

Fish-Lovers Flee! It's the Attack of the Mutant Sushi --- Japan's Famed Food Falls Foul of Culinary Criminals

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Good things rarely happen to good foods when they go global. Burgers, pizza or pasta, for example, have paid the price of universal popularity. Now it is happening to sushi -- and with a vengeance. (I'm using "sushi" to cover sashimi, nigiri-sushi and the various nori-wrapped rolls.) Any doubt I might have had that sushi has not reached even the most arid corners of the earth was dispelled when I stopped at a roadside diner in the one-horse, 20-casino town of Winnemucca in the northern Nevada desert ... and was offered the sashimi special.

It is even harder to connect the dishes at Sushi Samba with the ancient origins of sushi along the Mekong River where fish was preserved by packing it in cooked rice that produces lactic acid as it ferments. Over the centuries this migrated across China to Japan and was eventually refined into the nigiri-sushi of vinegared rice and raw fish that dates from the 18th century. From that we have now developed such anomalies as Sushi Samba's Yamato sushi -- tuna with foie gras, sevruga caviar, gold leaf and teriyaki teriyaki vinaigrette. Normally I'll eat anything in the service of writing an article, but I just couldn't bring myself to order this ridiculously expensive, pointlessly opulent dish.

Monster Sushi, another restaurant that draws a noisy crowd, has taken an alternative American slant on Japanese food by adopting the adage that bigger is better. The owner wanted to call the restaurant Godzilla Sushi until lawyers for the Japanese urban-demolition expert intervened. Monster may be a better appellation anyway, as the sushi here is indeed scarier than any oversized plastic reptile. The slabs of fish are up to 156 centimeters long, requiring multiple bites to get through a single piece. The standard nigiri-sushi plate is a struggle to finish (is there such a thing as a protein overdose?). But size isn't everything and, indeed, expanding sushi to this scale feels as defeating as writing a book-length haiku.

FULL TEXT

This is not so much fusion food as collision cuisine -- mutant monstrosities that could only have been created for people who hate fish: sushi smothered in salsa, or stuffed with foie gras ... or served up jumbo-sized. All across the U.S. -- and now even in parts of Asia -- the purity and refinement of sushi is being submerged under a wave of what chefs like to think of as inventiveness, and what purists regard as crimes. Sushi is suddenly bigger, gaudier and more overstuffed with exotic ingredients than ever before.

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New York has become the epicenter of this new sushi movement that blends a range of tastes, from the Franco-Japanese food of Sono to restaurants that mix Latin American flavors with traditional Japanese recipes. It started

with chef Nobuyuki Matsuhisa, whose eponymous Nobu restaurants served sushi spiked with ingredients he picked up during his years in Lima and Buenos Aires.

His most popular dish was the oxymoronic "cooked sashimi" -- raw fish for those who like their fish cooked. He took slices of fish, covered them with finely chopped scallions, garlic and ginger and then doused the lot in very hot olive oil. Chilies, herbs, garlic and lime juice started to appear alongside the more traditional flavorings of wasabi and soy.

Nobu's restrained experimentation was a revelation (and horrifically expensive). It managed to put a twist on a food cuisine that could be a little too freighted with tradition, but he did it without compromising the freshness and clarity of tastes that makes good Japanese food so special.

Alas his good ideas have now fallen into the wrong hands. Sushi Samba, for example, mixes Latin flavors as loud and overpowering as the salsa music, obliterating the Japanese elements. It has already opened two branches in Manhattan and looks set to metastasize around the world.

The restaurants, both decked out in sunny colored stained glass, cater to a roaring crowd of twentysomethings tanked up on vibrantly hued cocktails and saketinis (martinis made with sake rather than vodka). It is hard to think of restaurants as far from the Japanese ideals of purity, calm and refinement as these.

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I did however try the raw salmon with strawberry-key lime sauce and jalapenos, a lurid swirl of orange flesh and pink sauce that was one of the most unpleasant things I have ever eaten. A succession of Japanese-Latin ceviche dishes in which raw fish is partly pickled in lime juice was hardly better. These included tuna with apple and soy, salmon with onions and citrus, octopus with dijon mustard and miso, lobster with mango and lime juice, squid with pickles and capers, and mackerel with balsamic vinegar and blood oranges. The combinations seemed endless. The sauces managed to blur any differences between the fish. Any sense that you were eating fish just disappeared in a roll stuffed with salmon, shiso, jalapenos, crispy onions, mozzarella and spicy sauce.

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Bond Street in the East Village has a reputation for innovative and stylish Japanese food with a twist. Although its 15 minutes of fame might be up, this place is still painfully, self-consciously chic, with a wait staff that displays all the pouting self-involvement of Calvin Klein models. I feared that the food would similarly be all attitude and no substance, yet I was quite surprised. Dishes like rolls of arugula with crispy potato and orange and ginger dressing and sun-dried tomato and avocado with garlic ponzu oil and green tea salt were clean and clear, with a skilled mix of

textures and tastes. Sashimi with a frozen shiso and celery vinaigrette had an intense flavor but didn't wipe out the fish.

Sesame-crusted shrimp with orange curry dressing and hot eel dice with sweet soy and crushed roasted almonds were among the most interesting of the new sushi dishes on offer but what was clear was that the best food was not the most innovative. Bond Street has eight Japanese chefs working behind the counter, shouting out noisy greetings to new arrivals and skillfully putting together some of the best, simplest sushi available. It is those dishes, just rice and fish sculpted by long-apprenticed hands, that are in the end the most memorable.

Something Fishy

Sushi Samba 245 Park Avenue 212-475-9377 or 87 Seventh Avenue at Barrow Street 212-691-7885

Bond Street 6 Bond Street. East Village 212-777-2500

Monster Sushi: 158 W 23rd Street 212-620-8686.

Nobu: 105 Hudson Street, TriBeCa, (212) 219-0500. (There is also the cheaper, no reservations Nobu Next Door at the same address)

Sono: 106 E. 57th St. (At Lexington Avenue.) (212) 752-4411

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