

13

Ways to Tell if a Sushi Restaurant is Worth Trying



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A Comprehensive Guide to Identifying High Quality Sushi

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Thank you for visiting my website and taking the time to learn how to identify high quality sushi. I'm glad that you're here because I need to tell you something...

All sushi is NOT created equally.

I'm sure you've noticed some of the differences in quality of sushi, but I want to shed some light on exactly what those differences are. I wrote this guide because I want to help you distinguish between the good sushi and bad sushi. By the very nature of eating raw or "underprepared" fish (the preparation is actually quite extensive, but "under-prepared" is what the FDA defines it as), eating bad sushi can lead to some serious health implications and understanding what to look for - and what questions to ask - can prevent you from needing to worry.

There are tons of determining factors when it comes to the quality of sushi. But for now, let's focus on the top 13.

As you might have guessed, you will need to go inside the restaurant to accurately gauge the quality of their sushi; if possible, take a seat at the sushi bar. If you don't see a sushi bar, or at least an area where the chefs can be seen preparing the sushi, then you should immediately become skeptical of the quality of the sushi.

There are a few parts within this guide that will require you to ask your chef a few questions. Don't worry- sushi chefs should be accustomed to this and welcome your questions with grace and humility!

1. How does the fish look?



Within the sushi display case, each piece of fish should be on its own plate and each plate should be wrapped in cellophane. Because predatory fish are more susceptible to parasites, they must be flash frozen and thawed before serving. This is the distinction between standard seafood and “sushi grade” seafood (though this term and its practice are not currently regulated by the FDA).

The purpose of the cellophane is to elevate the fish and allow any excess moisture to drip down the puncture holes in the cellophane. This ensures that the fish or other seafood maintains its consistency and does **not** become soggy.

Some species of fish should be brightly colored, like salmon or tuna, while other fish should be more subtle in their coloration - like halibut, snapper, tilapia, and mackerel.

Take a special note of the malleability of the fish. When the chef picks up a piece of fish or places it back in the case, do you notice any indentations left by their hand? Fresh fish should have a slight “bounce” to their consistency - meaning that once the meat has been touched, the meat should slowly “bounce” back to its original shape.

If the fish doesn’t bounce back, then you should bounce out of your seat.

2. How does the fish smell?



First of all, if you can smell the fish without bringing it directly under your nose, then it probably isn't fresh enough to be consumed raw. If there is a strong "fishy smell" then you know the decomposition process has gone too far.

If anything, the fish should smell lightly salty. If you smell any sort of metallic scent, then you know that the fish has been treated in liquid carbon monoxide to preserve its color, "flavor," and/or texture. Try to avoid metallic smelling fish (most commonly found in prepackaged tuna).

To test this, ask your chef for a small sample of the desired fish. Most sushi restaurants will be happy to oblige if you are sitting at the sushi bar, but don't ask for a sample of each fish in the case. Pick one or two that you are genuinely interested in purchasing or sample one of their seasonal species.

Also, be sure to tip the sushi chef after you sample something- especially if you ask for multiple samples. It's not their job to pass out free samples and they could potentially get into trouble for doing so. But by being a good patron, you will evoke the best service.

3. Is the fish pre-sliced?



GOOD - Large fillets that are sliced per order.

Pre-sliced fish is never acceptable and here is why: fish decompose faster after being cut into smaller pieces. The reason why you should see large pieces of fish in the sushi case is not only for presentation, but also to keep the fish as fresh as possible before consumption.

Ask your chef if they fillet their own fish or get any fish whole. The larger the fish comes into the sushi establishment, the more likely it is that the fish is fresh. If the fish comes pre-packaged it is much more difficult to gauge the freshness of each piece.



BAD - Pre-slicing fish to save time during busy periods.

Pre-sliced fish promotes bad habits when it comes to making sashimi and nigiri.

Pieces of sashimi should vary in size, thickness, and shape depending on the fish.

Pieces of nigiri are typically slightly thinner than sashimi and should be sliced to a particular shape.

4. Does the restaurant look clean?



I don't normally like to judge a book by its cover, but there is something to be said about the cleanliness of a restaurant. I think it's safe to assume that you can tell when a restaurant is clean, so I'll focus on a few specific things to look for in sushi restaurants:

The Display Case: Every sushi bar will have a refrigerated fish display case. This case should be clean, well-organized, and in good condition. In some restaurants, there may be more than one of these display cases.

The Rice Container: In addition to the iconic fish display case, you should also be able to see a large container of sushi rice (in the picture above, it's the large, silver container on the back counter). These containers are insulated to keep the rice at the proper temperature and they should also appear to be very clean.

If the restaurant doesn't appear to be clean and clear of clutter around the preparation areas, then it's a safe bet that they are too lax on their preparation methods as well.

5. Is the preparation area kept clean?



Now that we've covered how the restaurant should look, let's look a little closer at the sushi bar in particular. Here are a few additional things to look for:

Hand Water (Tezu): This is a small bowl of water and rice vinegar that the chef dips her/his hands into to prevent rice from sticking to their hands. This water mixture should be clean and relatively free of debris. The chef should be changing this water mixture frequently.

Hand Towels: You should be able to see a few (and sometimes several) hand towels that are either dry or damp. These towels should also be relatively clean, as they are used to wipe off the cutting board and knives between rolls.

The Cutting Board: The cutting boards should be very clean and free from stains. After all, everything that touches your plate first touches the cutting board.

Sink Near By: All chefs need to be washing their hands frequently, so having a sink close by makes sense. In my experience, sushi chefs are also more likely to change their tezu if the sink is close.



In many places around the U.S., it is required that chefs and cooks wear gloves when preparing food. While most people believe this to be the best practice, I believe that when a sushi chef wears gloves they cannot feel what is on their hands. For example, when I'm working with a piece of salmon and then a piece of tuna, I may not be able to feel how much oil from the salmon is on my hands before handling the tuna. The topic of wearing gloves is a bit controversial among chefs for various reasons. Personally, I feel more comfortable when my sushi chef doesn't wear gloves.

6. What's the price tag look like?



The lower the price, generally speaking, the lower the quality.

The phrase, “It’s too good to be true” comes to mind here. In most circumstances, high quality fish will not be served for pennies on the dollar. However, just because the fish has a high price tag doesn’t mean that it’s automatically high quality either.

How can you tell if the price is worth it? **Ask.**

Ask your chef about the types of fish and see how much information they can give on them. If the price is high, they better be able to back it up with information on where it was caught, how long ago it was killed, and how long they have had it out.



7. What other dishes are served?



Chances are that if a restaurant serves 5 different styles of cuisine (like pizza, sandwiches, sushi, gyros, and pasta), they don't do any of them well – especially when it comes to sushi.

Be wary of restaurants that serve a multitude of Asian cuisine as well (Hibachi+Sushi+Thai+Chinese Buffets obviously make the list of places to avoid eating sushi at).

Keep in mind that there are always exceptions to this rule. I have been to a few places that serve high quality sushi as well as a dozen other types of Asian food, but it's a rare find.

If the restaurant is serving sushi in a buffet format, I would advise avoiding it. It's not to say that the sushi will be inherently bad, but chances are you didn't see the chef preparing that sushi and you don't know how long it has been sitting there. Sushi, as we know it today, is intended to be made-to-order and consumed immediately.

8. How old is the fish?



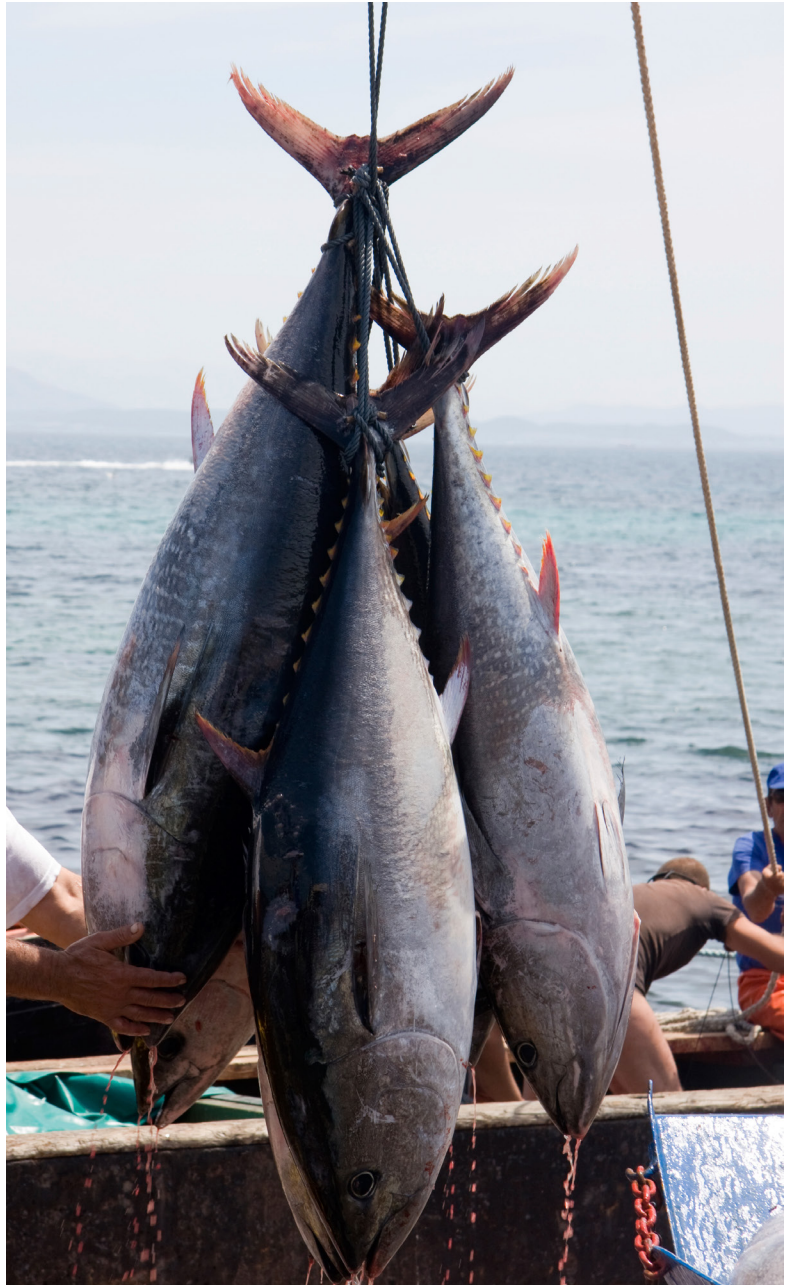
There is no accurate way to tell exactly how old fish is by looking at it. Obviously, we can tell when fish is past its prime by appearance, but we should be asking the chef how old the fish is before consuming it.

Better yet, ask your chef how long it's been since that piece of fish was frozen.

As I mentioned at the beginning, “sushi grade” fish must be flash frozen with liquid nitrogen to eliminate parasites and other microorganisms. This process also prevents any physical deterioration of the fish.

In my experience, the best tasting fish is between 2-4 days old (or unfrozen).

Fun Fact: The best fish for sushi is not actually the “freshest”, or most recently caught. Fish that is only a few days old have enzymes that help break down the fish muscles. These enzymes create glutamate and are detectable by the human tongue (also considered to be the “fifth taste”, or Umami, in Japanese).



9. What types of fish do they carry?



There are always a few staple species of fish in sushi restaurants: salmon, tuna, yellowtail, mackerel, red snapper, scallops, etc. But do they carry any specialty fish? Most sushi establishments that are worth their weight in rice will carry seasonal seafood (technically all seafood is seasonal, but modern aquaculture gives us a few exceptions).

Seasonal seafood provides higher quality meats, lower costs, wider varieties, and are better for the environment. These specialty fish should be rotating every few months and will prove that the establishment cares about the craft and the service to their customers – not what will simply make them money.

To find out what types of seasonal fish they are carrying, simply ask your chef!

10. How is the rice?



There is a lot to be said about the quality of rice at a sushi restaurant. After all, it is the most important ingredient (the term su-shi actually translates to vinegared-rice).

Ask your chef what brand of rice they use, whether or not it is a new crop (shinmai), and ask if they make their own Su (rice wine vinegar seasoning).

You should also ask for a sample of their rice before ordering. This isn't too uncommon among savvy consumers.

Is the rice too cold or too hot?

It should be between room temperature and body temperature.

Can you taste the vinegar on the rice?

Each grain should be evenly coated with Su. If you find that some grains are well seasoned and other are not, then you know the rice wasn't made very well.

Does the rice taste too sweet or too salty?

This is largely based on personal preference or regional preference, but it will give you a good understanding of the attention to detail within the establishment.

For example: In Japan, the rice will have a stronger salt/vinegar flavor. Whereas in the U.S. the rice will be sweeter.



I can't stress enough how important the rice is and how it should be made with the highest level of attentiveness. In my opinion, when you ask for a sample of their rice, you should think, "Wow. That was incredible. Thank you!"

11. How much rice is being used?



BAD - Thin slices of fish and too much rice.

When ordering maki, or rolls, take note of the ratio between the amount of rice used and the amount of other ingredients within the roll. The more rice that is present, the more likely the rice will dilute the flavor of the other ingredients.

When ordering nigiri, each piece should be made to consume in a single bite. Anything larger is either made by someone who wasn't trained well and they are diluting the delicate flavor of the fish with excess rice OR they are cutting the cost of their raw fish by using more rice. Either way, when you order nigiri you want to taste the flavor of the fish, right? Don't let them dilute that flavor by using too much rice!



GOOD- Large slices of fish and a small amount of rice.

12. Is the Sushi Premade?



There are several people out there that claim that pre-made sushi is “not bad.” But it doesn’t mean that the sushi is good either. Pre-made sushi is technically safe to eat, as it must be refrigerated and abide by HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point) guidelines.

“We worry about eating raw fish, but we haven’t seen problems with it the way we have with E. coli and salmonella in burgers and chicken,” says O. Peter Snyder, PhD, president of the food-safety consulting group Hospitality Institute of Technology and Management.

But what does that say for the *quality* of pre-made, refrigerated sushi? Here’s a few negative side effects of refrigerating sushi:

Rice becomes hard and void of its original flavor: The reason rice is served at near body temperature is because the rice is at its peak flavor point and consistency. Once it drops below 40 degrees Fahrenheit, it loses a lot of its flavor and becomes as hard as rocks.

Seaweed becomes soggy: The once flavorful, crisp nori becomes soggy with moisture and has the consistency of wet paper.

Sauce soaks the sushi: (try saying that ten times fast) any sauce that is used will naturally saturate the sushi over time. The longer the sauce sits, the more saturated the sushi will become. Have you ever put syrup on some pancakes and then put them in your refrigerator? It’s not a very appetizing sight and neither is refrigerated sushi.

Sushi was never intended to be refrigerated. Like most dishes, it is best served fresh and made to order.

13. Lastly, Check the Reviews.



I say this one last because it relies on the opinions of others. While I trust the judgment of other people for many things in life, I can't always depend on them when it comes to sushi. Even in large numbers, good reviews can be deceiving.

Always trust your own judgment when it comes to sushi.

However, detailed reviews of a restaurant can tell you a lot about the establishment before ever stepping foot inside. For example, great service and cleanliness are common qualities for people to mention in a review. These are particularly valuable if they sat at the bar or mention the sushi chefs in their review.



Thank you so much for taking the time to read this. I would love to hear about your thoughts, comments, and questions! Feel free to send me a message on Twitter, Facebook, or even email me at bryan@secretsofsushi.com.



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