

cooking and entertaining



Sushi 101 With Jimmy Ishii of Sekisui

I love sushi. It's fresh, healthy and even fun to eat. Recently, I called Jimmy Ishii, owner of the Sekisui group of restaurants and undoubtedly the sushi expert of the mid-South, and asked him how to make sushi at home.

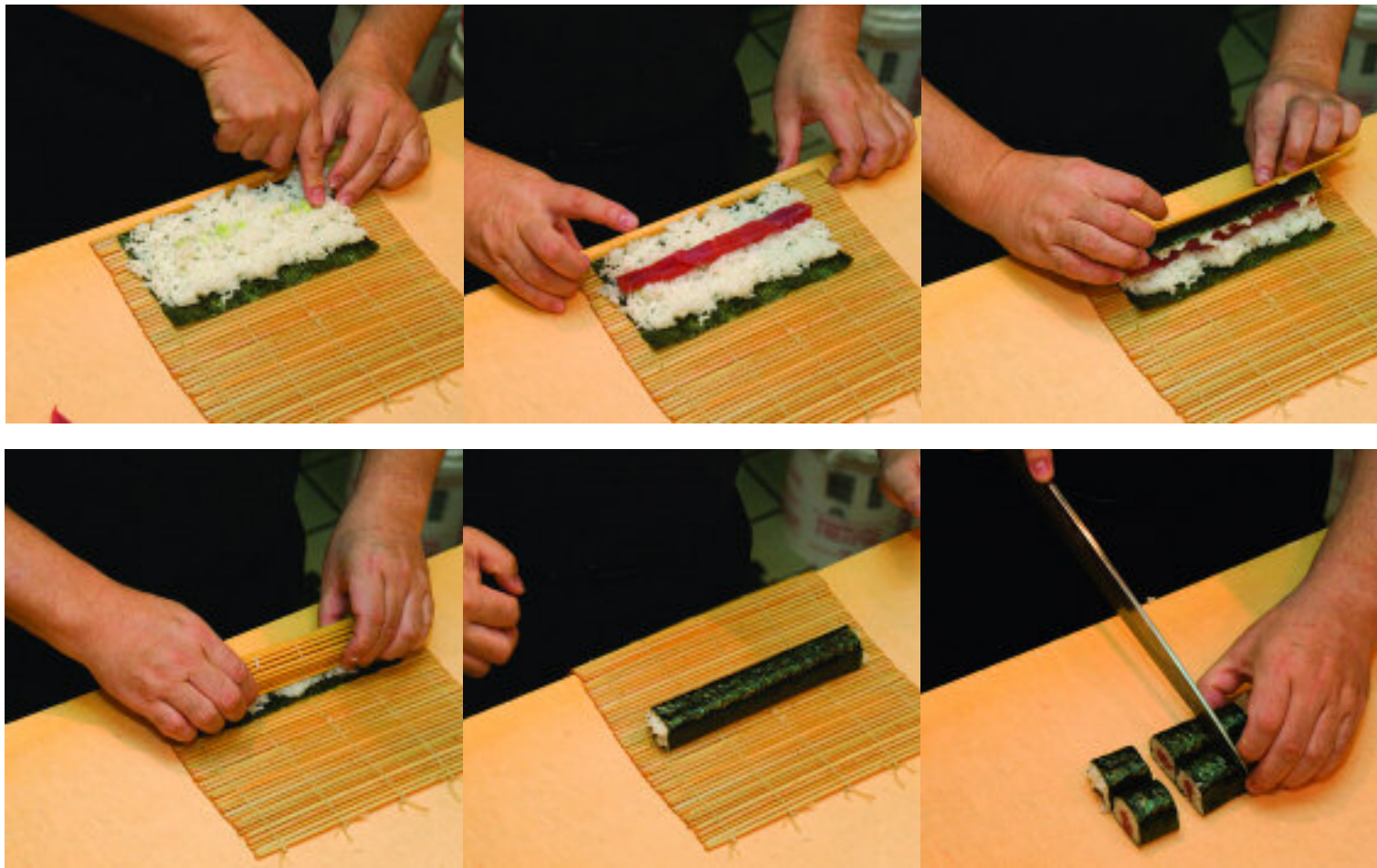
WRITER JENNIFER CHANDLER PHOTOGRAPHER HAL JAFFE

"Everyone tends to think that sushi is impossible to make at home," explains Ishii, who also regularly teaches a sushi workshop at the Viking Cooking School. "Preparing sushi at home can be so easy. You just need the right rice and good ingredients."

Ishii further comments that almost any ingredient you can find at your local grocery will work in sushi. Just follow your imagination and your taste buds.

In the produce department, look for fresh vegetables and fruits such as avocados, cucumbers, zucchinis, radishes, green onions and even mangos and apples. At the seafood counter, pick up sushi-grade tuna or salmon, your favorite shellfish (which, by the way, you must cook before serving) or even smoked salmon and imitation crab. Thinking beyond raw fish, BBQ shoulder, seared tenderloin or even spiced duck make great sushi ingredients.

For the rice, Ishii recommends buying California sushi rice, a short-grain rice. "To always have the perfect rice, be sure to wash the rice three or four times before cooking and use a rice cooker," advises Ishii. A rice cooker is a handy countertop appliance that uses indirect heat to make a perfect batch of rice every time.



SAKE

The perfect complement to sushi, sake is a Japanese wine that is made from the fermentation of polished rice. The flavor tends to be crisp and dry with a hint of fruitiness.

In Japan, sake is served cold, warm or hot, depending on the preference of the drinker, the quality of the sake and the season.

Typically, hot sake is consumed in winter and cold sake is consumed in summer. As heating serves to mask the undesirable flavors of lower-quality sake, it is said that the practice became popular during World War II to mask the rough flavor of low-quality sake resulting from scarcity of quality ingredients.

A high-quality sake must be refrigerated and is best served either chilled or at room temperature.

When serving sake at your home, consider using a traditional Japanese cup such as an *ochoko* (the small cup used at Sekisui) or a *masu* (wooden box-like cup).

In addition to rice, rice vinegar, soy sauce, wasabi and pickled ginger are necessities for serving sushi. “It all goes back to the history of sushi in Japan,” explains Ishii. “Sushi was invented in the 17th century in Edo (now known as Tokyo). At that time, there was no refrigeration, so the vinegar, soy sauce and wasabi were used to kill any bacteria that might be in the raw fish.” The pickled ginger is used to clean the palate between different types of sushi.

Once you have chosen your sushi ingredients, making *nigiri* (fish on top of rice with a touch of wasabi) or *maki* (sushi rolls) is easy to do.

For maki, Ishii recommends using a bamboo mat to form the rolls. “Bamboo is traditionally used in Japan because it resists bacteria,” adds Ishii. Ishii also recommends covering the mat with plastic wrap when making rolls where the rice is on the outside, such as California Rolls, to prevent sticking.

SUSHI PARTY MENU IDEAS

Here are a few popular Maki Sushi Rolls and their ingredients to help plan your grocery list.

Tekka: sushi-grade tuna

Alaskan: king crab, mayo, smelt roe and smoked salmon on top

California: avocado, crab and cucumber

Boston: scallion, crab and salmon

New York: apple, avocado and salmon

Philadelphia: smoked salmon, cream cheese and cucumber

Texas: beef and cucumber

Sekisui: tempura shrimp, cucumber and mayo

Spider: fried softshell crab, cucumber and carrot

When working with the rice for either nigiri or maki, it is important to keep your hands moist. But be careful; too much water and the rice will fall off, or too little water and the rice will be sticky. "I keep a small bowl of water by my cutting board when making sushi," explains Ishii. "The key is to use only the tops of your fingers, not your whole hand."

Ishii and his team of sushi chefs make preparing sushi look like a breeze, but I was concerned it would take me all day to make enough sushi to feed a group of friends. Then Ishii shares a Japanese secret with me: "If you are having a big group of people over, it is hard for anyone to make a party plate that is both pretty and big enough. In Japan, we set out a buffet of the seaweed, rice, toppings, wasabi and ginger and let people make their own *temaki* (hand rolls)."

"What an ingenious idea," I thought. His suggestion was the perfect way to throw a fun dinner party where my guests did the work. As a side benefit, it would be fun to see what concoctions my friends created with the ingredients on hand.

So the next week, I did just as he suggested and got a group of girlfriends together.

It was the perfect dinner party...good food, good friends and lots of laughter. For your next soiree, I highly recommend a sushi theme. ●

