

# Sushi



Sushi is known as the most typical meal of modern Japan. The preparation of this popular delicacy is an art that is left exclusively to men. It is believed that only the cooler hands of men have the right temperature to shape the sticky rice perfectly. It is not only the shaping that requires special skills and the proper hands, but also the arrangement according to colour and shape.

It takes at least five years for a traditional Japanese chef to learn his trade before he is entitled to serve this specialty to his guests. During the first two years of his training he fulfils simple kitchen tasks, runs errands and learns the art of cooking rice. This may sound easy, but it is more difficult than one might think, as the

apprentice must be able to tell how dry the rice is and how much water is needed for steaming. He then learns how to arrange sushis perfectly abiding by strict rules. There is a large variety of arrangements ranging from magnificent landscapes to radial designs emphasising the colour effects. In the past the colour sequence red, white and blue predominated on sushi trays. During the last 100 years yellow and orange were added. After having learnt this art, too, the apprentice dedicates the following years to buying the best fish, to cutting and filleting it. Only then is he entitled to take the examination for the master craftsman's diploma. Afterwards he is held in high repute.

## Culinary delights

It is a fact, however, that the Japanese adopted this method from the Chinese approximately in the 7th century and that they have developed an extremely refined art of cooking since. In order to speed up the fermentation process, which is said to have taken between one and three years following the ancient method, rice was added to the pickled fish in the 15th century. And surprise surprise, the fish tasted much better with rice than without: Nama-Nari Sushi was born. The fermentation process still took about one month though.

But the connoisseurs from Tokyo, which was called Edo at the time, did not want to wait that long. In the middle of the 17th century a clever man named Matsumoto Yoshiichi discovered a stunningly simple way how to shorten the fermentation time to half a day. He mixed the rice with vinegar. The sour rice was pressed into a wooden box, covered with slices of fish and a stone. As a result the fish became nice and tender and the rice much tastier. This arrangement of rice and fish in layers was called Haya Sushi and still is the basis of many modern sushis.

According to records the fishmonger Yohei Hanaya, who lived in Edo from 1799 to 1858, has invented the possibly best known form of sushi: Nigiri Sushi. He placed raw fish filets onto slightly sour rice and served this combination as practical finger food.

By the way: the longest roll of sushi was made on 23 September 2000 by 315 Toyota employees within just one hour. The roll had a diameter of five centimetres, weighed about 2,200 kilograms and was 1.11 kilometres long. The conventional wisdom is that sushi is a Japanese invention. But this is not so. In the past sushi was a method of conserving fresh fish. The fish was salted and a heavy stone was placed on top until the fermentation process had started. Different sources report about some inhabitants of mountainous regions in South-east Asia who are said to have preserved their fish that way. It was first mentioned in a Chinese encyclopedia that was written in the 2nd century AD.