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THE STORY OF SUSHI

**An Unlikely Saga
of Raw Fish and Rice**

Trevor Corson

In **THE STORY OF SUSHI** (HarperCollins trade paperback; September 2008; \$14.95; previously titled *The Zen of Fish*) journalist Trevor Corson takes readers on a fascinating, all-inclusive tour inside the world of a culinary delight that many gleefully devour but few have given much consideration: Sushi. Since its arrival in the United States via L.A.'s Little Tokyo in the 1960s, sushi has gone from being an exotic and adventurous novelty of foreign cuisine to being a ubiquitous offering in restaurants, supermarkets, and even sports arenas around the country. But what Americans know as sushi bears only a passing resemblance to its original Japanese incarnation. To tell the real story of sushi, Corson – who last conducted similar gastronomic fieldwork in his critically acclaimed *The Secret Life of Lobsters* – delves into both its humble beginnings in inland Southeast Asia and its present popularity around the world, with illuminating side trips into the cultivation, harvesting, and preparation of the some thirty plants and animals that go into its creation.

“The Japanese tradition of eating fresh raw fish has nothing to do with sushi,” Corson writes. “Sushi began as a way of preserving old fish, and street vendors turned it into a crude snack food.” The word itself simply refers to its essential ingredient – rice seasoned with vinegar. The modern version of the sushi bar did not evolve until after World War II, when health authorities of the American occupying forces made Tokyo street vendors move their operations indoors. Other surprises: soy sauce, a staple of any American sushi bar, is barely used in the true Japanese version, and what passes for wasabi in this country is really just a

manufactured imitation of the real thing. Many types of fish that are among the favorite ingredients of sushi in the U.S. were traditionally considered inferior, even inedible in Japan. Most sushi “rolls” derive from a homegrown California invention.

To frame this cultural history of sushi, Corson shadows a young woman sushi apprentice and her classmates during the twelve weeks of training at the California Sushi Academy in suburban Los Angeles. Whereas traditionally sushi chefs have undergone an apprenticeship of many years under the knowing eye of a master, the CSA is the brainchild of Toshi Sugiura, a self-taught chef and restaurateur who acquired star status at two celebrity beach hangouts during the 80s and 90s. The classes, which are held during the daytime off-hours in Toshi’s restaurant, are taught by Zoran Lekic, an Australian-born former body builder of Yugoslav descent. One of the chefs is a Danish actress and model, another is a former Japanese pop idol still occasionally recognized from his days with a mega-selling boy band.

In this highly unlikely setting, Kate Murray and the other students have three months to transform themselves into reputable sushi chefs. It proves a grueling process, involving the proper handling and preparation of an array of fish and other ingredients with speed and aesthetics. A sushi chef, Kate learns, has to be an entertainer as well as a cook. And an artist, too – “In a sense, making sushi and sashimi has much in common with creating a Zen garden,” Corson observes. Kate also faces an additional obstacle, trying to succeed in a profession that has long been considered the exclusive domain of men.

Fluent in Japanese, Corson had unprecedented access for a Western journalist into the world of sushi in both Japan and the United States. As he chronicles Kate’s whirlwind apprenticeship, he takes readers behind the scenes of sushi – to a Japanese fish market the size of forty football fields, to California rice fields and Oregon wasabi farms, into the biology of the sea creatures whose final destiny is to be transformed into *nigiri*, or hand-squeezed pieces of sushi. As he did so effectively in *The Secret Life of Lobsters*, Corson combines detailed science and top-notch journalistic investigation with a compelling, character-driven narrative, making **THE STORY OF SUSHI** a singular and surprising look at the little-known culture of a much-loved Japanese – and now American – phenomenon.

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