

Hot Tuna

Tony McNicol watches “Seven Sushi Samurai” battle it out in London to become sushi chef champion of the world.

It was certainly an incongruous setting for a master-class in cutting-edge cuisine. Seven sushi masters, more accustomed to wielding the knife behind long cypress sushi counters, now found themselves surrounded by oak-paneled walls and imposing portraits of nineteenth-century grandees. The venue was London Hall, an elegant neo-Georgian building in a leafy corner of central London. The competition was billed as the “Seven Sushi Samurai,” a man-eat-fish battle to find the world’s most skilled and inventive sushi chef.

The event was held as Japanese cuisine enjoys a surge of popularity worldwide, and the 300 sixty-pound tickets sold out in just two weeks. It was the sixth annual sushi competition in London and the centerpiece of “Eat-Japan 2007,” a four-month celebration of Japanese food, drink and culture. Sponsors read like a roll call of stakeholders in the Japanese food boom: the Embassy of Japan, JETRO (Japan External Trade Organization), JNTO (Japan National Tourist Organization), the All Japan Sushi Association, local Japanese restaurants and Japanese foodstuffs manufacturers and importers.

On the evening of October 23, a crowd of food writers, chefs, journalists,



The “Seven Sushi Samurai,” from left: Anayama Masaki, Watanabe Noriyoshi, Jose Calderon, Ogata Masashi, Jeff Ramsey, Mineo Yasuhiro, Andrei Sim

Japanophiles and avid foodies waited in salivatory anticipation as the seven chefs prepared their creations. Proceedings finally began with Stefan Gates, a UK food writer and TV personality, interviewing the five judges and seven chefs. Judge Kyle Connaughton, head chef of development at the Fat Duck Experimental Kitchen, told the audience that the key to good sushi is “simplicity and freshness.” Paul Wootton, a former editor of leading U.K. bar industry magazine *Class*, had some advice on tipples to match with sushi. He recommended sake, beer or

shochu, pointing out that the last is now available at one of London’s trendiest new drinking venues, Shochu Lounge.

Next up were the “Seven Sushi Samurai” themselves. Russian chef Andrei Sim had come over from Moscow, where according to presenter Stefan Gates, there are now “more sushi restaurants than in London.” Representing the sushi homeland, veterans Ogata Masashi and Watanabe Noriyoshi had traveled from their restaurants in Japan with, respectively, nineteen and thirty-eight years’ experience behind the sushi chopping board. London-based Mineno Yasuhiro and Anayama Masaki had come from world-famous Japanese-fusion eatery Nobu and the popular Matsuri restaurant, respectively. Mexican-born Jose Calderon had journeyed from the United States for the competition. Last but not least, young experimental sushi chef Jeff Ramsey of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, Tokyo had come to defend his 2006 title.

The sushi on offer was no less diverse. Each chef, with the help of a just a single assistant, prepared 300 pieces of sushi for the attendees—no mean task considering most *itamae* are more used to serving sushi two pieces at a time. The resulting fare ranged from the confidently authentic to the positively avant-garde.



Lines of “Miso Beef Sushi” prepared by Nobu’s Mineno Yasuhiro



“The Whole Salmon” sushi prepared by Sushi of the Year 2006 winner, Jeff Ramsey. The *nigiri* here would be topped with a sprinkling of salmon roe and served with a coffee mustard sauce.

Matsuri's Anayama presented a traditionalist dish, "Seared Sea Bass Sushi," the originality of the creation coming via the use of *yuzu* (Japanese citrus), chili and chives, and fresh lime in place of wasabi. Watanabe took the opposite approach with his "Fruits de la Mer Mille-feuille," a seafood bonanza as elaborate as its name, containing salmon, crab, scallops, tuna, and flying fish roe, and served with an avocado and tofu-based sauce.

Reigning champion Ramsey dished up "The Whole Salmon," in which the passion-fruit-marinated flesh, head and cartilage of the fish was topped with roe and served with a tiny pink crane painstakingly folded from sliced ginger. Meanwhile, Nobu's Mineno eschewed fish entirely for "Miso Beef Sushi," tender Scottish beef fillet marinated in miso and topped with halved white seedless grapes. Ogata produced the competition's only vegetarian sushi, his "Golden Shooting Star" an ingenious mélange of exotic ingredients mimicking the taste and texture of shark's fin. Calderon looked to the culinary traditions of his homeland with "Taco Sushi," featuring salmon, octopus, jalapeño peppers and cilantro inside a tostada shell. Lastly, Sim cooked up the patriotically and descriptively named Red Square—the eponymous red square piece of tuna being accompanied by rocket and a sweet-sour dressing.

Visitors at the event were clearly as enamored of Japan as they were of sushi. Londoners Victor and Yvette Henlon said they plan to go on holiday to Japan for two weeks next year. The self-confessed foodies are regulars at Japanese restaurant Eat Tokyo in Golders Green. "We are going to Japan because of the food," said Victor. "We thought this event was a great opportunity to try sushi before we go." Likewise, London accountants Sunny Cora and Khoo Hui said they were also planning to visit Japan. "I want to buy a chef's knife," said Sunny. They had wanted to come to the competition last year, but the event was sold out. This time the two London accountants found out early through a Japanese food shop in Soho.

Luckily for Londoners who want to enjoy Japanese cuisine closer to home, sushi in the capital has reportedly improved immeasurably in recent years. Henry Harris, chef-director of London restaurant Soho House, has helped judge the competition every year since 2001. Speaking after the event, he said that when sushi became popular in London back in the 1980s and 1990s, initially it was mostly "fast-food sushi" and conveyor belt sushi. "[Now]", he said, "there are far more seri-

ous, authentic Japanese restaurants."

Not just that, the quality of sushi fish has improved, he said. Today's fishmongers are much more aware of sushi chefs' needs. "If you asked a Japanese chef ten years ago about coming to England and doing sushi and sashimi, they would have said there was no point. The fish was no good because it wasn't getting to them quickly enough," said Harris. "[Now] we have fishermen in this country who can get deliveries of fish that are still moving into London." Moreover, adds Harris, "We

gratulations of his fellow itamae, a noticeably weary-looking Ogata spared a little time to chat. I am only in the United Kingdom for four days, [and] I am still jet-lagged," he said. But now that he'd seen such an unusual range of international sushi, what did he think was the biggest difference between sushi overseas and back home in Japan. "Japanese sushi is bound by tradition," said Ogata, "The fact that international sushi isn't tied that way is fantastic."

Yet having seen today's sometimes



Russia's Andrei Sim and assistant prepare their mighty "Red Square" tuna *nigiri*.



Mexican-born Jose Calderon applies a guacamole layer to his "Taco Sushi."



Watanabe Noriyoshi and assistant assemble their elaborate "Fruits de la Mer Mille-feuille" sushi.



Competition winner Ogata Masashi receives a small prize from one of the event's sponsors, Kikkoman.

have very cold waters around the United Kingdom so we have stunning fish." Perhaps not tuna, but there is sea bass, salmon, turbot, squid and octopus aplenty.

But what about the big question, Who was the new sushi chef champion of the world? As he stepped up to receive his award, winner Ogata was a picture of modesty, saying little other than to pay credit to his staff for their hard work. Ogata's "Golden Shooting Star Sushi" was an unlikely but nonetheless delicious combination of ingredients included gold leaf, radish, seaweed, avocado, maple syrup and—surely a sushi first—cornflakes.

After receiving his prizes and the con-

weird and wonderful creations, wasn't he concerned that foreign sushi might have a strange influence on sushi's traditional form? Apparently not. He pointed out that the cuisine has been evolving energetically ever since its humble origins as a method of preserving fish. And he expects it to keep on changing.

"I don't know about Japanese sushi, but [today's creations] have certainly had an influence on me," said Ogata modestly. "It is a kind of culture shock. I have to learn about sushi again." TM

Tony McNicol is a freelance journalist and photographer based in Tokyo.