

Northwest *palate*

FOOD, WINE & TRAVEL OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST



The
Inns & Dining Outs
of the **Willamette Valley**

WHERE TO
EAT, TASTE,
STAY, & RELAX



SUSTAINABLE SEAFOOD IS BEING TOUTED ON MENUS AT SELECT SUSHI RESTAURANTS IN THE NORTHWEST. MAKING OCEAN-CONSCIOUS DECISIONS TODAY IS A WAY TO ENSURE THAT DINERS WILL BE ABLE TO ENJOY DELICIOUS SUSHI FOR GENERATIONS TO COME.

COURTESY BAMBOO SUSHI

Dinner at Portland's Bamboo Sushi is a sequence of dishes like you'd experience at any other popular sushi bar—that is, until the check arrives.

Slices of Alaskan salmon are served atop expertly shaped bundles of seasoned rice, held together with a ribbon of seaweed. Albacore tuna sashimi is a study in texture and restraint, while house specialty rolls, makizushi, showcase the sushi chefs' skill at pairing the flavors of various fish with seasonal vegetables and special sauces.

It's when the bill of fare arrives, accompanied by a pocket-sized pamphlet from the Monterey Bay Aquarium outlining the importance of selecting environmentally-friendly seafood, that you realize the meal comes with a message.

"Sushi is the least sustainable food in the world," says Kristofor Lofgren, owner of Bamboo Sushi, an independently owned, certified-sustainable sushi restaurant in Portland, Oregon. "We're trying to make people more aware of the fish they consume."

According to a 2006 study published by *Science* magazine, due to overfishing and the rapid disappearance of biodiversity, the oceanic ecosystem is on the verge of a collapse so dramatic that all saltwater fish could be extinct by 2048. The United Nations estimates that more than 70% of the world's fish populations are on the verge of extinction or already extinct.



Bamboo Sushi's signature dish: Marine Stewardship Council-certified sustainable Oregon Albacore tuna carpaccio.

Despite these dire projections, endangered species like the popular bluefin and yellowfin tunas are still regulars on most sushi bar menus. Other sushi staples, like Japanese yellowtail, salmon, and unagi, are often farmed or caught in ways that harm the environment.

FEWER FISH LEFT IN THE SEA

“There are so many species that we know, scientifically, don’t have much livestock in the ocean left, and we are still eating them,” says Hajime Sato, owner and head chef of Seattle’s Mashiko. After 15 years in business, Mashiko made the transition to a sustainable sushi restaurant in August 2009. When Sato’s culinary students began questioning the source of his restaurant’s fish, the more Sato learned about the environmental impact of fishing, the more guilty he felt for not taking action. “Serving [unsustainable seafood], I felt like I’m the evil guy who knows something [but is still] doing something else on the other hand,” Sato says. “And I felt really bad about it.”

And Sato’s not alone. As a sense of eco-consciousness sweeps through restaurants in the Pacific Northwest, many sushi chefs and restaurateurs are making their menus more ocean-friendly. In Portland, Bamboo Sushi opened in 2008 and became the first

independently owned, Marine Stewardship Council-certified sustainable sushi restaurant; Vancouver, B.C.’s Blue Water Cafe + Raw Bar began working with seafood conservation programs in 2005; and Tojo’s, Vancouver’s lauded restaurant led by sushi chef Hidekazu Tojo, has a long-standing commitment to sourcing seasonal, local fish.

Defining what’s sustainable can be slippery. At Mashiko, Sato does not follow any outlined sustainability guidelines, instead determining his own personal standards based on four factors: the fish’s endangered status, catching method, farming method, and traceability.

Those same requirements run parallel with California’s Monterey Bay Aquarium, whose Seafood Watch effort is one of the premier ocean conservation programs. Seafood Watch ranks the sustainability of several types of fish and categorizes the species on a color-coded scale: Best Choices (green), Good Alternatives (yellow), and Fish to Avoid (red).

Farmed fish are often put on the “Avoid” list because of the way they’re raised, often in open-net pens in the ocean, which harms other marine life. Pens can release pollution, waste, and foreign disease into native waters, destroying natural habitats. Since many farmed fish are carnivores, they’re fed inordinate ►

Prosciutto-wrapped scallops at Mashiko.

COURTESY MASHIKO/SUSHIDAY.COM PHOTO



amounts of wild fish, depleting populations lower on the food chain. Farmed salmon, for example, are fed an average of three pounds of smaller fish for every one pound of weight gain.

Among wild-caught fish, octopus and some species of shrimp are caught by “trawling”—dragging a net that picks up everything in its path. This fishing method is not deemed sustainable due to the amount of bycatch, or non-targeted living creatures, that it produces.

COASTAL BOUNTY

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), one of the leading organizations promoting sustainable seafood, assesses and certifies fisheries that meet a set of environmental guidelines. Of the thirteen North American fisheries currently on the MSC’s certified list, three are in the Pacific Northwest, with five others in Alaska.

The MSC also takes into account the carbon footprint of fish that’s shipped from Asia or the Atlantic. Despite its long coastline and prodigious seafood supplies, the United States imports a staggering 80% of the seafood it consumes each year. With the rise in popularity of sushi, combined with the challenging economics of running a restaurant, it should come as no surprise where a lot of this imported, unsustainably farmed and harvested fish shows up.

Bucking these trends are places like Blue Water Cafe and Bamboo Sushi. The owners and chefs at these restaurants carefully vet fishermen to ensure their catch is sustainable. Often that means finding independent fishermen who are mindful of sustainability issues and use low-bycatch methods, like hand-line or hook-and-line.

“The Pacific Ocean houses some of the best fish in the world,” Lofgren says. “We were able to [source] a lot of Alaskan halibut, cod, salmon, crabs, uni, all kinds of great things, locally within Oregon, Canada, California, and Washington.” Half of the 18 “Best Choices” suggested by the Monterey Bay Aquarium’s Seafood Watch program—among them, Albacore tuna, sablefish, and wild salmon (*see the “Seafood Watch” sidebar for more information*)—are abundant off the coasts of British Columbia and Alaska. Pink shrimp from Oregon makes the list because it’s caught in a trawling method that does not damage the ocean floor or disrupt other fish species.

Insisting on sustainable seafood has had an unintended yet propitious result: it often leads chefs to create more inspired sushi dishes. “We have so much fish right now that we never used before,” Sato says. “[Going sustainable has] actually increased the amount of fish that’s available at the fish bar.” Sato’s sprawling menu offers unique options rarely seen in sushi houses, including rainbow trout, geoduck, and catfish sashimi.

Sato replaces imported hamachi with the environmentally friendly Kona Kampachi, a Hawaiian yellowtail that’s raised in the open ocean, shrinking the effect of contaminants on the environment. (Closed-pen and land-based farming, which are kept separate



Hajime Sato of Mashiko arranges a platter of sustainable sushi.

COURTESY MASHIKO/JESSICA OYANAGI PHOTO



Sustainably farmed Hawaiian Yellowtail by Blue Water Cafe + Raw Bar’s chef Yoshihiro Tabo.

COURTESY BLUE WATER CAFE/JOHN JAMES SHERLOCK PHOTO

from natural ecosystems, are also viable sustainable options.) One of Mashiko's signature dishes, monkfish liver, was shelved in favor of a similar dish made from British Columbia sablefish.

Blue Water Cafe's Executive Chef Frank Pabst, who oversees the non-sushi offerings, creates an annual "Unsung Heroes" tasting menu that features rarely plated, yet plentiful species such as mackerel, sardine, herring, and sea urchin in an effort to introduce new tastes to North American palates.

"If we fish out what's in the ocean just for the sake of having species on the menu that people demand, then these species might not be around for very long," Pabst says. "And that's not what we want. So we use mackerel, we use sardines... I feel that I have the responsibility to showcase those species in dishes."

Last year, one of his "unsung" seafood creations, a local red sea urchin served with a mousse made from Qualicum Beach scallop (harvested off Vancouver Island), made Pabst a champion at the Olympic Gold Medal Plates competition. His current menu includes a Port Hardy sardine (fished off the northern tip of Vancouver Island) stuffed with herbs.

FRESHNESS IS KEY

The Raw Bar at Blue Water Cafe is headed by Chef Yoshihiro Tabo, a 40-year veteran of his craft. His sushi menu prominently features locally sourced ingredients, with few notable exceptions including unagi and Australian amberjack yellowtail. The yellowfin tuna served at Blue Water was caught in the South Pacific, but Tabo points out that it was hand-line-caught, good enough for a Monterey Bay "Good Alternative" ranking.

"We source local seafood whenever possible, and if a product is not, we always try our best to source sustainable alternatives," Tabo says. Blue Water vets its seafood through the Vancouver Aquarium's Ocean Wise program, a conservation and sustainability effort that focuses on local Canadian waters. Like Monterey Bay's Seafood Watch, Ocean Wise classifies fish species based on the four tenets of sustainability and partners with restaurants committed to the cause.

"Our goal is to bring the unaltered flavor and texture of the fish to the plate," Tabo continues. "That ►



Yoshihiro Tabo
of Blue Water
Cafe + Raw Bar.

Seafood Watch ranks the sustainability of fish and categorizes the species on a color-coded scale: Best Choices (green), Good Alternatives (yellow), and Fish to Avoid (red). The Pacific Northwest waters are home to many of these abundant fish species. Demand for sustainable seafood has resulted in fisheries and farms focusing their efforts on bringing in this sustainable catch. The following Northwest fish can all be consumed guilt-free.

Albacore tuna: Unlike albacore tuna caught elsewhere in the world, fisheries in British Columbia, Hawaii, and the Northwest all use troll or pole-and-line fishing methods, catching fish one at a time with little bycatch.

Wild salmon: Wild-caught salmon is always preferable to farmed, but Alaskan salmon is considered the "Best Choice" because of its natural abundance in Alaskan waters. The MSC has certified five Alaskan salmon species as sustainable: Chinook, Chum, Coho, Pink, and Sockeye.

Mackerel: The large population of mackerel makes it a safe bet regardless of where it was caught; for something more local, the Hawaiian mackerel scad (or big-eye mackerel) gets a "Best Choice" ranking because it's caught by hand.

Dungeness crab: Dungeness crabs are native to the Pacific, and because they're caught using traps, there's little bycatch. To preserve future populations, fisheries only target male crabs that meet specific size requirements.

Geoduck: Geoduck, or giant clams, are native to the Pacific Ocean and are harvested by

hand, which causes little bycatch or environmental impact to the ocean floor. Fisheries in both Washington and British Columbia are legally required to follow strict conservation requirements: A B.C. quota only allows a geoduck catch of 1% annually.

Uni: Because sea urchins reproduce plentifully and are harvested by hand, they are naturally sustainable fish. But while uni have been overfished in U.S. waters around California and Maine, sea urchin populations in British Columbia are still plentiful, making it the best place to source the fish.

Sardines: Pacific sardines reproduce quickly, making for a healthy population far from being in danger of overfishing.

Pink shrimp: All categories of shrimp are plentiful in the oceans, but their catching method—trawling—accounts for the accidental bycatch of more than 1.8 million tons of ocean life each year, according to the Monterey Bay Aquarium. The Oregon coast, however, is home to an MSC-certified pink shrimp fishery that uses "otter trawling," a bycatch reduction device that allows other undesired fish to escape.

Sablefish: Native to the North Pacific, wild sablefish (also known as black cod) enjoy large, healthy populations in Alaska and British Columbia, and their catching method (using long lines) nets little bycatch. Oregon and Washington's sablefish populations are less abundant, though they are still deemed a "Good Alternative" on the Monterey Bay list.

Clams, Oysters, and Mussels: These shellfish are universally farmed in an environmentally friendly manner. None of them rely on other fish species for food, and fish farms can actually have a positive effect on the local ecosystem: All three species are filter-feeders, meaning they clear debris from surrounding waters.

Scallops: Like clams, oysters, and mussels, scallop farming is an eco-friendly endeavor. Even farmed scallops from Asia are preferable to Atlantic wild scallops (though scallop populations are healthy, dredging nets in the wild damage the sea floor).

Yellowtail: Not only is the Hawaiian-farmed Kona Kampachi raised in the middle of the ocean to reduce contaminants, but the farm has worked to greatly reduce the amount of wild fish needed to sustain the crop. Kona is not officially MSC-certified, but the Monterey Bay Aquarium recommends U.S.-farmed yellowtail over any variety farmed worldwide.

Halibut: The Marine Stewardship Council has certified Pacific halibut fisheries in Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia, where the fish inhabits the North Pacific coastal shelf. Caught by longline fishing, which allows fishermen to select certain species based on the size and design of the hook, halibut fishing results in little bycatch.

If you're looking to dine on guilt-free sushi, the Pacific Northwest may have the most ocean-friendly menus in North America. The region boasts two of the United States' three certified-sustainable sushi restaurants—Bamboo Sushi and Mashiko—while Vancouver, B.C.'s Ocean Wise program regulates the menus of more than 100 member restaurants. Concern over the health of the oceans has influenced other sushi chefs to offer sustainable options, though their restaurants may not have official certification.

CERTIFIED-SUSTAINABLE SUSHI RESTAURANTS:

Bamboo Sushi
310 SE 28th Ave.
Portland, OR
503-232-5255
bamboosushipdx.com

Mashiko
4725 California SW
Seattle, WA
206-935-4339
sushiwhore.com

RESTAURANTS WITH SUSTAINABLE OPTIONS:

Yakuza Lounge
5411 NE 30th Ave.
Portland, OR
503-450-0893
yakuzalounge.com

Zilla Sake House
1806 NE Alberta St.
Portland, OR
503-288-8372
zillasakehouse.com

Chiso Japanese Restaurant
3520 Fremont Ave. N.
Seattle, WA
206-632-3430
chisoSeattle.com

Seastar Restaurant and Raw Bar
205 108th Ave. NE
Bellevue, WA
425-456-0010
&
2121 Terry Ave. Ste. 108
Seattle, WA
206-462-4364
seastarrestaurant.com

Tojo's
1133 West Broadway
Vancouver, B.C.
604-872-8050
tojoes.com

Blue Water Cafe + Raw Bar
1095 Hamilton St.
Vancouver, B.C.
604-688-8078
bluewatercafe.net

Zen Japanese Restaurant
2232 Marine Dr., West
Vancouver, B.C.
604-925-0667
zensushi.ca

Sushi Bento Express
1258 Robson St.
Vancouver, B.C.
604-681-1150

begins with using only the freshest fish available," including Alaskan Sockeye salmon, sablefish, and rolls loaded with Dungeness crab.

According to Sato, this fresh, environmentally-friendly interpretation of sushi has historical roots. In Japan, traditional Edomae sushi was created by utilizing whatever fish was the freshest. "Edomae" translates to "in front of Edo," the old name for Tokyo; what was "in front" was the Edo Bay, home to a large fish population. With the area's strong fishing communities and the era's lack of refrigeration, seafood was caught, sold, and prepared on the same day.

"You have to think about tradition in that sense, and bring back what's in front of the Northwest, what's available," Sato says. "Sometimes people feel like bringing fish from Japan is more authentic. But what about getting fish locally? It's much fresher, has less of a carbon foot-

print, and you can enjoy more of it."

And for an area with such plentiful waters, it's not surprising that sustainable seafood extends far beyond sushi counters. Pinto abalone is one recent seafood success story. Once abundant along the B.C. coast, abalone was all but eradicated by overfishing in the 1980s and 1990s. But thanks to the efforts of the government agency Environment Canada, which funded in part an effort to re-introduce the species to B.C. waters, the highly prized mollusk is back on the menu at Vancouver's C Restaurant.

C Restaurant was the founding restaurant partner of the Ocean Wise program; the city now boasts more than 100 Ocean Wise-approved restaurants, from the high-end Coast Seafood restaurant to local pizza chains.

When asked if going sustainable was inspired by the Northwest's hunger for doing things as sustainable and farm-to-table as possible, Sato pauses thoughtfully. "Maybe it is the West Coast thing," he says. "But if I lived in New York, I would do the same thing."

Erin DeJesus is a Portland, Oregon-based food writer. Read more of her work at asteriskerin.com.

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