

How *Sushi* Became Popular in Italy

The Role of Producers and Consumers

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Abstract The diffusion of *sushi* in Italy is linked to the globalisation of *sushi* chefs and to the globalisation of fish markets that allows people to buy every kind of fish they need, without thinking about the damages they could provoke. The consumption of *sushi* underlines also the diffusion of Japanese cultural elements and the fascination for Japanese culture in Italy. In general, *sushi* is not only linked to economic strategies adopted by chefs and restaurant managers, but also to the diffusion in Italy of other Japanese cultural elements.

Keywords Sushi. Italy. Globalisation. Culture. Restaurants. Culture. Japan. Consumption.

As Nützenadel and Trentmann (2008) wrote, food and globalisation are inseparable. Food plays an important role in the creation of national and local identities and it is often the cause of political contention, wars and protest. Nevertheless, there are few articles about global effects linked to food consumption and distribution, subjecting them to other factors such as financial markets, politics and migration. Human beings can survive without money, politicians, cars and other commodities, but they cannot get far without food. Scholars have focused their attention on the diffusion of restaurant chains such as KFC or McDonald's as they are linked to the globalisation process, but less attention has been paid to food and its creators. Glo-

balisation is more than having an IKEA or a KFC in your town (Kimura, Belk 2005, 325). Many scholars have only written about the production of food regarding “McDonaldisation” (such as Ritzer 1993), but few of them have focused on globalisation through food consumption (Nützenadel, Trentmann 2008; Ritzer 2010). Since food is about survival, it allows us to understand the social norms and the identity of groups of individuals. Saying that ‘we are what we eat’ is not only linked to a chemical-biological aspect of food consumption, but it also outlines that our society is deeply influenced by its own diet. Food in fact requires storage, utensils, space, recipes and communication. Food is also a social status marker; with regards not only to Michelin stars in modern restaurants, but also to the consumption of foreign products in the past, especially during the Age of European colonial empires which began in 1493.

The creation of the first colony in the New World, the modern Haiti, in which the consumption of Europeans foods was “a common practice amongst those social groups who were keen to acquire higher status” (Nützenadel, Trentmann 2008, 11). Food is also a national identity marker: after the War of Independence (1775-83), American people refused to drink tea like British people, replacing it with coffee (Nützenadel, Trentmann 2008). Thus, “food is about culture and culture is not an end in itself”, but a means to an end (Griswold 2008). As Griswold (2008) argued quoting Arnold and Swift, culture can be compared to the work of spiders and bees. If culture moves as do spiders, who work for themselves making webs only to catch their own meals, it cannot create communication between people. As bees allow people to make candles from their wax and sweet from their honey, food allows people to communicate, to develop knowledge and to spread science and technology. In this way it creates a link between culture and society. Food in fact is not to be seen as a mere commodity but as a symbol which tells a story about its creator and its origin. Only with its history can food (and commodities in general) obtain a value and be considered from a different point of view not linked to the economy or finance. Therefore, the meaning and the value of food lie in its own history and the value related to the consumption of the same food is different from place to place. During the War of Independence, coffee was considered a drink for slaves since it was produced mainly in Brazil and drunk by people working on the coffee plantation.

Let’s think again about the War of Independence in America and the destruction of tea thrown into the Boston harbour during the ‘Boston tea party’ in 1773. Why tea and not something else? Tea was the symbol of the British Empire which had colonised India, Sri Lanka and other territories, and which was characterised by tea plantations and the consumption of tea. The consumption of this beverage was a status symbol linked to the supremacy of Great Britain as a colonial power.

For this reason, destroying a load of tea meant refusing that supremacy, and after the end of the War of Independence, tea was then substituted in the USA by coffee, a beverage drunk by slaves in plantations, to symbolise the birth of a free country without control of the British Empire. The global system offers us a lot of products linked to other countries. Those products can be abstract such as holidays, ideas, and habits, and concrete such as clothes, vehicles and food. For these reasons, some scholars argue that globalisation is a phenomenon as old as humanity itself. Its birth lies with the first migration of humans from Africa and the invention of agriculture (Kiple 2007) but it was only in the period between fifteenth and seventeenth century A.D. that this phenomenon arrived to join other parts of the world. Indeed, till that period a lot of cultural and economic movements such as Hellenism, Christianity and Capitalism were born. Nevertheless, these movements only influenced a few parts of the known world. The diffusion of globalised food and, consequently, the increment of restaurants and shops, marketing, machinery, knowledge and tools linked to that product are a part of globalisation. Between 1970 and 1990 *sushi* arrived in the metropolitan centres such as London and Amsterdam (Cwiertka 2000), in high level Japanese restaurants and very expensive hotels attended by businessmen and Japanese tourists. Since it was considered a dish of *haute* Japanese *cuisine*, it was very expensive (Ming, Miho 2001). The creation of *sushi*-bars and low-cost *sushi* accelerated the diffusion in other countries such as the USA and Europe, *sushi* increased as a business.

Restaurants in Italy seemed to be forced to modify their menu with ingredients coming from Eastern traditions, and in particular from Japan. Ethnic restaurants such as Chinese restaurants, for this reason, are now inserting typical Japanese dishes such as *sushi* into their menu. For these reasons the effects of globalisation can be seen from the point of view of the 'original', created by the fusion between the 'exotic' with the 'familiar' (Brannen 1992). In fact, one of the main reasons for the quick diffusions of *Californiamaki* is the adaptability of new ingredients and new tastes. *Sushi* can be seen as proof that globalisation is not just a process linked to the diffusion of Western Euro-American products and values. Furthermore, the globalisation of *sushi* also represents the globalisation of other sectors linked to this product. For example, the fish market, where more and more fish such as red tuna are now sold (Bestor 2000). and the job market, where more and more *sushi* chefs are required. Nowadays, people eat and make *sushi*, increasing its success and popularity alongside *haute cuisine* and popular foods. In fact, the Great Recession of 2008 which affected *haute cuisine* restaurants in Italy, seems to have been one of the key factors of *sushi* as a healthy low-cost food. Supermarkets also started to create little corners for *sushi* and sell ingredients in order to permit customers to create *sushi* by them-

selves at home. Japanese rice, *nori* seaweed, rice vinegar and *wasabi* appear next to the pasta and tomato sauces, which are the base of the Mediterranean diet. Then, we can say that *sushi* has spread to a lot of sectors linked to its own business which originated in Japan to Italy, changing the appearance of our cities, our diet, the way of making healthy low-cost food, the idea of making something popular which originally belonged to a limited group. Nevertheless, with the exception of the works of Cwiertka (2005), Bestor (2000) and Milligan (2006), few literary works have focused on the diffusion of Japanese food, and *sushi* in particular, in Europe and few scholars have focused their attention on the spread of *sushi* in a country such as Italy. Scholars such as Cwiertka have focused their studies on Northern European cities such as London and Amsterdam but few literary works have explored the diffusion of *sushi* in Southern Europe. Then these studies could be too general, because the analysis of big cities cannot reflect the situation of other geographical places inside the same country (Milligan 2005, 3). *Sushi* can be seen as a cultural object, *sushi* chefs as cultural producers, *sushi* restaurants as specific social worlds and a consumer as someone who receives that cultural object. These four elements are the base of Griswold (2008) so called “cultural diamond” from which it is possible to make an analysis of a culture through a practical approach. For ‘*sushi* restaurants’, I don’t only mean restaurants which only offer *sushi*, but also other kinds of restaurants which have inserted *sushi* in their menus. In particular, the differences in terms of price, value, customers and staff between an Italian restaurant which offers *sushi*, a *kaitenzushi* restaurant, a Japanese cuisine dedicated restaurant and a new category of restaurant recently created in Italy, called *Wok-sushi*, will be analysed. According to an article which appeared in ANSA (Agenzia Nazionale di Stampa Associata) on October 5th 2012, there are 458 Japanese restaurants in Italy, representing 6.6% of all of the restaurants in the whole of Italy, of which about 50 are situated in Florence.¹

According to another article, written by Fabio Savelli in *Corriere della Sera* on October 3rd 2012, there are about 200 Japanese restaurants in Milan (Savelli 2012). The choice of the restaurants where interviews were conducted was motivated by the proximity to the place where I lived.² As the interviews have revealed, restaurants adopt different ways to promote and diffuse *sushi*. For the *Wok-sushi* restaurant, the diffusion is only based on the quantity of a product

¹ “Fipe sostiene vera ristorazione giapponese”, ANSA, October 5 2012. <https://tinyurl.com/2p95af2m>.

² The study is based on interviews made with the owners of three different *sushi* restaurants: an Italian restaurant whose menu includes *sushi*, a Chinese restaurant with *sushi* in its menu, a Japanese *sushi* restaurant.

and of its customers. In fact, the *Wok-sushi* restaurant menu offers 60 *sushi* recipes, available all year round, and thanks to the 'all you can eat' formula customers can eat everything for a cheaper price. The number of people the restaurant can host also suggests us how important the role of quantity is. The management has to guarantee a high standard of quality, and this is possible thanks to the open view kitchen through which customers can observe the chefs working within. The management of the selected Italian restaurant revealed how foreign cuisine could be promoted with local ingredients. The preparation of typical local food is also influenced by Japanese culinary techniques such as tempura style of frying. In this case, the purchase of local and high quality ingredients increases the price of the final product. Here, the quantity is not a basic element (as is shown also by the number of customers the restaurant can host). Quantity is replaced by quality and is guaranteed by the experienced staff in this field. The diffusion of *sushi* promoted by *kaitenzushi* is linked to the ability of the chef to understand the tastes of his customers. In fact, the chef of the *kaitenzushi* decided to offer new recipes alongside traditional ones in order to persuade even the most sceptical consumers to choose *sushi* not necessarily prepared with raw fish. The fact that *sushi* has become so successful through its adaptation to local tastes is typical of *kaitenzushi* which has based its strategy on a study of customer tastes. For most Japanese restaurants the quality of ingredients is a basic point, but the value of the final product is also influenced by the work, the knowledge and the ability of the chef: the *sushiman*. As the interviews have revealed, the presence of a *sushiman*, the hierarchical organisation within the kitchen of a Japanese *sushi* restaurant, and the values linked to his knives are particular features which only belong to Japanese restaurants. If we sum up the elements on which *sushi* restaurants promote the diffusion of *sushi*, we could quote quality, price and taste.

Every restaurant that took part to the interviews based its management on these elements in very different ways. Quality is the element which attracts customers even in expensive restaurants and it allows the creation of loyal customers. Strategies around price have promoted the diffusion of *sushi* in Italy amongst different types of customers from different social conditions and age.

Thanks to these differences in quality, price and taste that characterise these four types of restaurant, *sushi* was diffused in Italy. Even if chefs have tried to give us an image of their typical customer, it is very difficult to understand their characteristics. An important external factor which has influenced the strategy of the management of those restaurants is the economic crisis. The interviews revealed that, while this *Wok-sushi* restaurant focuses mainly on the number of customers, the Italian, Japanese and *kaitenzushi* restaurants rely on loyal customers who, despite the economic crisis, eat

out. According to these interviews, customers eat out less frequently than before the beginning of the economic crisis. Thus, the creation of a loyal customer is an important factor which permits *sushi* to be diffused. From this interview we can understand that the *Wok-sushi* restaurant, thanks to its low-price menu, has encouraged people to approach *sushi* by substituting the original role of *kaitenzushi* in Japan. These interviews have shown that three of the four chefs have attended specialised courses in *sushi*, while only two of them have obtained a specialised diploma. Experience as an apprentice in a restaurant is preferred to school courses, and no law obligates a *sushi* chef to have these kinds of certifications. The differences amongst these kinds of restaurants can suggest that even if all of them prepare *sushi*, this product is not the same in each place. The differences amongst the chefs has helped the diffusion of *sushi* in both big cities and small towns. From the interviews carried out it was difficult to understand the frequency in which clients visited the restaurants. Through the analysis of the quantitative data, we can understand the general features and characteristics of *sushi* consumers and their preferences in order to understand in which way they contributed to the diffusion of *sushi* in Italy. In order to collect basic information to understand the characteristics of a medium *sushi* consumer, I created 19 questions. After that I created an account with username and password for a website, I inserted the questions into the program on the site and I shared the survey on my personal page in the social network (Facebook).³ Many consumers went to a *Wok-sushi* chain restaurant and Japanese restaurant, while few consumers ate *sushi* in an Italian restaurant which offered *sushi* on their menu. If we look at the interviews with the Italian restaurant management and the *Wok-sushi* chef, this trend is reflected in the choices of business strategies adopted by each management: the *Wok-sushi* restaurant focuses on quantity of customers by attracting them with low-cost food and the Italian restaurant manager focuses on local and quality ingredients with higher prices and fewer tables influenced by the type of customer. There is little difference in terms of percentage between consumers travelling from their town and people who eat *sushi* in their own town. This could be explained by the absence of those kinds of restaurants in particular urban areas but also by the larger choice that big cities offer in terms of price, competition and quality. What a customer needs in these restaurants is good fish quality as the survey has revealed. Another point of view is that the strategy of *Wok-sushi* restaurant in preparing low-cost *sushi* is not synonymous with bad quality and the presence of the open view kitchen could be a sort of guarantee for customers. Consumers in Italy go to *sushi* restaurants

³ The web site I used for this survey is <https://it.toluna.com/>.

with other people and few of them didn't eat raw fish. The use of the Internet has been important not only to understand how to prepare *sushi*, but also for the diffusion of other Japanese cultural elements such as *manga* or *anime*. Talking about other Japanese cultural elements, many participants had some knowledge of them: for example, a large percentage of the participants watched *anime* or read manga. On one hand it doesn't seem to have any correlation with *sushi* consumption because, as the answers to the opened questions suggested, not all *sushi* consumers have a wide knowledge of Japan or practice any of the activities the survey proposed. It could also present a *clichéd* image which doesn't reflect reality. There might or might not be a link in terms of cause and effect of *sushi* consumption and other elements and this is shown in the experiences furnished by the answers to the open questions. In fact, as some participants said, many of them were introduced to *sushi* by *manga* or *anime* in which characters ate *sushi*, but many of them approached it thanks to friends who invited them to eat it. What is important to notice is that the majority of the participants were aged between 18 and 35 years and they were influenced in their choices by price and fish quality. According to the answers to the open questions, *sushi* is a valid substitute to *pizza* or other kinds of Italian foods with low prices. It means that the diffusion amongst consumers has occurred in very different ways according to the experience of each individual, but it also means that this promoted the diffusion of this consumption amongst people offering a competitive price and serving fish of good quality at the same time. The results of the study suggests that the diffusion of *sushi* in Italy has derived from four elements: the presence of different kinds of restaurants which propose different products; these different restaurants having different business strategies which allow *sushi* to be presented in different menus with different prices; restaurants having the merit for having understood the interests of the consumers for *sushi*; and their different business strategies that were created to satisfy their customer's needs. At the same time the Great Recession has affected not only consumers but also chefs who adapted their strategies to the new contest. Even with the presence of low-cost *sushi* restaurants, the frequency with which consumers go out to eat *sushi* has declined and this is confirmed by the survey. What the study suggests is that the Great Recession has not stopped the consumption of *sushi*, but it has focused consumers' attention on their budget, changing their habits in terms of frequency of consumption. The study revealed that the diffusion of *sushi* amongst consumers is accompanied by the diffusion of other Japanese cultural elements such as *anime* and *manga* but, that does not mean that there is a correlation between the consumption of *sushi* and the interest for other Japanese cultural elements. Since Griswold (2008, 12) defined a cultural object "as shared significance embodied in form", the study

revealed that *sushi* could also be considered a cultural object. Behind the consumption of *sushi* there is its history, the work of chefs who permitted receivers (customers) to appreciate this food and there is the creation of particular place of consumption with the purpose to attract and to satisfy their own customers (Griswold 2013). The study showed that consumers aged between 18 and 35 represented 85% of participants surveyed, although we could find older people who ate *sushi*. This means that today, young consumers will be the older consumers of the future and the forecast is that the consumption of *sushi* will increase in the future. Answers to the survey showed that consumers consider *sushi* a valid alternative to other meals consumed outdoors and they linked values such as health to this dish and those elements seem to encourage people to go out and eat *sushi*.