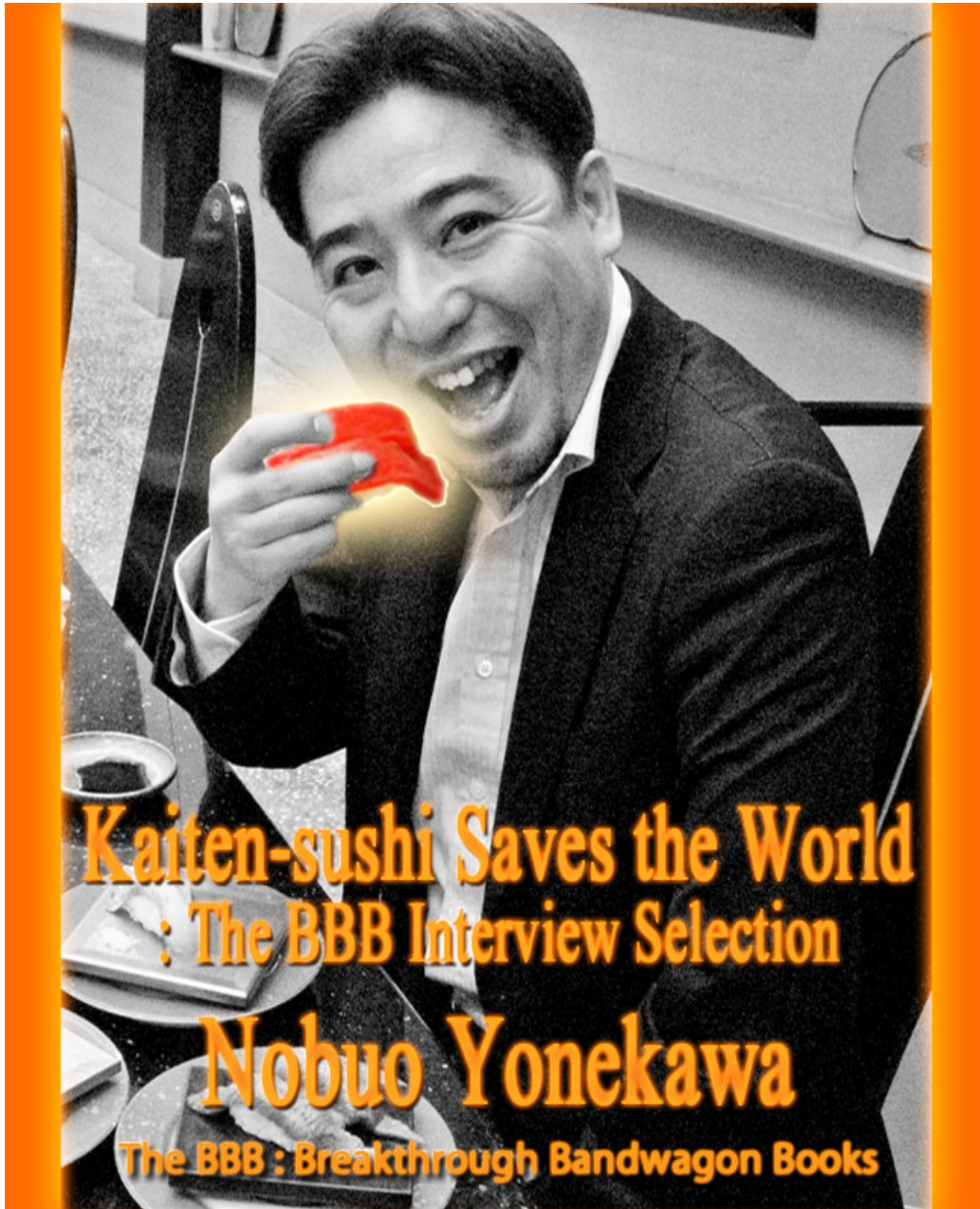


Kaiten-sushi Saves the World: The BBB Interview Selection



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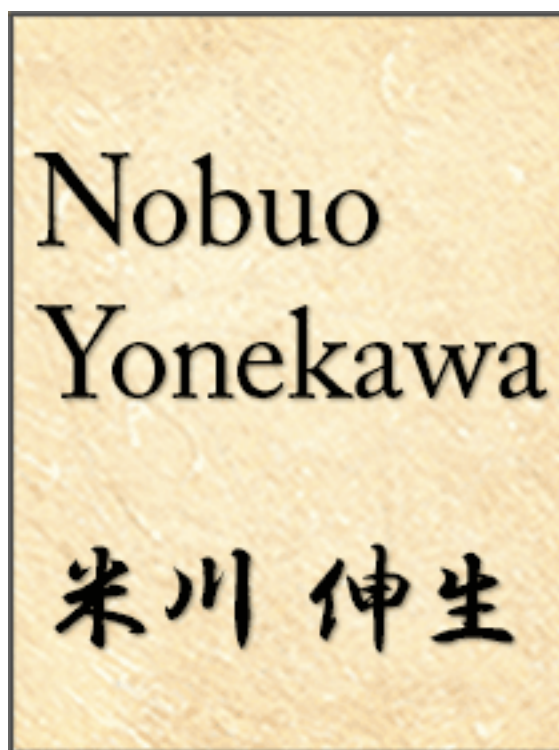
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The BBB website

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1. Nobuo Yonekawa and Kaiten-sushi

Nobuo Yonekawa works as a kaiten-sushi (conveyer-belt sushi) critic and consultant. In 1971, when he was only five years old, he became fascinated by revolving sushi. Since then, he has visited more than 4,000 kaiten-sushi restaurants in Japan and abroad and has collected over 350,000 sushi pictures. After graduating from a university, he worked for many television programs featuring kaiten-sushi, and his articles were published in magazines. In 2007, he won a kaiten-sushi championship on a TV program, *TV Champion 2*, earning the honorific title of “King of Kaiten-Sushi.” Moreover, he established the Japanese Kaiten-Sushi Society in 2010 and is launching the Gourmet Navigation website (kaiten-sushi version) in September 2013.



B (Editor of *The BBB*): So, Mr. Yonekawa, first of all, please introduce yourself to the readers of this interview from around the world.

Yonekawa: I have visited more than 4,000 kaiten-sushi restaurants in Japan and abroad. Every time I go abroad, I definitely visit a kaiten-sushi restaurant, observing and learning something from it. In recent years, I have expanded my consultations to include kaiten-sushi restaurants not only in Tokyo but also in other Japanese cities. So usually, for about one week every month, I visit another city.

B: Do you advise the management only at the opening of a kaiten-sushi restaurant?

Yonekawa: No, I counsel them both before and after the opening as an external adviser.

B: Specifically, what is your role in consulting them?

Yonekawa: I help them with any kind of planning to promote sales, such as creating a menu or a campaign as well as fostering human resources. Nowadays, a kaiten-sushi restaurant is not merely a place where sushi is served; it is a versatile restaurant. So creating a space where customers can dine comfortably is very important.

B: Do you adopt a different strategy for each area?

Yonekawa: Not for each area, but for each restaurant. I regard a kaiten-sushi restaurant as something like an amusement park. The conveyer belt reminds me of a merry-go-round! Various attractions are displayed on it. Just as we enjoy contemplating which attraction to experience next at an amusement park, we enjoy contemplating which sushi to eat and experience. Metaphorically speaking, some kaiten-sushi restaurants are huge amusement parks, like Disneyland or Universal Studios, but some are small, like a nearby park in your town. Each restaurant serves different types of sushi and provides a unique atmosphere. So, creating a restaurant that best suits its feature is very important.

B: So, all things considered, you are a kaiten-sushi *consultant* rather than just a kaiten-sushi *critic*.

Yonekawa: If the kaiten-sushi restaurants I counsel are successful, that would be my greatest achievement. Although in a larger sense, spreading kaiten-sushi is my top priority. I'd like to gain the public's attention by promoting kaiten-sushi through various media, thus increasing their desire to dine at kaiten-sushi restaurants. I think that's my most important job. In fact, my own company is called "The Cheering Party for Kaiten-Sushi." [Laughter]

B: You frequently appear on TV and radio in Japan, don't you, gradually spreading the word about kaiten-sushi?

Yonekawa: Kaiten-sushi is supported by a wide range of people, and it's fair to say that it is already one of the most popular cuisines in Japan. But strangely, as compared with other food service industries, there are few critics and little word of mouth on the Web. This is probably because many believe there is no major difference between kaiten-sushi restaurants. But in reality, I would like people to know that there is a wide variety of restaurants. In addition, I established the Japanese Kaiten-Sushi Society in 2010 to transmit information regarding kaiten-sushi to the rest of the world. However, it is unfortunate that the majority in the society choose to strengthen their domestic connections rather than international ones.

B: I heard you are preparing a Gourmet Navigation (kaiten-sushi version) website.

Yonekawa: I'm going to publish two new kaiten-sushi guidebooks at the end of September 2013. So, I'd like to launch the website simultaneously. On the website, I will offer information about kaiten-sushi around Japan.



2. Origin of Sushi

B: According to your book, sushi originated as *Nare-zushi* in ancient times.

Yonekawa: *Nare-zushi* was invented in Southeast Asia, in the fourth century B.C. It spread from Southeast Asia to China, and finally to Japan. In short, sushi did not originate in Japan. However, the sushi that people around world now eat has its roots in the Japanese sushi created in the late Edo period. *Nare-zushi* isn't eaten anymore, even in Southeast Asia. The only vestige of the ancient *Nare-zushi* is the Japanese *Funa-zushi*, a type of local cuisine. To make *Nare-zushi*, rice was used to ferment fish. However, only the fermented fish was eaten, not the rice. Originally, *Nare-zushi* was a method for preserving salted fish. So when people ate it, they discarded the rice and ate only the fish. In fact, *Nare-zushi* was more like fermented food than sushi. Finally, in the Nara period, people also started eating the rice. Someone probably thought, "That's wasteful!" and ate the *Nare-zushi* rice. Then, he realized that it was more delicious than he expected it to be. Eventually, also from the Nara period, people began wrapping the sushi in hemp and eating it as *Haya-zushi*. This marked the first instance in world history when people ate rice alongside fish.

B: Are *Funa-zushi* or *Saba-zushi*, which are currently popular in western Japan, the vestiges of *Haya-zushi*?

Yonekawa: To begin with, *Nare-zushi* originated as a tribute to the Court. The general public was prohibited from eating it. So its vestiges are found in western Japan, where the ancient Court was.

B: After that, was it introduced to Kyusyu (the westernmost end of Japan)? *Oshi-zushi* is popular in western Japan and the Kyusyu area, isn't it? Then, in the Edo period, a small sushi called *Edo-mae*, the origin of contemporary sushi, was invented. Is that right?

Yonekawa: Right. Contemporary sushi was invented in the Nara period—it was originally fermented or preserved food. *Oshi-zushi* in western Japan is prepared using the same method; however, it was fermented for a longer period. *Nare-zushi* developed into *Haya-zushi* and then into *Battera* (western Japan style sushi). The fermentation period for the fish steadily decreased, and finally, during the Edo period, people began eating fresh fish with rice. This is the contemporary sushi style, *Edo-mae*.



3. Kaiten-sushi or Kaiten-zushi?

B: We would like to ask your opinion about an English term for kaiten-sushi. It's referred to by various terms, such as "conveyer-belt sushi," "sushi-go-round," "rotary sushi," "sushi train," and "revolving sushi." Which, according to you, Mr. Yonekawa, is the most appropriate English term? Or do you prefer a name different from the ones mentioned?

Yonekawa: I don't like the name "conveyer-belt sushi" because it brings to mind a factory. And "rotary sushi" does not convey any cultural characteristic through the name. Furthermore, I actually know the restaurant in Australia that is called "Sushi Train." By way of elimination, though, I am only left with "sushi-go-round" or "revolving sushi." As for another name, perhaps "sushi circuit," for example, would be appropriate.

B: As per your knowledge, do people in foreign countries understand the term "kaiten-sushi"?

Yonekawa: Many restaurants use the term "kaiten-sushi." I hope that it eventually becomes a universally used name, like the Japanese word "karaoke."

B: If it does become the name used around the world, which do you prefer, "kaiten-sushi" or "kaiten-zushi"?

Yonekawa: "Kaiten-sushi," of course. People might not understand that "zushi" and "sushi" mean the same thing. (In Japanese, when the word "sushi" is used with another word, its pronunciation tends to change to "zushi.")



4. Difference between Sushi and Kaiten-sushi

B: To begin with, non-Japanese people might not understand the difference between kaiten-sushi and traditional (non-revolving) sushi. The main feature of kaiten-sushi is that it is placed on a conveyer belt. In addition, traditional sushi restaurants select their customers and treat them well, whereas kaiten-sushi restaurants accept all customers. Moreover, while sushi restaurants sometimes charge exorbitant prices, kaiten-sushi restaurants adopt a transparent pricing system. Also, at kaiten-sushi restaurants, sushi is prepared by not only sushi chefs but also sushi robots.

Yonekawa: In addition, at high-end sushi restaurants, we cannot choose the sushi; we eat only the sushi served by the sushi chefs. But at a kaiten-sushi restaurant, we can control our eating experience and choose the sushi we wish to eat. Kaiten-sushi is regarded as a type of sushi restaurant. In fact, it is a completely different culture from traditional sushi restaurants. People once valued sushi more than kaiten-sushi, but now things have changed. Especially customers from abroad, who might not know how to order sushi at a sushi restaurant, can enjoy any type of sushi at a kaiten-sushi restaurant even if they don't understand any Japanese.

B: As the renowned King of Kaiten-Sushi, Mr. Yonekawa, what do you think about traditional (non-revolving) sushi?

Yonekawa: Actually, on my day off, I visit a sushi restaurant and just enjoy eating sushi and drinking *sake*. [Laughter] While I visit kaiten-sushi restaurants to discover something new and important, I visit traditional sushi restaurants to relax and heal myself. The sushi chefs' great techniques always inspire me. I learn something from a sushi restaurant and pass it on to a kaiten-sushi restaurant and vice versa. I really hope that both sushi and kaiten-sushi continue to develop.

B: How can sushi and kaiten-sushi share their roles?

Yonekawa: With regard to sushi, traditional techniques and methods of treating food are really amazing. Ideally, kaiten-sushi chefs should learn from sushi chefs and, at the same time, develop a familiarity that everybody can connect with.

B: If a foreigner inquires about the difference between sushi and kaiten-sushi, how do you respond?

Yonekawa: I tell them, "You should know that there are various types of sushi restaurants. For example, at a very famous *Edo-mae* restaurant, Sukiyabashi Jiro, customers cannot drink *sake* unless they are regular patrons. You might have to pay 30,000 yen for just 30 minutes at the restaurant.

B: Some people definitely need to be aware of this.

Yonekawa: Sukiyabashi Jiro is a *Michelin Guide* two-star restaurant, so many foreigners should visit it. But they will be surprised that they cannot drink *sake* there. Even if you order *sake*, the sushi chefs won't serve it.

B: Traditional sushi restaurants are enigmatic and intimidating, right?

Yonekawa: At a sushi restaurant, the master sushi chef has so much authority that customers are forced to follow his rules. It is a strange, unique space where customers' requests are completely rejected.



5. Memory of Kaiten-sushi

B: Please tell us about your first experience of kaiten-sushi?

Yonekawa: I was five years old when I first visited a kaiten-sushi restaurant. My grandmother lived in Ikebukuro (a major area in Tokyo), where a new kaiten-sushi restaurant had opened.

B: Back in 1971, when you were five years old, I guess a kaiten-sushi restaurant must have been new to people.

Yonekawa: In eastern Japan, the first kaiten-sushi restaurant had already opened in Saitama Prefecture. Then, the second or third one opened in Ikebukuro. When I first visited it with my grandma, I found it really amazing. Then, each time I visited her, I went to the restaurant—Genroku-zushi. I loved it. Later, other branches of Genroku-zushi opened in Gotanda and Okachimachi, among other places. When I ate out with my family as a child, I always had either a kid's lunch at a restaurant in a department store or kaiten-sushi at Genroku-zushi. The ratio of meals in a department store to Genroku-zushi was probably three to seven. My memories of eating out as a child only include a department store or Genroku-zushi. I never went to any other type of restaurant.

B: Back then, there weren't many family restaurants, were there?

Yonekawa: Yeah, they were rare. They began spreading only in the 1970s.

B: But kaiten-sushi restaurants were already established.

Yonekawa: They were invented in 1958. But at the Osaka Expo in 1970, kaiten-sushi acquired nationwide fame, and a restaurant opened in Tokyo in 1971.

B: Do you remember what the first kaiten-sushi restaurant you visited was like?

Yonekawa: It was very cutting edge and was truly surprising to a child like me. The revolving sushi made the place seem like a dream land for a five-year-old boy. [Laughter] Back then, there was a tube above the counter from which hot green tea flowed. The tube was a little high for children, so I often came close to burning myself. Now customers add green tea powder into their cups and pour hot water from the tap, but back then, green tea itself flowed out of a tube. So, sometimes the tea was too thick, sometimes too thin.

B: Do you recall any specific episode from that time?

Yonekawa: In those days, sushi chefs were really ill-tempered. When I went there on a weekend, the chefs prepared sushi while listening to a radio program on horseracing, reading racing forms, and even smoking. One day, several dishes were piled up around the sushi lane, preventing customers from seeing inside. This remained unaddressed for a long time. I later discovered that the pile of dishes was meant to hide the unwelcoming chefs from customers. It also helped the chefs in that they could concentrate on preparing sushi without being distracted by customers. When I was a child, kaiten-sushi was really popular among office workers and generated significantly larger sales than it does today. Chefs were so busy that they worked like machines to handle all the orders.

B: How old were you when you experienced all this?

Yonekawa: Probably from the time I was about 10 years old (1976) to when I was about 22 (1988).

B: I feel as if you were destined to continuously visit kaiten-sushi restaurants from the time you were five.

Yonekawa: When I was in fifth grade, my family moved to Gotanda. At the same time, Genroku-zushi opened there. Before that, I could go to the restaurant only when I visited my grandma. But I could enjoy kaiten-sushi more frequently in Gotanda. I think this new situation greatly influenced me.

B: How frequently did you go to Genroku-zushi?

Yonekawa: Whenever I visited my grandma—once a month. In Gotanda, I went once a week, because it was close to my house.

B: Back then, was Genroku-zushi already popular among families?

Yonekawa: Even if chefs were ill-tempered, many families went there, because revolving sushi was a wonderful system, almost like a dream. I started living independently when I was 20, and I've moved nine times so far. All the places I've lived at have been close to a kaiten-sushi restaurant.

B: Did you intentionally choose such places?

Yonekawa: Of course. I used to love drinking beer and reading comics at a kaiten-sushi restaurant. I would take my favorite comic, drink *sake*, and eat crab salad. Back then, kaiten-sushi restaurants were not as popular as they are today, so nobody blamed me for lingering. Reading comics and drinking *sake* used to be my favorite form of relaxation.



6. As a writer for TV and magazines

Yonekawa: When I went to university, I had a lot of free time, and I occasionally drove across the nation—twice a year, during the spring and summer holidays. Once, I drove to Tohoku and Hokkaido; another time, I drove to central Japan; the next time, to Kyusyu; and so on. These driving tours really enhanced my knowledge about kaiten-sushi across Japan. I had already written an article for a men's magazine when I was in high school. At the time, articles addressed the current trends among high school students. I, however, wanted to be a literary novelist. [Laughter] At the university, I held a part-time job in a famous TV writer's office, and after graduation, I too became a writer for TV and magazines. The kaiten-sushi boom began in about 1992. Someone at the TV station asked me, "Hey, Yonekawa. You're familiar with kaiten-sushi, right?" I replied, "Yes, sir. I think I know it very well." He continued, "Okay. Come up with some ideas for TV programs featuring kaiten-sushi." After that, I was in charge of almost all kaiten-sushi TV programs. Back then, the Internet was still in its initial stages, and the majority of gourmet information on the Web was regarding ramen (Chinese noodles). There was no information regarding sushi. So I had to personally visit kaiten-sushi restaurants. As I had always been a big fan of kaiten-sushi, I visited a wide range of kaiten-sushi restaurants. Eventually, I found myself amazingly knowledgeable about kaiten-sushi. [Laughter]

B: Which happened earlier, your becoming a TV writer or the kaiten-sushi boom?

Yonekawa: The kaiten-sushi boom came later. Kaiten-sushi suffered a sort of dark age. After the 1988 junior high school student murder case in Kabuki-cho, downtown areas, including discos, lost momentum, and kaiten-sushi was not popular at all. In addition, the Japanese economy was at its peak. In such a bubble economy, no one wanted to eat cheap kaiten-sushi because everybody was rich. At the time, Genroku-zushi had been the only kaiten-sushi restaurant chain for twenty years, and it had a patent for the "sushi lane." So, anyone who wished to manage a kaiten-sushi restaurant had to register for its franchise. Moreover, Genroku-zushi offered all its dishes at 100 yen, so people regarded kaiten-sushi as 100-yen sushi. Because of the low price, Genroku-zushi couldn't use expensive fish. People declared kaiten-sushi as "cheap and bad" and ignored it during the bubble economy. However, after about 1992, the number of gourmet kaiten-sushi restaurants began increasing. No one wanted to eat 100-yen sushi, but these restaurants started offering delicious 300- or 400-yen sushi dishes in the early 1990s, which drastically changed the image of kaiten-sushi situation. After this came the kaiten-sushi boom. It drew the interest of TV, and programs featuring kaiten-sushi were continuously aired. I was in charge of almost all of them. That's how kaiten-sushi made a comeback, leading to various booms—such as the creative sushi boom and roasted sushi boom. I have always been involved in such sushi-related work in the mass media. I used to work as a writer, but now I work as a promoter, because directors I worked with are now producers with more authority.

B: Come to think of it, Mr. Yonekawa, you have witnessed the entire history of kaiten-sushi. I even feel like the god of kaiten-sushi, or something great, favors you as the King of Kaiten-Sushi.

Yonekawa: I think the greatest thing for me has been being able to eat kaiten-sushi from across Japan for years.

B: Many people love eating various ramen, whereas people who love eating various kaiten-sushi are rare. Why?

Yonekawa: It's simply because no one considers there to be any difference between kaiten-sushi restaurants. However, they are not the same. Each kaiten-sushi restaurant has its own characteristics and each menu is completely different. To the general public, I want to say, "You can find great variety there!"



7. Future of Kaiten-sushi

B: Mr. Yonekawa, what direction do you think kaiten-sushi culture should take in the future?

Yonekawa: First of all, I think sushi should be more localized. In Brazil, there is Brazilian sushi. In the Czech Republic, there is Czech sushi. In Italy, there is Italian sushi. I want sushi to develop in this way. Meanwhile, to develop sushi locally, local people need a solid base in sushi. We recognize the taste of both eastern and western Japan. In short, localized sushi is best enjoyed by local people. For example, Mexicans wrap sushi in fruits with jalapeño sauce. In Belgium, tuna is dipped in black beer. In Switzerland, sushi is topped with blueberry sauce. Thus, in each area, the original sushi can harmonize with the local culture. I would like sushi to continue developing in this manner, connecting with various cultures around the world. To facilitate this, people across the world should realize that the foundation of sushi can be developed locally. So, I don't want the current Japanese kaiten-sushi to spread to the rest of the world. I hope sushi continues developing locally and Japanese kaiten-sushi simply becomes the foundation for such development.

B: You mean, even if it's called "kaiten-sushi," something completely different from the original kaiten-sushi can spread across the world?

Yonekawa: I accept that the name "kaiten-sushi" precedes sushi itself.

B: It seems exactly the same as the case of "karaoke."

Yonekawa: Basically, to establish a certain culture, it is crucial to link it with local culture. I look forward to seeing these links develop for kaiten-sushi. From a global perspective, sushi is a local culture. Nobody is bothered about it originating in Japan (the *Edo-mae* style). When Shizuoka Airport was inaugurated, the World Sushi Exhibition was held. I joined the event as a judge and was extremely surprised by the skills displayed by sushi chefs from Mexico and Europe. They offered their original sushi with sauces. Each country matched its sushi with a sauce, such as French or Italian sauce. The wonderful advantage of sushi is that it *can* be mixed with any culture.

B: In 100 years, there should be various kaiten-sushi around the world.

Yonekawa: I think that would be a good situation.

B: So, do you have a vision to develop Japanese kaiten-sushi?

Yonekawa: I want to tell people, "Move away from places where people just dine." Even if a restaurant offers delicious sushi, simply that would not be enough to draw people. Most important is the enjoyment that customers experience. Kaiten-sushi restaurants once competed against other similar restaurants. But now, they must demonstrate their originality through entertainment, in addition to competing in terms of prices with beef bowl restaurants and curry restaurants.

B: When consulting kaiten-sushi restaurants, what specific advice do you give them?

Yonekawa: For example, "Let's determine your restaurant's specialty." A specialty is an item that can be found only at a particular restaurant. Moreover, cleaning a tuna is the most famous entertainment at kaiten-sushi restaurants, but it is performed by just one chef. All the chefs should engage in some kind of performance. For example, when they get a new order, all the chefs can celebrate using musical instruments. This could be a group performance, similar to theatrical entertainment. I request them to create a place about which people say, "It's always an enjoyable experience at this restaurant."

B: Can you provide us with a successful example of this strategy?

Yonekawa: I helped a restaurant create an item on the menu named *Goku-mori* (meaning Ultimate Heap). This involves a chef pouring salmon roe into a dish, while the other chefs call out cheering words "Wassyoi!"

Wassyoi!” using whistles and drums. Such a thing can transform a restaurant into a place of entertainment, like an amusement park.

B: Wow, that’s really amusing! [Laughter]

Yonekawa: There used to be places where chefs only offered sushi. But now, I want them to create a theatrical entertainment. Besides, these days, there is another culture, called “kaiten-sushi for dating.” Mysteriously, when I visit a kaiten-sushi restaurant at around 8 P.M., 80% of the customers are couples, most of them university students. Currently, kaiten-sushi restaurants rank among the top five popular dating spots. Even I was surprised by this trend. For university students, kaiten-sushi restaurants are ideal because they are not expensive and make the girls happy. What a great date! [Laughter] This also means that the quality of kaiten-sushi as well as the restaurants has improved, enabling couples to enjoy their visits there.



8. Message to Readers around the World

B: Coming to the end of this interview, as a representative of Japanese kaiten-sushi, do you have any message for our readers?

Yonekawa: I learned one very important thing from kaiten-sushi: it can absorb everything, from the environment you grew up in to the culture you belong to, so that the best sushi for *you* can be found. Only kaiten-sushi can achieve this. Sushi based on local culture is kaiten-sushi, not traditional sushi, because kaiten-sushi is flexible, free, and universal. Furthermore, it is compatible with local food everywhere in the world. Kaiten-sushi can be fused with your culture, whatever it is. I would like you (readers) to know this. You can create or find your favorite sushi. For example, for Italians, it might be pizza sushi.

B: Mr. Yonekawa, why do you think kaiten-sushi obtained such great flexibility or freedom?

Yonekawa: Because kaiten-sushi can evolve only by entertaining customers. *Edo-mae* (traditional sushi) is a food that has inherited Japanese culture, in the same way as *Kabuki*, *Nob*, and *Kyogen* have. Kaiten-sushi is not high culture; it is simply a food that entertains people. In modern Japan, *Nob* and *Kyogen* are cultural offerings that only the rich can enjoy. The general public is not afforded this opportunity. Similarly, sushi restaurants were originally places that only the rich could visit. But kaiten-sushi restaurants attract the general public. Of course, traditional sushi, with its inherent traditional culture, is needed, but so is the other, kaiten-sushi, which attracts people.

B: Mr. Yonekawa, thank you so much for your valuable talk today.

Yonekawa: It is I who want to thank you.

(This interview was recorded at a kaiten-sushi restaurant in Tokyo on January 28th, 2013)



This interview was exclusively conducted as one of the made-in-Japan content belonging to The BBB: Breakthrough Bandwagon Books.
