A Fish Tale on a Macro Scale: How Sushi Has Changed Globalization (and the World)

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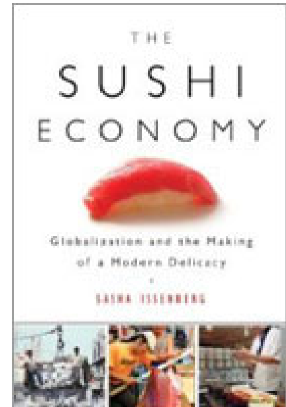

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In John Hughes' smash 1985 film, *The Breakfast Club,* five teenagers from different social cliques spend a Saturday together in detention. There is the jock, whose identity is wrapped up in athletic achievement. There is the nerd, who is book smart and socially awkward. There is the moody basket case who wears black and broods about death. There is the equally moody rebel, who smokes and swears and defies authority. And there is the princess, whose clothes are hot, whose manners are cold, and whose lunch speaks volumes about the rarified social atmosphere in which she moves. While the others bring sandwiches -- if they bring anything at all -- she brings sushi, elegantly arranged on a fragile Japanese dish. The others don't even recognize what she's eating, and when she explains what sushi is -- "rice, raw fish and seaweed" -- the rebel mocks her for her willingness to eat it.

Using food to trace the rigidly hierarchical world of American teen culture, the scene expects the audience to see sushi as fundamentally alien, exclusive and unappetizing. *The Breakfast Club* asserts that sushi-eating symbolizes a distasteful elitism that we all recognize, but that we do not ourselves create, maintain or like.

Such symbolism would never work today. In the short decades since Hughes' hit film, sushi has become a staple of American culture, a familiar, accessible and immensely desirable food that can be found in supermarket aisles and fast food outlets as well as high-end restaurants. Far from signaling the snobbery of those who eat it, sushi today belongs to the masses. Approximately 30 million Americans regularly eat sushi, including the Simpsons, the country's favorite animated family. And it isn't just Americans who have developed a passion for sushi. A taste for Japan's signature delicacy has also sprung up in the former Soviet Union, the Middle East and China.

A refined delicacy that is fast becoming a popular menu item around the world, sushi says something important about how wealth, taste and the market interact on an international scale. As Sasha Issenberg argues in *The Sushi Economy: Globalization and the Making of a Modern Delicacy,* sushi both reveals the "complex dynamics of globalization" and proves what many critics regard as a singular impossibility, that "a virtuous global commerce and food culture can exist."

Issenberg knows how counter-intuitive his claim is: After all, we tend to associate sushi with the hushed, ritualized elegance of Japanese culture, and we often regard the sushi bar as a welcome escape from the hard economic bustle of daily life. The immediate experience of eating sushi is, for many, one of transcendent sensual calm, at once richly evocative and profoundly removed from earthly things.

But for Issenberg, that's the point. In its striking beauty, sushi has the quality of art, and often seems to come from nowhere to exist purely as an irresistibly gorgeous, edible creation. Yet despite appearances, every piece of sushi has a distinctly modern, highly sophisticated economic history -- and in its journey from the sea to the market to the restaurant, from living fish to marketable good, it has much to tell us about how balanced, healthy world markets can be created and maintained. As such, Issenberg argues, "the new sushi economy has challenged the way we see the globe."

A Jet-age Commodity

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For Issenberg, the story of the sushi economy is the story of tuna. Originally reviled in Japan (so greasy it was only good for cat food), the bluefin was the beneficiary of a post-World War II shift in the Japanese diet toward heavier, fatty meats. The overwhelming popularity of the bluefin's buttery flesh meant that by the early 1970s, the Japanese had overfished their waters and were on the lookout for new sources of their favorite dish. The moment coincided with the rise of Japan Airlines (JAL), which was doing a tidy export business but needed to find something to fill its freight cabin on return flights. In an inspiration that would change the culinary profile of the planet, a JAL executive partnered with the fishermen of Prince Edward Island, Canada, who caught plenty of bluefin, but who had no use for it. Devising a means of gently freezing bluefin to preserve it during the long journey back to Japan, JAL inaugurated the era of global sushi.

Issenberg devotes considerable time to charting Japan's internal sushi economy, with special emphasis on Toyko's Tsukiji market, where fish imported from around the world are auctioned daily to bidders well versed in the arcane science of evaluating meat they have not tasted. At Tsukiji, we learn, a single bluefin regularly goes for $30,000 or more at auction; once all but worthless, bluefin has become one of the world's hottest and most wholesome commodities. Detailing how Tokyo's Narita International Airport has become -- paradoxically -- Japan's most important fishing harbor, Issenberg explains how even in Japan, sushi is a jet-age commodity. While sushi's roots go back hundreds of years to an era when fish was packed in rice to ferment and preserve it, the nigiri and maki that signify sushi today are only as old as the technological means of transporting highly perishable fish swiftly and efficiently from one end of the world to the other.

Originally devised to keep the Japanese in tuna, the transport system that evolved around bluefin has helped sushi spread far beyond Japan. Issenberg maps the rise of regional sushi cultures in California, Texas and middle America (Oklahoma, it seems, is one of sushi's newest hot spots). And in a chapter that holds special resonance for big-city sushi lovers, Issenberg follows world famous sushi chef Nobu from Japan to Peru to the U.S. to the Bahamas and beyond, examining how he first reinvented sushi in his own idiosyncratic image and then standardized his brand via his growing chain of restaurants.

Working backward from restaurants to suppliers, Issenberg studies the fishing economy of Gloucester, Mass., where centuries-old fishing traditions have met with modern management in the form of True World Foods, a distributor founded by the Moonies that is now one of North America's top suppliers of fresh sushi-grade fish. He also takes us to Port Lincoln, Australia, where innovative ranching enterprises have made local fishermen some of the richest people down under.

Through detailed, highly localized accounts of restaurants and chefs, fishermen and middlemen, markets and appetites, Issenberg casts sushi as an enormously positive example of globalization. An exceptionally unusual ethnic food that has kept its integrity while spreading its appeal, sushi melds the hunter-gatherer purity of long-line fishing; the sophistication of state-of-the-art transport; the hands-on, humane exchange of the auction; and the immense act of international trust undertaken by the millions who are willing to eat raw fish without knowing its origins or history. An index to a nation's worldliness, sushi expresses not only the sophistication of a country's taste, but also an equally sophisticated confidence in the procedural purity of an industry with great potential for corruption and adulteration.

Sushi thus offers a refreshing opportunity to rewrite the depressing story about globalization to which we have become accustomed in recent years. This story tends to see the expansion of global markets as coming at a steep cost. As we grow increasingly global in our preferences, processes and possessions, the story goes, we lose our ties to local variants of the same; globalization tends to be equated with standardization and diminishment, with a flattening out of vital cultural specificity and an exploitative disregard for traditions. As Thomas Friedman, perhaps our primary teller of this tale, has put it, globalization amounts to a struggle for balance between the Lexus and the olive tree, between the manufactured world of international commerce and traditional economies grounded in nature, custom and place. Too often, the story goes, as global markets expand, it is the ways, beliefs, languages, styles and cuisines of particular locales that are lost. As the Lexus sells, the olive tree dies.

Crab and Couscous, and Spam

Friedman says he was eating sushi when the idea for *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (1999) came to him,

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so it's only fitting that sushi would serve as the proving ground for Issenberg's attempt to offer a signal instance of globalization that balances the competing claims of world-scale commerce and cultural particularity. And, indeed, Issenberg is at his most fascinating when he outlines how sushi is at once preserved and reinvented in every new market it meets: Crab and avocado found their way into rolls in California, because that's what was available. In Brazil, California rolls are made with mango rather than avocado, again because that's what's available. In Singapore, one can find California rolls with both avocado and mango -- and one can also find curry rolls and halal sushi bars. Hawaiians retain a World War II-era taste for sushi made with Spam. In Marrakech, one can eat maki made with couscous.

Contradicting the scare stories proffered by other recent chroniclers of global foodways (think Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* and Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*), Issenberg serves up a singularly appealing picture of how our almost insatiable globalized hunger for new experiences, new things, new services -- and, crucially, new foods -- might be able to co-exist with our increasingly urgent desire to preserve local traditions and protect the environment. Combining a hunter-gatherer purity with a sophisticated international market organized around swift transit and state-of-the-art refrigeration, wealthy consumers and artisan chefs who continually reinvent sushi according to local tastes and ingredients, sushi seems to reconcile the conflict between the Lexus and the olive tree. Sushi extends the possibility that we might actually be able to have our globalization and eat it, too.

As Issenberg tells it, sushi sounds too good to be true -- and maybe it is. Toward the end of the book, Issenberg outlines how the growing global passion for sushi has led to massive overfishing of bluefin. As the market for bluefin expands, the bluefin population shrinks -- a circumstance that has led to rising prices, unenforceable quota systems and ruthless international piracy.

But the depletion of bluefin has also provoked a remarkable redefinition of delicacy that may prove Issenberg's thesis after all. As quality bluefin gets harder to find, Japanese sushi bars are looking for ways to replicate the gorgeous look and feel of tuna, with its bright red flesh and velvety texture -- and they are turning to two unlikely sources: horse meat and smoked venison. As strange and even unappetizing as that may sound, it's an innovation that is true to the spirit of modern sushi, which is anchored in a fish that was once regarded as inedible, and which makes a marketable virtue of local culinary traditions grounded in convenience. Raw horse is a delicacy in some parts of Japan. Known as basashi, it is served sashimi-style with soy and ginger -- and is even incorporated into ice cream. Perhaps the next chapter in the world's evolving sushi economy will include expanding its culinary boundaries beyond the sea.

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