## DISCOVERING LONDON

# On a roll

**Samantha Whitaker** takes a course in the delicate art of sushi-making

I wouldn't exactly say that I was a sushi virgin, but I wouldn't call myself a pro either. Recently, however, chains such as YO! Sushi, Wasabi and Itsu have become almost as prevalent as Pret a Manger and Café Nero. Sushi is the 'fashionable' way to lunch. Promoted by celebrities such as Kate Moss and Victoria Beckham, this healthy, low-fat, stylish fast-food appeals to the cosmopolitan and health-conscious 21st-century customer far more than the tradition BLT.

A combination of sticky, vinegared rice and other ingredients, including raw fish, modern sushi was originally a working-class dish, first served at a street-food stall in Edo (now Tokyo) in 1824. A century later, and the cuisine began to permeate the Pacific rim, adapting and evolving to satisfy Western tastes, and eventually finding its way to the UK in the 1990s.

However, the complex and captivating technique of sushi-making is a fine art. Sushi chefs spend a minimum of 10 years in training, but usually two years learning how to prepare the rice, seven years learning how to cut the fish, and then a final three years learning to prepare sushi. At So Restaurant in London's Soho, Head Sushi Chef Tomokazu Matsuya trained for 23 years in order to prepare the restaurant's contemporary Japanese cuisine. Matsuya san is also a trained Japanese cooking instructor and runs classes at the restaurant in how to make sushi at home.



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Learning anything in two hours seemed a tall order, but I was willing to have a go at fashioning my own sushi roll. The atmosphere downstairs at So is cool and calm and, as I and six others took our seats, we were welcomed by Matsuya san and his assistant, Manri Kishimoto, who is also his interpreter. In front of us were the ingredients and equipment needed to make California rolls and *nigiri* sushi, plus an empty takeaway box.

The class began without ceremony. We watched Matsuya san deftly prepare a California roll – a combination of cooked crab and avocado wrapped in sticky rice and *nori* (seaweed), and sprinkled with *tobiko* (fish roe).

We then tried the process ourselves, step-by-step, with fairly successful results. The second attempt was even better, and I felt the class unite in childish satisfaction as we placed our home-made rolls in our takeaway boxes. The key to good sushi, Matsuya san explained, is to use good, organic ingredients. These can be found in specialist Japanese food shops, such as the Japan Centre on Regent Street, and also in Waitrose supermarket.

Next, Matsuya san demonstrated how to prepare *nigiri*, which means 'grasp' or 'grip' – a key part of the procedure. An oblong mound of rice is pressed delicately between the palms of the hands, smeared with a fingertip of *wasabi* (a type of horseradish), and adorned with a sliver of raw salmon or tuna. The secret, we learnt, is to create an air channel through the rice, which affects the way the flavours of the warm, firm rice, fresh cold fish and fiery *wasabi* combine in the mouth. This is the test of sushi quality, he explained. If there is no air channel, then it is more than likely the sushi has been



**RAW TALENT:** Samantha Whitaker's successful attempts to make her own sushi (above), and So Restaurant's Head Chef, Matsuya san, shows how it's done (left)

prepared by an inexperienced chef. Even the machine-made sushi that is now commonplace is preferable to badly-made sushi, although Matsuya san warned us that supermarket
sushi is almost always frozen and he finds it almost inedible.

We then made our own *nigiri*, using salmon and tuna, until we had filled our takeaway boxes, which were then garnished with fresh ginger and tiny sachets of *wasabi*. Matsuya san demonstrated how to slice the California rolls with a careful sawing action to create colourful wheels, while we feasted on some he had prepared earlier.

The course runs most Saturday afternoons, with a maximum of 10 students per class. Several of those on the course had been given the experience as a gift, and Matsuya san also offers team-building experiences and private tuition. He would like to open a Japanese cooking school, and is seeking advice from Government organisations that are keen to back initiatives that help to promote Japanese culture in the capital. I left with my takeaway box and bamboo mat, feeling inspired to demonstrate my newly-acquired skills as soon as possible.

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