

# A dventures of a Japanese Restaurateur in California

By Yoshimori Tome



Author Yoshimori Tome

I arrived in California in 1981 not expecting to be a purveyor of Japanese food. After a teaching stint in the San Joaquin Valley as part of an exchange program, I came to Sausalito (just across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco) to work in a new Japanese restaurant. It was here I became a student again. I studied the restaurant business by watching and listening and immersing myself in American culture. I first worked as a host at the front door, greeting people as they came in, and then moved on to a position as manager. It was a different kind of classroom, and I loved it.

And the biggest lesson I learned during this time? American people just can't get enough of Japanese food.

## Mad about Maguro

Let me start off by saying that a huge thanks is owed to Japanese Americans who have inspired the local culture here. We at *Sushi Ran* are obviously big beneficiaries of their hard work and influence. Over the years I got to know loyal customers, and my passion for providing them with the ultimate Japanese dining experience became even stronger. The restaurant was struggling to make a profit, and I was eventually given the opportunity to take over and become owner. With a good restaurant education now under my belt, the first thing I did was hire the best chefs and staff. I was also determined to find the best seafood, wine and sake available.

Let's start with the food. Why is Japanese fare so popular in the United States? It's unique, it's colorful, it's delicious and it's healthy. People here in Northern California are very health conscious — they like to exercise (the mountain bike was invented here in Marin County) and they like to eat right. And what's healthier than omega-rich fish?

The open *sushi* bar started to be a trend about 20 years ago, and many Californian-style restaurants now have open kitchens inspired by the *sushi* bar concept. People like to watch their food being prepared — it makes them feel like they're eating at a chef's table. They're also curious about the variety of Japanese food that's available, much of which they've never had before. Knowledge is power, and now they're able to order more easily when they come in.

The rise in popularity of Asian-inspired food and culture is evident in the proliferation of Asian restaurants — Thai, Indian, Chinese, Burmese, Himalayan, to name just a few — and yoga, which has become one of the most practiced forms of exercise in California. And more high-end kitchen supply stores are stocking Japanese and Asian cooking tools because more and more people are cooking Asian-style meals at home.

## A Teacher Again

Now it was time to really start educating customers and staff about Japanese cuisine and how to get the most out of it. During the first 10

years of running *Sushi Ran*, *sushi* and *sashimi* were essentially the primary focus. When the restaurant began to expand, we brought a little more "California flavor" to the menu — Japanese-Californian fusion, if you will — but always keeping in mind how people here savor delicious and healthy Japanese cuisine.

We needed to be adaptable and flexible, while at the same time maintaining the integrity of Japanese food. So our new focus became sourcing more local organic and sustainable products, everything from fish to vegetables. Because of our concern for preserving our natural resources, we made some changes. For instance, we have stopped serving wild blue fin tuna; we now offer only farm-raised tuna that was sustainably raised from the egg, a technique developed at a Japanese university.

An example of adapting to different taste buds: during a November trip to Israel, I ordered *yakisoba* at a restaurant in Tel Aviv, and it was the sweetest *yakisoba* I had ever had because it was full of ketchup. "This is what the locals like to taste," the restaurant owner told me. OK then. Our assignment in Israel as guests of the Japanese government was to create a menu for 350 guests at a gala dinner in Tel Aviv. As in California, Japanese food is quite popular in Israel. But even with different expectations and taste buds, not to mention having to perform under kosher rules in a limited time, the event was a success. Without the experience of my executive chef Taka, who had been working seven years at *Sushi Ran* and 20 years in total in the US, we would not have been able to pull it off.

With the growing popularity of Japanese restaurants here and abroad, there's an enormous demand for experienced Japanese chefs. Unfortunately there isn't enough supply to meet demand. Organizations like the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET) are vitally important in efforts to foster ties between Japan and other countries. Similarly, Japanese chef programs would be hugely beneficial to restaurateurs around the world, hungry to learn more about Japanese cuisine.

## Sushi Lovers Club

People who love Japanese food keep coming back. That's why, in 1986, we started our "Sushi Lovers Club" at *Sushi Ran*, which quickly grew to 2,000 members until we discontinued it in 2001. Patrons paid a small membership fee — in return, we kept track of their attendance, provided newsletters and an annual report, and even added such "extracurricular" activities as picnics and parties. It was a little like being part of a country club — creating a community for *sushi* aficionados, who got to know one another because of their shared love for the Japanese dining experience.

Eating in a restaurant shouldn't be just about the food. It's also about conversation and, yes, people-watching. It's a social experience that adds to the ambience of a place, and that's what we hope to offer to all our patrons. Whenever *Sushi Ran* is reviewed locally or nationally, the social aspect of the restaurant is always mentioned. It's as important to us as a positive review of the food.

## Sauvignon or Sake?

Californians love wine, so the wine list can be just as significant as what's on the menu. With Sonoma and the Napa Valley right in our backyard, it's very easy to provide premium wines, and customers are willing to pay top dollar for a good Sauvignon Blanc or Cabernet if it enhances their dining experience. *Sake* has become very popular here in the US as more Americans become educated about the varieties and styles of *sake* available, and sophisticated about pairing *sake* with food. At *Sushi Ran* we carry more than 30 varieties of *sake* by the glass and more than 40 by the bottle. And what would enhance a fine Japanese meal better than a perfectly matched *sake*?

Most of my staff do not speak Japanese, and with fewer than 5% of my customers being Japanese or Japanese American, it involves educating a lot of people about the fine art of *sake* drinking. It's one of the areas I've put a lot of effort into — trying to encourage people to order *sake* with their meal. If *sake* labels, as beautiful as they are, could be more user friendly to the American audience, it would be easier to promote the product. Getting information from sake companies and importers and even the Internet can be difficult and time consuming, so we do our best to encourage customers in different ways, like recommending a specific *sake* to suit a wine drinker's palate. For example, someone who likes a Sauvignon Blanc would probably prefer a *soushu*-style *sake*, or a red wine drinker might favor a *kimoto*-style *sake*. And for people not familiar with *sake*, we would suggest a *nigori sake* because it has sweetness, texture and less of an alcoholic taste, making it very approachable.

## A Plea to Sake Exporters

Like the wine sommelier, *sake* distributors and salespeople should know everything there is to know about the product so we can too. It would make our job easier selling *sake* to our customers. I hope one day soon English translations will be provided on *sake* labels offering information similar to what's on wine labels. Specifically alcohol content, and since this is *sake*, where it was brewed, type of rice used, yeast, source of water and polishing ratio — all that would aid the

Photo: Author



*This was the annual Sushi Ran New Year's Day celebration this year, which attracted about 200 people. A Japanese priest (in white robe) presided over the New Year blessing. The person standing next to me (far left) is my wife Suzie.*

understanding of someone unfamiliar with the brewing process. This would make *sake* much less intimidating and allow people to learn more about all the wonderful varieties and styles available. In order for *sake* to be enjoyed worldwide, and for people to become more sophisticated about their *sake* purchases, labeling details in English would be extremely helpful.

I've had the privilege of touring numerous *sake* breweries in Japan over the years. I've learned a lot about the process of making different styles of *sake*, which has given me more confidence when trying to promote *sake* in my restaurant. In fact, these tours have been such a good experience for me that I've asked Japanese government officials, professional food and *sake* organizations and the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) to create *sake* tours for people who don't speak Japanese but who are trying to learn more about *sake* production. Again, knowledge is power.

## Giving Back

Since the local community has been so good to me, I try to give back in different ways. With nearly 30 years in business in Sausalito, it's important for me to participate in the business community — some of the organizations I've been involved with include the Sausalito Chamber of Commerce and the Japanese Restaurant Association of Northern California. It's also important for me to commit to local charitable organizations, including supporting fundraising events for local schools. And of course *Sushi Ran* has been very involved in a fundraising campaign to help earthquake victims in northeastern Japan.

I'm grateful for the success I've had here. Helping to promote Japanese culture and cuisine, educating people about Japanese food and *sake*, and contributing to local and global causes are my ways of expressing gratitude. *Kanpai!*

**JS**

*Yoshimori Tome is the owner of the Sushi Ran restaurant in Sausalito and one of Northern California's most respected restaurateurs. He has received top Bay Area restaurant rankings from both Michelin and the Zagat Survey, and three stars from SF Chronicle food critic Michael Bauer. A native of Okinawa, he is also president of the Northern California Japanese Restaurant Association.*