

Everything you need to know about sushi from Sushi University in Tokyo

There's no better way to learn

Larry Olmsted

By Larry Olmsted

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Tokyo is full of tiny sushi restaurants with only counter seating and lots of personal attention from the chef, but they can be hard to find and staff often do not speak English — Photo courtesy of Tetsuya Hanada

In the cult foodie documentary *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, Americans were introduced to Sukiyabashi Jiro, a three-Michelin starred gastronomic seafood eatery hidden in a Tokyo subway station. With just 10 seats, all at the counter, the chef prepares every dish for every guest directly, serving sushi tasting meals of 20 or more courses, which cost hundreds of dollars.

Neither the lofty prices nor the highest rating from the vaunted Michelin Guide are the norm for eating sushi in Japan. But sitting at the counter in small restaurants, often in obscure or hard-to-find locations and frequently with no staff speaking English, is quite common. At better places, the option of sitting at a table and ordering simply does not exist. Often, menus do not exist either, as customers leave the choice up to the chef.



Forget California or Philadelphia rolls – in Japan sushi means treasured ingredients like sea urchin — Photo courtesy of Tetsuya Hanada

Seeing your sushi and sashimi artfully and meticulously prepared in front of you, one piece at a time, using the freshest seasonal ingredients, is a world apart from the mixed platters and wooden boats crammed with American inventions such as California, Philadelphia or Firecracker rolls. For sushi lovers, dining this way is the pinnacle experience.

But because of high barriers to such meals, from finding a hole-in-the-wall gem to simply making a reservation to ordering from undecipherable menus and often not even knowing what is being served, many visitors instead seek out commercialized tourist-friendly restaurants and miss both a local cultural experience and education in sushi.

Often, travelers claim they want to "eat like a local," but in Japan that can be daunting. For those visiting Tokyo from all over the world, Sushi University is the solution.



Not all sushi is raw fish, or fish at all, but at better places, it's always a beautiful art form, like this baby green onion shoot sushi — Photo courtesy of Tetsuya Hanada

While it's a brilliant concept, the name is a bit confusing. While it's definitely a learning experience, there are no classes or homework – it's a unique twist on the local food tour.

Here's how it works: you make a reservation, and based on where you're staying, a "professor" (staffer) picks a great local gem within 30 minutes of your hotel, then meets you in your lobby and takes you there – always by subway, because owner and founder Tetsuya Hanada considers that part of the authentic Tokyo visitor experience, which like eating out, can intimidate visitors.

Hanada only uses sushi places with ten seats or less, where everyone sits at the counter and the meal is "omakase," which means "chef's choice," a multi-course tasting menu of small plates based on what's fresh and available. He contacts the chef beforehand in order to prepare a translated and annotated printed menu for you, and the same interpreter who brings you

sits with you to explain the food and customs, as well as interpret as the chef addresses you just as they would a Japanese client.



Sushi chefs use an array of specialized, ultra-sharp knives, in this case cutting the roll into bite-sized pieces — Photo courtesy of Tetsuya Hanada

It's a learning experience and you can ask questions. It's a truly great way to dissolve cultural barriers, relax, enjoy a great meal and learn much more about sushi without intimidation.

Basically, Sushi University allows visitors from all over the world (staffers speak nearly a dozen languages including English German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Chinese, Korean and Thai) to dine at hidden gem omakase sushi restaurants they would never find on their own. And it does so in a way that makes them feel as if they're visiting a familiar neighborhood restaurant.

"It is a tour in which we take visitors to an Edo-style sushi restaurant along with an expert interpreter, and let them eat as the sushi chef gives a lecture," Hanada explained. Edo-style sushi is what Americans generally think of as simply sushi, mainly raw fish and cooked rice seasoned with vinegar, though this is just one type of Japanese sushi, which can be cooked,

raw or completely unrelated to seafood.

10 foods you need to try in Japan that aren't sushi

There are three standard price tiers offered. The basic (\$110) might be at the type of neighborhood eatery that office colleagues would pop into after work. The intermediate (\$200) is held at a fancier venue, which a local might pick for a birthday celebration. The advanced (\$290) visits a standout fine dining spot at the Michelin-starred level, but while they vary in terms of fanciness, each is a full omakase dinner of more than a dozen courses, with fifteen or sixteen common.

Tips for eating sushi in Japan



The finished product – two kinds of rolls in one fell swoop! — Photo courtesy of Tetsuya Hanada

In every single case, it's a private customized experience for your party. You have to experience it to appreciate the taste and artistry, but the following are a few of the takeaway lessons you would learn.

- Nigiri sushi, fish or egg atop an oval shaped rice bed, is already seasoned by the chef to perfection, including wasabi. Dipping it in soy sauce or adding wasabi is a no-no. The sauce and wasabi offered on the side is for rolls only, and then to be used sparingly.

- Wasabi is a root indigenous to Japan, and good sushi places never use powder. They grate a whole root as needed, usually on a piece of sharkskin. Very little "wasabi" served in the U.S. is the real stuff; it's typically horseradish dyed green. Real wasabi tastes much better.

- Even in the fanciest places, eating sushi with your hands, relatively unheard of for other foodstuffs in Japan, is not only acceptable, it's preferred. This will earn you smiles.

- Many sushi fans believe it tastes better when you eat it upside down and put the fish on your tongue first, rather than the rice. Try it.

- Your sushi is served in bite-sized pieces and is meant to be eaten in a single bite. This avoids the embarrassing mess of your nigiri rice falling apart when you try to bite it in half. A common but even worse mistake, according to Hanada, is taking the topping off the rice and eating them separately.

- When it's time to talk, talk. When it's time to eat, eat. Sushi is served at the desired temperature and best eaten within 10 seconds. There will be plenty of time for questions between plates. Chatting and leaving your food uneaten is impolite.

- Sake can go great with sushi, but there are many kinds and sake is confusing. At Sushi University, your guide will help you pick the right kind. On your own, you can take a chance – or have beer.

- Tuna is never just tuna in Japan: it's lean (akami), medium fatty (chutoro), fatty (otoro), in different cuts from different types of fish and it's beloved in every way. But there is no such thing as "white tuna," an oddity found only on American sushi menus – and often not tuna at all.

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