using tools. Gradually, a recipe to press a bite-sized ball of rice with your hands and serve it directly was created. It is believed that this led to the emergence of modern *nigiri-zushi* as we see now.

## **Trend of sushi culture in modern Japan**

With the variation of sushi expanding dramatically, *nigiri-zushi* gained great popularity among the busy people in Edo as a convenient fast-food that was sold in food stalls and could be eaten while standing. Chefs specializing in making sushi started to appear, and the style of *Edomae-nigiri*, using seafood caught near Edo, diffused throughout Japan. Gradually, the image of *nigiri-zushi* as a common style of sushi was established.

Thereafter, from the end of World War II to modern days, sushi culture in Japan can be divided generally into three genres.

One is high-class sushi, using premium ingredients and served in sophisticated restaurants where customers and sushi chefs face each other over a counter. Second is the “sushi train” style restaurants, where you can enjoy sushi casually and quickly at a reasonable price. Third is homemade sushi enjoyed as an event food on special occasions in the region and seasonal events. Sushi has such a profound character that can be changed flexibly according to people’s needs in any era.

## **Discover the appeal of sushi in this era of globalization**

Through its history as long as 1300 years, sushi in Japan has gone through many major innovations according to the trend of the times. It is a food that has been popular among ordinary people, realizing “food fusion” repeatedly in terms of ingredients, form, and recipe. On the other hand, it is also interesting that the sushi before such innovation has not become obsolete, and you can find and taste many forms of old-style sushi if you desire. You can say that the appeal of sushi lies in its rich variation and flexibility.

Based on such understanding of the history of sushi, the fusion of sushi abroad is definitely not a strange phenomenon. It can rather be recognized as a familiar change that is characteristic to sushi. The word “sushi” has now become a common word used globally, despite various original changes added in each country, and sushi, originating in Japan, is enjoyed worldwide as a delicious, healthy food. Those are facts that we can be greatly proud of.

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