

WHY WE'RE STICKING WITH JAPANESE CUISINE



Light, healthy and convenient, sushi unsurprisingly remains a top eating trend internationally, with regional appetite on the rise for sushi and other Japanese dishes. **Nada Alameddine**, managing partner at Hodema consulting services, tracks both the history of Japanese food and the latest trends, from humble rolls of rice to flavorsome fusion experience.

When we think of Japanese food, our thoughts immediately turn to sushi. However, these small garnished rolls of rice have come a long way since the 1960s, when nigiri sushi was first introduced to Little Tokyo restaurants in New York. Translating to "sour rice", due to it being soaked in rice vinegar, sushi can now take all shapes and forms - a far cry from the strict Japanese traditional recipes that are sashimi, nigiri, chirashi, maki and temaki. The dish is now one of the top eating trends and has established itself as a classic meal option for many across the globe.

The sushi takeover

And it looks set to remain so for the years to come, since sushi ticks all the new eating habit boxes. First, it's light and healthy, offering a great diet option for those avoiding fat, sugar, processed food and gluten. The only fat is from the seafood, with sugar coming from the teriyaki sauce, which is optional. Another plus is the ease with which sushi can be eaten. Suitable for eating at a restaurant table, an office desk or on a park bench, varieties are usually sold in boxes with disposable sticks, which is just what busy workers need. Sushi also adapts to all types of budgets, since it is usually sold in sets or pairs. In addition, it is the ultimate delivery meal, since there's no risk of it getting cold on the way. Sushi should benefit from the exponential growth of the online delivery and takeaway market - an industry on course to reach multimillion-dollar levels in the coming years. All these factors combine to make sushi the ultimate fast casual-eating option in many countries.

Regional appetite

Food and Beverage investors have been immersing themselves in the sushi business for many years now, building successful chains across the globe, such as Genji and Ace Sushi in the US, YO! Sushi in the UK, Sushiro in Japan and Sushi Shop in France. Some have expanded their business in the Middle East, such as YO! Sushi, which can be found in the UAE, KSA and Bahrain. Even if some of the ingredients are not always available for chefs, the region has become home to a large offering of outlets, benefiting from demand from expatriates in the emirates and a steady fan base in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Mori Sushi has opened several branches around Cairo, in Alexandria and on the coastal route, while Sushi Ko is well established in Lebanon. The first Japanese restaurant in Saudi Arabia dates back to 1985 and, since then, numerous establishments have popped up across the country, including Sushi Yoshi and Samurai. The Kingdom even boasts its first local sushi chef, Khulood Olaqi, who runs Oishii Sushi in Riyadh. The conveyor belt concept that has taken over the sushi world has also found its habitués across the region.

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When tradition meets fusion

But of course, Japanese food is certainly not limited to sushi. The cuisine is varied and complex, mixing ingredients with exotic flavors and names, such as shirako (fish prostate) and nama tamago (raw eggs). Japan has opened its doors wider to tourists in recent decades, allowing us to discover a range of local delicacies, many of which are foreign to our western or oriental palates. The milder options, such

as udon noodles or deep-fried meats, have traveled to our plates, thanks to fusion restaurants. Nobu, the celebrity chef who owns outlets in the US, Canada, across Europe and in the UAE and KSA, has made high-end Japanese cuisine a trend. Many have since followed suit, with Japanese and foreign chefs experimenting with traditional and fusion ingredients. Dubai has been the mecca for Japanese cuisine in the region for some time, but KSA is now quickly catching up as the country is boosting its leisure and tourism industry. This boom in Japanese establishments in the region can be seen through the Middle East & North Africa's 50 Best Restaurants' awards, held in Abu Dhabi in January. The list of nominees shows that traditional Japanese dishes are on the rise, fusion experience is on trend and sushi artistry is a must-see. It is clear that Cairo should no longer be considered a second-class dining spot, with fine Japanese cuisine now available in the city. A new entry at No.50, Bonjiri was launched by Maryam Alnusif in Salmiya in Kuwait. Then, moving up, we find Reif Kushiyaki in Cairo and Dubai, Zuma in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, Hoseki in Dubai (with its sushi master and only nine seats), Myazu in Riyadh and Kazoku in Cairo.

More in the making

But Japanese cuisine aficionados needn't worry since there are more flavors on the way. In New York, Kimika restaurant is already causing a stir with its "Itameshi" concept, a surprising mix of Italian and Japanese dishes. The menu offers Cavatelli pasta with a pork ragu, studded with edamame and a dollop of burrata; and a Japanese curry arancini. Vegan sushi options are also ones to watch, with the American chain Whole Foods Markets now selling Kikka Sushi's vegan tuna and salmon sushi varieties made out of konjac root, which mimics the taste and texture of raw fish. Vancouver-based Konscious Foods is also offering frozen plant-based sushi and onigri. For sit-in options, vegan sushi bar Kusaki in west Los Angeles and New York's Shojin are already both serving plant-based omakase.

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