

Sushi

Going out to eat was strictly utilitarian when I was growing up. There was hardly any sharing or conversation because dinner was quick and to the point. It was understood to order only the cheapest entrees that almost always excluded steak or seafood. Ordering anything but water was simply unnecessary and the lack of appetizers or desserts often meant the meal would be over in half an hour. My mom would hastily prompt the waiter to bring the bill and to-go boxes even though our plates were half-full because the leftovers would serve as a soggy lunch the next day. My family's inability to share can get a little aggressive and defensive, a tribute to a more primal survival instinct that comes with not knowing when the next "nice" meal would come. The philosophy behind this way of going out was that the cheaper we made it, the more frequently it could occur, even though all the awkward and silent staring, the faces too close to plates, and the water glasses made dinner an unpleasant experience.

In addition to my family's dinner protocol, we never branched out much to different ethnic foods. To this day my mom has never tried sushi and my dad has only once and so my sushi experiences were nonexistent until a few years ago. My very first experience with sushi was awkward as I tried and failed using chopsticks, couldn't fit the sushi into my mouth, and gagged after my teeth slid along a particularly springy piece of eel. After this traumatizing experience, which resulted in a very graphic video of me on the Internet, I was hesitant to try sushi again. Whenever I did, I would play it safe with rolls that were fried and consisted of tuna, salmon, cream cheese, and avocado because of my texture sensitive palate. Eel and anything else notoriously known for being "chewy" was a hell-no. Even cucumber was off the list because of its crunchy texture amidst the soft fish.

However, my sushi experiences have grown over the years to include date nights, sister nights, and girls' nights that have opened up my mind to seaweed salads, specialty rolls, traditional Nigiri and Sashimi, and of course...Sake. This past weekend made me see just how far I've come on my culinary journey. My foreign exchange student friends and I went out to a sushi bar and I was able to hold my own and wow my Asian girlfriends with my ability to effectively use chopsticks and

navigate the menu. Even though my anxiety creeps up with decision-making, I'm relieved that the menu is just a two-sided page instead of the Cheesecake Factory's 200-item menu. We each decide to pick a roll or tapa to share, including: two sushi rolls, a plate of tempura vegetables, a side of stuffed shishito peppers, and some miso soup. Before our food comes, our table is spotted with Japanese beer, plum wine, vodka tonics, and Saketinis. I'm excited to see the so-called "Asian blush" in effect.

Each roll is filled with fish I've never seen aside from on a sushi plate and I'm unaware of what they are or where they come from. The Rainbow Roll is filled with salmon, tuna, snapper, shrimp, yellowtail, crab and avocado. The Jazz Pick'n Roll is filled with crab and cucumber and topped with avocado and eel. These westernized rolls include a varied bouquet of fish and veggies snuggled in between white rice and rolled up tight with seaweed (or vice versa), topped with a fish or avocado garnish. The brightly colored rolls span the entire color spectrum and look a bit like dragons, stretching across the long slender plates, weaving through ginger and wasabi roses and black soy lagoons in the small, shallow bowls meant for dipping.

Long, delicate chopsticks add deliberation to food selection versus the fork that is used to stab our food, making a kabob. I carefully take a dab of wasabi to mix into my bowl of soy sauce, cautious not to overdo it. My friend from Japan doesn't use any soy or wasabi in order to savor the true flavor of the fish and generously eats ginger between each bite. My Taiwanese friend grabs half the wasabi and stirs it into her soy sauce, enough to turn the dark brown pool into a murky mint color.

The dinner with my friends lasted two hours, the conversation spanning from snowboarding to interracial dating and the characteristics of boys across the globe. Apparently white men's noses are too big and make kissing really uncomfortable. So, in an attempt to dilute my whiteness I realize I need to branch out and indulge in something more than just food. As more drinks are ordered, we slowly continue to take down the food in the middle of table, eating slowly so that we can still engage in our increasingly rowdy conversation, making it an enjoyable and memorable night.