

by Kate Palisay

What makes fish or seafood “good”?

There are so many ways to answer that question, and the responses you’ll come up with depend heavily on who you’re asking. By now we’ve reached a general consensus as far as sustainability goes, and that consensus is that we should be buying and eating seafood that is fished in a way that will protect the population of a given species for generations to come. The “right” way to be sustainable—stricter regulation of the fishing industry, raising seafood in contained habitats separate from wild populations, choosing to eat wild-caught but underfished species, designing genetically modified and so-called “Frankenfish” like AquaBounty’s lab-conceived salmon—is a constantly evolving debate. And we’ll likely be trying to find the right answers to the ethical questions of what “good” fish is for the foreseeable future, especially as climate change continues to disrupt every aspect of our ecosystem, from rising sea levels to increased water temperatures.

Most of us who consume fish on a regular basis in 2018 don’t eat seafood to live, or because it’s the most practical and readily available source of protein—we’re eating it because, simply put, it’s delicious. In American culture especially, we often treat fresh seafood as a delicacy—if you want “good” fish, you’ll have to spend good money, and if you make the unfortunate mistake of consuming “bad” fish, you’re destined for an unforgettable bout of food sickness. Whether a particular piece of fish is good or bad (or, more realistically, just kind of mediocre) comes down to its “quality”, which is determined by...what exactly?

If you knew that most fine sushi restaurants in the United States—restaurants where high-quality, flavorful raw fish is of central importance to the menu—import their fish from places like Japan and Europe, you might figure that the fish coming out of non-U.S. waters must be better than the same fish caught off our own coast. There must be something about the water, about the environment on the other side of the world that makes for a better-tasting fish. But that’s not why sushi chefs have a long history of outsourcing their seafood. In fact, there’s no discernable difference in so-called “quality” as long as that fish is still in the water—be it on Japan’s side of the Pacific, or Oregon’s. The differences in flavor, texture, and freshness are noticeable the moment the fish is caught and have long been a concern for American sushi chefs.

Yuji Haraguchi knows a lot about seafood, and, more specifically, the Japanese way of preparing it, making him the perfect person to explain those differences. He’s the owner of Osakana, a specialty fish market off the Graham Ave L stop, as well as nearby restaurants Okonomi and Okozushi. Translated, Osakana means “honor your fish,” a Japanese philosophy that Haraguchi imbues into all aspects of the shop and his practice. Before entering the restaurant business as a proprietor, he was working as a seafood distributor out of Boston for nearly a decade, where he saw firsthand just what American fish handlers were doing to corrupt their product.

“The biggest mind-changing experience for me was when I saw a fisherman in Boston bringing fish to the pier, and I saw him standing on top of a pile of live fish that were caught in a net,” he recalls. It’s an image Yuji will never forget, because it is one that is so diametrically opposed to every tenet of osakana.

So what exactly was that fisherman doing wrong? By putting his own body weight and pressure on top of the catch, he was pretty much amplifying everything that’s already terrible about commercial net fishing. In that net, there are hundreds of fish packed together tightly, causing them to die by suffocation. It’s a slow—and yes, pain- and fear-inducing—process that triggers the fish’s stress response to release cortisol into the bloodstream and stiffen the muscles. Cruelty implications aside, death by suffering can not only affect the taste and texture of your seafood—just as it does to meat and poultry when livestock are slaughtered factory farm style—but according to Yuji, it will actually accelerate deterioration in freshness of that fish, meaning it will go bad much sooner than if it had been properly butchered (by cutting the fish at its nerve).

While not all fishermen in the U.S. are literally standing on top of live seafood set to go to market, the handling of fish here—by all parties—has for a long time been rougher and more careless than in other parts of the world. Yuji works with a premier—someone who acts on his behalf when buying from the fishmongers at a central market like New York’s Fulton Fish Market—whose standards and expertise he trusts. It’s a relationship that has made it possible to source fish that is truly local, catches that come from the waters off the Eastern seaboard. In addition to selling those cuts in the market, he opened Okozushi as a sushi restaurant that serves local fish exclusively, a unique achievement and a venture he didn’t plan for.

“After two years [running Osakana], I learned how to make local fish sashimi good, and I thought we can now make that into a sushi restaurant.” The process for making local fish sashimi “good” is just that—a process. It mostly means taking extra steps and care when it comes to cutting and cleaning the fish, as well as remaining flexible to working with whatever catch the premier brings in that day. That openness is another attitude that few Americans seem prepared to embrace when it comes to the seafood they eat—shrimp, salmon, and canned tuna account for more than 56% of American seafood consumption, and that share jumps to 64% if you include tilapia. Not exactly the most diverse plates.

Yuji also practices the Japanese principal of mottainai, meaning “no waste,” and he wishes more Americans would realize what they’re missing out on when they throw away large parts of the fish that contain major flavor potential during preparation.

“In America, people trim the bones way too much,” he says. “If we talk about the whole fish, and what percent of that is the actual meat you consume, it’s around 50 or 60%. But the rest is guts, head, and bones, and there are ribs that are attached to the belly, and that can be so good when it’s cooked, because that helps hold the fat and moisture during cooking—it’s just more work to eat it. But it’s a very delicious part, and if you try to trim it, you lose so much fat and so much weight.”

When asked about how he believes we can shift attitudes and philosophy toward seafood in America, Yuji is adamant in his belief that change on every level is dependent on the consumer—fishermen, distributors, and all the other potential bad actors in the seafood industry lack the impetus to improve the current system without consumer pushback.

That’s part of why Yuji has devoted time and space at Osakana to classes that provide a mini-education in Japanese fish preparations that is both fun and practical. Knowledge is not only power, but confidence—the more comfortable you are in your skill level, the more likely you’ll be to take a risk by trying an unfamiliar catch at the fish counter.

Pressuring an entire industry to change practices that have been in place for years is hard, time-consuming work, and as individuals, we can’t always do all the right things, in all the right ways, all the time, for all our lives. The choices we make about what kinds of foods we buy and eat depend on our highly personal needs and circumstances—factors like what kind of dietary concerns or restrictions we have, how much money we make, the number of people there are to feed in our household, and hectic work schedules that limit time and flexibility when it comes to the meals we manage to squeeze in. That said, it’s up to each of us to find our own way to “honor our fish,” starting with an open mind. There’s a reason why the omakase—or even just a few pieces à la carte from the specials list—at a great sushi restaurant is always more incredible than ordering your go-to choice of fish as sashimi; whatever is being used in preparing a meal at the chef’s discretion is going to come from the best-tasting pieces of fish that day. You can—and you should—apply the same approach in your own kitchen. While it may be easiest to fall back on that always reliable salmon recipe, try going to the fish counter and finding out what’s fresh, local, and delicious before you settle on how you’re going to prepare it—let the fish shape your recipe, not the other way around. Talking with your local seafood purveyor is the best way to find out the exact origins of the fish you’re catching—ask for catches that come from close-by. One of Yuji’s favorite locally-caught species is the Bluefish, an oily fish that can be easily swapped in for recipes that call for mackerel.

Regarding fish, or just food in general, honoring what we eat is a philosophy we all stand to benefit from. It’s a step back meals driven by consumerism and impatience. Embracing the Japanese philosophies of osakana and mottainai are great first steps in building an American food culture that is both more sustainable and more delicious.

Shop Local

Grocery stores like Whole Foods and Union Market are convenient places to shop for your whole meal in one stop, but if you want to ensure that your fish seller is an expert in their product and can tell you exactly where it came from, check out one of these local fish markets around Brooklyn:

Fish Tales (Cobble Hill)

191-a, Court Street

A neighborhood store with a neighborhood vibe—top-rated customer service with fish sellers that are not only happy to advise you about your selections and preparations, but are willing to fulfill special requests on their next trip to Fulton Fish Market if you’re looking for something in particular.

Greenpoint Fish & Lobster Co. (Greenpoint)

114 Nassau Avenue

A Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch partner, their market in Greenpoint is also a petite (and popular) restaurant. Queens residents can find their second market location in LIC. If you’re an oyster fan, check out their upcoming classes in shucking.

Mermaid’s Garden (Prospect Heights)

644 Vanderbilt Avenue

Sustainability-focused market committed to supporting fishing communities both local and around the U.S.—like Sea To Table, but without the scandal. They offer a Fish Share program that you can join for weekly portions of fresh fish, with pick-up locations around Brooklyn.

Osakana (Williamsburg)

290 Graham Avenue

Yuji Haraguchi’s Japanese-style fish market offering a daily selection of wild, locally-caught seafood ready for use in both cooking and sushi preparations. Just as important as the market itself are the classes they offer, like “Sashimi at Home,” “Hands on Fish Butchery,” and “Hands On Japanese Noodle Making.”