

THE
SUSHI
ECONOMY



*Globalization and the Making
of a Modern Delicacy*

SASHA ISSENBERG



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From the sea to your plate, the first international tour of sushi's journey in the global marketplace

One generation ago, sushi's narrow reach ensured that sports fishermen who caught tuna in most of the world sold the meat for pennies as cat food. Today, the fatty cuts of tuna known as *toro* are among the planet's most coveted luxury foods, worth hundreds of dollars a pound and capable of losing value more quickly than any other product on earth. So how has one of the world's most popular foods gone from being practically unknown in the U.S. to being served in towns all across America, and in such a short span of time? Sushi aficionados and newcomers alike will be surprised to learn the true history, intricate business, and international allure behind this fascinating food.

A riveting combination of culinary biography, behind-the-scenes restaurant detail, and a unique exploration of globalization's dynamics, journalist Sasha Issenberg traces sushi's journey from Japanese street snack to global delicacy. *THE SUSHI ECONOMY* takes you through the stalls of Tokyo's massive Tsukiji market, where the auctioneers sell millions of dollars of fish each day, and to the birthplace of modern sushi--in Canada. He then follows sushi's evolution in America, exploring how it became LA's favorite food. You're taken behind the sushi bar with the chef Nobu Matsuhisa, whose distinctive travels helped to define the flavors of global sushi cuisine, and with a unique sushi chef blazing a path in Texas. Issenberg also delves into the complex economics of the fish trade, following the ups and downs of the hunt for bluefin off New England, the tuna cowboys on the southern coast of Australia who invented the art of tuna ranching, and uncovering the mysterious underworld of pirates, smugglers, and the tuna black market.

Few businesses reveal the complex dynamics of globalization as acutely as the tuna's journey from the sea to the sushi bar. After traversing the pages of *THE SUSHI ECONOMY*, you'll never see the food on your plate — or the world around you — quite the same way again.

The Sushi Economy: Globalization and the Making of a Modern Delicacy Details

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Joe Voltz says

Takes you through the sushi production chain, step by step. A bit thick for anyone outside of business (not for foodies) unless you like or eat sushi on a regular basis, of course! Rather, it has you think more about what it takes for your California roll to appear with regularity in your supermarket cold case. Some things have changed since then - the legendary Tsukiji fish market that features prominently in the book has since closed its doors. Still, valuable as a layman's history of a cultural export now used as a yardstick to measure modern taste.

Sara says

This probably would have been more successful if it had been called *The Tuna Economy*, but I still enjoyed it. The book focuses on fish markets, sushi's expanding popularity, the modern sushi chef, and the future of new Chinese markets and tuna ranching.

I eat sushi fairly regularly, and expect and enjoy fresh sashimi, but I never really realized how complex a process it is to get that fish to the restaurant. The fish could be from almost anywhere in the world. It's amazing how quickly it changed hands.

I also especially liked the section explaining how sushi became popular in the U.S. I was especially repulsed to learn that the California roll originally contained mayo. I find California rolls kind of gross anyway, and that mayo thing really cemented it for me.

This is definitely worth reading for those who have an interest in global food markets or sushi.

Shawna Burch says

Pretty good! I actually read this book in University for a course on Economic Geography. Super interesting take on globalization and the supply/demand chain.

Alexander Ose says

Full of interesting little tidbits about the early days of the global economy. I particularly liked the history of how tuna originally made it into JAL cargo holds.

Yune says

This was the book I was looking for when I picked up *The Zen of Fish*: an in-depth look at how sushi has globalized and the people and economic forces involved in the movement. There's a bit of history and some explanation about the training involved to become a sushi chef (the profile being of an American, but ah well), and an actual breakdown of the costs for a restaurant, as well as a detailed visit to the famed Tsukiji Market.

It doesn't stop at that scale, though. There's a whole section about how an enterprising fellow working in the cargo department of Japan Airlines figured out how to transport fresh fish, and suddenly all those tuna that Canadian fishermen were throwing away had a market. As others have mentioned, the book is arranged in such a way that you follow people; I didn't get annoyed by this, since there was no attempt to try to involve you in their life stories, just their roles, and you get to see a variety of them, from fishermen to people tracking tuna pirates.

The main failing of the book is its emphasis on bluefin tuna. There are so many other ingredients involved in sushi, which is actually a strength of the other book I read. That said, tuna does make for a more dramatic story of conservation and market reactions.

Worth a read if you're interested in the subject, but not written so compellingly that it would hook in others, I suspect.

Vincent says

This book has been getting a couple reviews from a variety of places (The Atlantic and Esquire, to name a few), so I was pretty excited when I finally got my hands on the book.

As a sushi lover and weekend economist, I was hoping I could bring both worlds together. Unfortunately, I was a bit underwhelmed; I expected more talk about globalization and less character profiles. I was looking for more analysis and insight into globalization and the economics of moving fresh sushi around the world.

While I've loved Mark Kurlansky's *Cod-Biography of the Fish that Changed the World* and there were a couple gems (always order sushi from the sushi bar), I felt that I was misled by the title.

nimrodiel says

The sushi book is divided into 4 parts. First is an exploration of sushi. How the first Atlantic bluefin tuna were shipped to Japan fresh, how sushi evolved from its fermented origins as a way to preserve rice to the popular forms it is enjoyed in now: futomaki, nigiri, sashimi, and the box sushi which is still a regional fermented delicacy. The second portion of the book looks at the expansion of sushi from a Japanese delicacy into the well loved globally enjoyed delicacy it is today. The book focuses on the introduction of sushi into Los Angeles, and the spread of sushi as a food for first the rich to becoming widely available across the US and into the rest of the world. The third portion of the book focuses on the fishing industry in different ports where tuna is a primary catch crop. How over fishing has decimated wild tuna populations, and how farming

tuna has become a profitable option that still depends largely on wild fish. The book ends with a look at the future of sushi. How changes in tastes in other Asian powers such as China may change the purchasing pattern of tuna (both fresh and frozen, wild and farmed), the tuna pirating that is occurring in the Mediterranean, and the effects of trying to propagate tuna in farms rather than catching wild tuna and fattening them on fish farms.

I thought this was an interesting look at the complexities of the tuna fishing trade specifically, and how sushi has increased the demand for this fish worldwide. Since it was written using 2005 and 2006 statistics as the most recent I was left wanting to know more about how what I was reading about was currently in 2013.

Cheri says

I love sushi, so this was an obvious read for me, (so obvious it was given to me for my birthday)... and it didn't disappoint. It's an interesting and well written look at the way that one nation's food item can turn into a worldwide food craze. We here in LA have been a part of this craze as long as I can remember, (being on the Pacific, there is a tremendous Asian influence here). Certainly, it was popular in the 80's. I know that I didn't think it was weird that Molly Ringwald's character in the Breakfast Club took sushi to school with her. Consequently, I hadn't thought much about how this food stuff became popular or how it gets to our tables.

The book is filled with every aspect of how sushi is grown, shipped, made and eaten. Issenberg interviews buyers, importers, sushi chefs, restaurateurs, critics, and diners each revealing their own aspect of the world of sushi. The best of these is when Issenberg interviews an incredibly wealthy tuna baron in Port Lincoln, Australia, who raises fish in pens. He's styled his estate after Southfork Ranch - yes, the one from Dallas. I can't say that this made me want to go out and buy a piece of tuna and add to this man's incredible conspicuous consumption, but it was enlightening.

The book works best when it focuses on sushi's emergence as a case of globalization at its best and most productive. I'm sure there is a downside somewhere, but that will have to appear in another book. If you're a sushi lover or if you're interested in Global commerce, you will enjoy this book.

Dustin says

In person Sasha Issenberg is courteous and engaging, but slightly reserved. It was a nice surprise to see the claws come out in *The Sushi Economy*. Sasha tears apart what you think you know about sushi and aggressively peddles a parade of facts and events that leave the reader no choice but to submit to Sasha's passion for the culinary logistics of a fat, ugly fish.

The Sushi Economy describes the full life cycle of the bluefin tuna: how they are raised, caught, shipped, purchased, prepared, and consumed. The story is told through a colorful cast of characters from Tokyo to Texas. Their personal trials and successes contextualize the human impact of the tuna trade throughout the fish's life cycle. Issenberg successfully navigates the economic angle of sushi as commodity as well as the more human facets of fishermen's loyalties, piracy, and a seafaring nation's national pride. In between narratives the book is stuffed with facts, comparing favorably to Evan Osnos's *The Age of Ambition*.

My favorite chapter was on tuna ranching. Port Lincoln is a small town in Australia that catches more tuna

than any other city on the continent. It's a place where Olympians come to throw tuna at festivals for prizes, but the town doesn't have a single fresh tuna restaurant. Despite their lack of appreciation for the taste of tuna, the Australians develop the most advanced tuna processing facilities in the world. The economics of growing a commodity without understanding why it holds its value was fascinating and reminded me of coffee growing in South America.

The Sushi Economy also sensitively probes the underlying mechanics of Japanese culture. The rigid hierarchy of Tsukiji Market assumes diversity in tuna quality and a clear ichiban, or #1 fish each day. Farmed fish break this model, delivering similar size and quality and tuna on demand. Issenberg shows that at least some of the rarity and unpredictability of tuna trade is a product of the Japanese desire to maintain the illusion of a nature that cannot be tamed by humans.

What happens next? The Sushi Economy is almost 10 years old. Since then, consumption of seafood is down in Japan and prices have increased in China and the West. I'd love to hear Sasha's opinion on what this means: Does sushi still belong to Japan? Or has it truly globalized, and is it now a product of the world?

Sofia says

From my point of view, this book has helped me to understand how this delicacy has become what it is now a days. From different point of views and examples, the reader can follow the path sushi has take to be such a delicious plate nowadays.

Eliel Lopez says

Insightful story of the tuna industry. I liked this writer's style of prose with the exception of the profanity encountered in some of the pages. Thus one star deduction in my review as well as no spot earned on my book shelf.

Sue says

One would think I know more about sushi, having a mother from Japan and all. Really, she's from Okinawa...not exactly sushi country. And up until a couple years ago (when a trip to Japan precipitated the necessity) I wasn't even eating fish. I had been a vegetarian since I was about 14. But now I'm back to it and I figured it was time to do a little research.

From the start, I really enjoyed this book. The author's detailed, personal style of explanation held my interest, even when he was describing seemingly boring events like a fish auction. Economics is not my forte, but this book provided me with a convincing peek into the business world of how products get their footing. Starting with a product that was previously a burden to throw in the dump (bluefin tuna) and raising it to rockstar status in the fish world was no small feat.

My favorite chapter was on the white American and his journey to becoming a sushi chef. The story of this guy's dedication was amazing...made me feel a bit lazy and unfocused. BUT...that's where my interest trailed off. I rushed through subsequent chapters trying to get back to the good stuff to no avail. Perhaps I have the

attention span of a fly, but my guess is the first 2/3 of the book was just juicier than the last bit.

Mark says

Ain't it great that we can eat sushi in Omaha as if Omaha were on the sea? It's the miracle of globalization that makes it possible (or even desirable.) But it's not the same as eating sushi in LA or San Francisco or New York.

One difference is midwestern American technique employed in eating sushi. Step 1: Order lots of rolls, especially California rolls, spicy tuna rolls and salmon skin rolls. Maybe include a little bit of *nigiri* made with tuna or shrimp. Step 2: Once the fish arrives, dribble some soy sauce into the little saucer. Then add the green stuff. It's not wasabi, which is only grown in Japan and Oregon, and not widely even there. But no matter, horseradish tastes good, too. Mix the resulting concoction into a slurry. Step 3: Using chop sticks, clumsily pick up your piece of sushi (which refers also to the rice, by the way, not just the fish) and dip it (rice, not the fish) into the slurry. Leave half the rice in the little saucer. Step 4: Pop all, or, at your choice, only part, of the piece of sushi into your mouth. If you chose only part, have the remaining rice disintegrate into your plate, but slurp up the entire piece of fish. Step 5: Discover the pile of pickled ginger on the plate with the fish. For your next bite, use your chop sticks carefully to pick up a piece of ginger and drop it on top of a section of roll. Step 6: go to step 3.

I once sat next to some Japanese business guys at the bar in a sushi restaurant in Toronto. At least, I think they were Japanese, and so was the proprietor. They ordered *omikase*, which means chef's choice, more or less, and were presented with a few pieces of sushi every several minutes. They had soy sauce in a little dish in front of them, but didn't mix in any horseradish. They picked up the sushi with their fingers. To effect this, one puts one's forefinger on top of the fish, and one's thumb and middle finger along the opposing sides. With a graceful flip of their wrists, they turned the piece over, and dipped one edge of the fish, not the rice, into the soy sauce. Then they usually put all of the piece into their mouths. A couple of times I observed them taking a partial, but they bit hard with their front teeth to sever the fish. All very neat. Then they had a big slug of *sake*, and invited the chef to have a drink of sake, too. The chef had his own bottle behind the bar, but he charged the customers for every drink he took, and only took a drink if they invited him. Sometimes, between courses, the diners took a piece of ginger. On occasion the chef gave them rolls, but usually it looked to be pretty simple *nigiri*.

In Issenberg's book we learn that spicy tuna rolls were developed by American chefs "to unload odd scraps of fish past their prime, assuming that slathering them in mayonnaise and chile would help mask dubious taste and texture." He doesn't judge those of us who like such things. He's too good a journalist for that. The reporting here is done with minimal invasion of overt opinions. (Although he is pretty critical of a Spanish guy who tracks violations of the ICCAT fishing agreements, but maybe he deserves it.)

There's a lot to like here. Issenberg starts in the fish market in Tokyo, and quickly moves on to describe how tuna came to be transshipped to Japan from North America. He outlines the history of tuna farming in Australia and the Mediterranean. He fairly profiles Nobu of the eponymous, and seemingly more and more ubiquitous, upscale restaurants. (I wasn't impressed during my visit years ago to Nobu Next Door, but it's only the JV version.) He describes the boom and inevitable bust of the Northeast tuna fishery. He covers all these topics and more. (But not the part above about comparing how midwesterners and Japanese eat sushi. I made that up.)

And he implies but doesn't claim, a dire prediction for fisheries everywhere: "Culturally, sushi denotes a certain type of material sophistication, a declaration that we are confidently rich enough not to be impressed by volume and refined enough to savor good things in small doses." So, if only one-tenth of China's anticipated middle-class population in 2020 develop a taste for raw fish, that's 50 million new sushi eaters. Where will all the fish come from, not just for China, but for Omaha, too?

It's a good read if you're interested in the subject.

John says

Contrary to popular belief, sushi in its present form is a recent development that may be headed to a quick extinction. I count myself lucky to have lived during the time of sushi.

Anne says

This falls into the category of: seriously, there's a book about everything out there. Awhile back, I read a great review for this book, an exploration of the burgeoning popularity of sushi around the world - and the evolution of tuna from fodder for cheap cat food to a modern delicacy. Absent the review, I doubt I would have picked up a book on this topic. Issenberg approaches the issue from every angle - from Tokyo's Tsukiji fish market where auctioneers sell pounds and pounds of fish every morning to the hip LA restaurant sushi bars. Issenberg looks at the fishing trade itself - the various ways for farming and pirating tuna for legal commercial trade, as well as on the black market. This is a thorough study of the globalization of sushi, and interesting to the extent it answers the question of how such a seemingly strange food has gained such widespread popularity. But, at the end of the day, it's a book about the globalization of tuna - and while there are interesting factoids here and there, overall, it just didn't float my boat. Though it did put my in the mood for a big fat ninja roll.
