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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Sushi for Two

By **TREVOR CORSON**

WITH the depletion of bluefin tuna in our oceans now front-page news, people around the country have been sharing with me their confusions and fears about eating sushi. I think that we — and our fish — would benefit from a new deal for American sushi: a grand pact between chefs and customers to change the way we eat.

Lobbyists for the sushi and fishing industries insist that tuna is essential to sushi, and that controls on harvesting the fish would threaten traditional Japanese culture. But that's nonsense. Traditionally, the Japanese considered tuna unfit for sushi — especially the fatty parts. Boiled shellfish, pickled mackerel and lean, light-fleshed snappers and flounders were most popular. Not until the Western diet influenced Japan in the 20th century did the Japanese start to value the red meat of tuna and fatty cuts of fish.

But the Japanese still value tradition. When I lived in Tokyo, eating sushi generally involved a trip to a tiny neighborhood sushi bar. The chef, like a good bartender, knew everyone by name and bantered with his customers while he worked. Instead of tables and menus, people sat at the bar and asked what was seasonal and most flavorful. The chef delivered a delightful variety — unpretentious little fish with great character, crunchy clams, surprisingly tender octopus.

When sushi took root in the United States in the 1970s, a few Japanese chefs tried to educate Americans about the variety of seafood eaten in traditional sushi, and a few made the effort to recreate the neighborhood sushi bar, with its cheerful chatter, trusting relationships, lack of menus and reasonable prices.

But the dirty little secret of American sushi is that from the beginning, many Japanese chefs assumed that we could never appreciate the wide-ranging experience the way their Japanese customers did, so they didn't bother to educate us. Simple sushi took over, featuring the usual suspects: tuna, salmon, boiled shrimp.

Today, most Americans remain wary of the stern-faced sushi chef, and dare not sit at the bar — we wouldn't know how to order or to control the bill. Many chefs, in turn, tell me that they're fed up with the way we Americans mishandle our sushi, so they don't bother to serve us the fun, flavorful and more peculiar toppings.

So Americans are stuck between chef-driven omakase meals at elite restaurants that cost a fortune and the cheap, predictable fare at our neighborhood places. Both extremes have deepened our dependence on tuna — at the high end, on super-fatty cuts of rare bluefin; and at the low end, on tasteless red flesh that has often been frozen for months and treated with chemicals to preserve its color.

What we need isn't more tuna, but a renaissance in American sushi; to discover for ourselves — and perhaps to remind the Japanese — what sushi is all about. A trip to the neighborhood sushi bar should be a social exchange that celebrates, with a sense of balance and moderation, the wondrous variety of the sea.

I suggest that customers refuse to sit at a table or look at a menu. We should sit at the bar and ask the chef questions about everything — what he wants to make us and how we should eat it. We should agree to turn our backs on our American addictions to tuna (for starters, try mackerel), globs of fake wasabi (let the chef add the appropriate amount), gallons of soy sauce (let the chef season the sushi if it needs seasoning) and chopsticks (use your fingers so the chef can pack the sushi loosely, as he would in Japan). Diners will be amazed at how following these simple rules can make a sushi chef your friend, and take you on new adventures in taste.

In return, the chefs, be they Japanese or not, must honor the sushi tradition and make the effort to educate us — no more stoicism. They must also be willing to have a candid conversation about the budget before the meal; it's the only way American diners will be willing to surrender to the chef's suggestions. Sushi should never be cheap, but it also should never be exorbitant, because that makes it impossible to create a clientele of regulars.

Fraternalizing with the chef may be a tough habit for Americans to take up. But we've had sushi here now for four decades, and it's time for a change — both for our sake, and for the sake of the embattled tuna. Let the conversation across the sushi bar begin.

Trevor Corson is the author of "The Zen of Fish: The Story of Sushi, From Samurai to Supermarket."

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