



# Not just for fish

*Homemade sushi is fun to make, cost-effective and mouthwatering*

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You can make sushi at home, and easily. Just forget about fish.

Which is not only acceptable but wonderful, and perfectly traditional. The mounds, rounds or rolls of pearly white, sweet-sour, just warm rice are the real essence of sushi. (You know that sushi is all about the rice, don't you? )

Like rice dishes everywhere — risotto, paella, arroz con pollo, biryani — sushi is a way of taking a common, relatively inexpensive product and giving it more character by adding a bit of something interesting to it. You already know this doesn't have to be fish, because you've eaten sushi with avocado and egg, at least.

Both are traditional in Japan, but there's no reason to stop there. What about roasted peppers? Or a slice of prosciutto?

Once you skip the fish, you don't have to worry about its freshness, sustainability (the seeming omnipresence of bluefin tuna in most sushi bars is horrifying) or even its quality.

You don't have to be ashamed of your slicing technique, and you need not buy tiny quantities of a dozen different kinds of seafood. You get to eat all the rice you want. And, yes, it's fun. You can even become good at it.

Think about it: sushi without seafood, sushi without restaurants and sushi without spending US\$80 a person at a top restaurant. It's an appealing option.

To make sushi at home, you do need an ability to make sushi rice and some ideas for combining it with ingredients that aren't fish. So, not for the first time in my life, I began experimenting.

I started with a lesson from Toshi Ueki, who runs the sushi-making operations for the Blue Ribbon restaurants. (We met at Blue Ribbon Sushi Bar and Grill, near Columbus Circle in New York.) I asked Ueki just two things: Teach me to make the rice well, and then suggest some possibilities for other ingredients.

The rice-making is easy, and far from mysterious. You need good short-grain white rice (you can use brown rice, of course, but it's not the same thing), rice vinegar, sugar, salt and kelp (or konbu, a kind of seaweed). Some sake is

nice, but it is not essential. You blend the vinegar, sugar, salt and kelp, remove the kelp, then let the sweetened vinegar (now called awasezu) sit at room temperature or in the refrigerator for as long as you like. (I haven't tested to see how long it will last, but several days are certainly fine.)

You cook the rice, adding a little sake to the water if you have it; the proportions are about one-and-a-half parts water to one part rice, though you can get away with less water if you have a rice cooker.

When the rice is done, you let it sit for 15 minutes or so, then you fold in about a half-cup of awasezu for every two cups of cooked rice. You do this gently, so as not to crush the rice, but it's not as painstaking a process as it's sometimes made out to be.

If your goal is to become a great sushi chef, you can take this more seriously. But for me, it seemed the rough equivalent of folding egg whites into a batter. The rice will absorb more awasezu than it needs, so you have to keep tasting and stop when you have the right, slightly sweet-and-sour flavor.

Forming the rice looks easier than it is. The rice is very sticky, so you need to wet your hands between forming each piece. (You'll note that most sushi chefs do this, too.) Ueki proceeded to rip off shapes of all kinds: hand-molded nigiri, mat-rolled maki, a kind of "box" sushi called oshigata that is popular in Osaka. (I bought a gadget for making oshigata for US\$5 online; it works), and a variety of less-formally molded shapes. These, when I got home and began to work myself, turned out to be my favorite. Even a nicely formed nigiri sushi can take some time.

Once I got the hang of it, I was producing hand rolls in a variety of forms without much trouble. Ultimately I found three favorites. First is a quarter sheet of nori, smeared lightly with rice (about a tablespoon, not much more) and topped with a couple of bits of whatever — say umeboshi and tofu — then rolled, cigar or cone-like. Next is a small rounded pile of rice (again, about a tablespoon) with, say, a pile of chopped seasoned greens on top and a thin band of nori wrapped

around its side (like the popular sushi made with uni). Finally, a small pile of rice, crudely shaped but vaguely nigiri-ish, with something on top — prosciutto turned out to be my favorite. (I never said these were vegan.) All of these were crude yet recognizable forms of shapes that Ueki had demonstrated.

When buying nori, look for darker color and fewer holes. It is usually sold in packages of 10. You can tell the difference between ultra-cheap and not-so-cheap, which has more flavor and stays crisp longer. But as soon as nori is wrapped around sushi, it absorbs moisture and begins to soften. (Maybe this isn't true for the pricier stuff, but I couldn't find any, which is probably just as well.) If you want hand rolls with crisp, light, brittle nori, eat them almost as soon as you make them — 10 minutes later is already pushing it.

The most intriguing and stimulating part of this entire exercise was in answering the question, "What goes with sushi rice?" The answer, not surprisingly, is "almost anything." (It's rice, after all.) Although I was concerned that the sweetness of the rice would impose limits, I had trouble finding any toppings that crossed the line. This is in part because the rice is also quite salty (it's really very well balanced), and soy sauce pretty much makes sweetness disappear.

Ueki demonstrated a host of traditional options: pickled eggplant (which is very vinegary, and blue), pickled mustard greens, umeboshi (pickled plums, which taste like slightly sweet olives) and pickled radish. You can buy these pickles at almost any Japanese market.

Other traditional sushi toppings are easier to come by, like sauteed mixed mushrooms, poached asparagus, avocado and a few other things. When I thought about them as symbols, rather than as essentials, it was easy to start substituting at home.

What wasn't easy was getting the forms right. But I could become good at this; we all could. And the overall experience of my homemade, fish-less sushi? Worry-free, guilt-free, inexpensive and delicious.



◀ DIY sushi is all about the rice.

PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG

## HOW TO MAKE SUSHI RICE

Time: 30 to 40 minutes, plus at least 2 hours' resting

250ml rice vinegar

75g sugar

2 tablespoons salt, plus a pinch

1 piece konbu (kelp), about 7.5cm or 10cm square

370g short-grain white rice

1 teaspoon sake, optional.

1. Combine vinegar, sugar and 2 tablespoons salt in a container and shake or stir until dissolved. Add konbu and let sit about 30 minutes before removing konbu and covering container. Let sit for at least 2 hours and up to several days. (Room temperature is fine.)

2. Wash rice in several changes of water until water runs clear. Combine with sake, a pinch of salt, and 625ml water (if you're using a rice cooker) or 750ml water (if you're cooking it on stovetop). Cook until water is absorbed, 38 minutes in a rice cooker, about 25 minutes in a covered pot over medium-low heat.

3. Turn rice into a large bowl, preferably wooden, and let cool for 15 minutes.

4. Using a rubber spatula, a wooden paddle or spoon, gently fold sweetened vinegar into rice, a little at a time. You will probably need about 125ml for this amount of rice, but a little bit less or more is fine. Rice should be glistening and moist but not wet, and sweet but not overly so. Use immediately with sushi toppings of your choice.

**Yield:** Enough rice for 4 generous or 6 small portions of sushi.

SOURCE: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



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## SHORT LIST OF SUSHI INGREDIENTS

Here are some suggested ingredients for making sushi at home. Many do not require soy sauce or wasabi, but it doesn't hurt. Mixing and matching is fine. Pairings like umeboshi and scallions are particularly good.

Avocado  
Butternut squash  
Cooked chopped spinach, perhaps with a bit of sesame oil  
Cucumber, raw or lightly pickled  
Daikon and other radishes  
Escabeche of eggplant or other vegetables  
Fried tofu  
Olives  
Pickled eggplant  
Pickled mustard greens  
Poached asparagus or other vegetables  
Radish sprouts or other sprouts  
Raw or seared tofu, cubed  
Roasted eggplant  
Roasted pepper, with or without anchovy  
Sauteed mushrooms  
Scallions  
Scrambled eggs (or fried or poached quail egg)  
Speck or prosciutto  
Thinly sliced cooked meat  
Umeboshi, pitted and halved  
Watercress or arugula.

SOURCE: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE