

# Umami

FALL ENTERTAINING, NUMBER 106, FALL 2018

## Women vs Tradition

Gender Inequality in the Sushi World

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At Umami, our mission is to spread awareness and appreciation for the vast world of Asian cuisine. We make it our goal to enlighten our readers on social issues throughout Asia to raise understanding of other cultures.

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# Women vs Tradition

## GENDER INEQUALITY *in the* SUSHI WORLD



Written By: Naomi Tomky

Photography Credit: Aubrie Legault

In Japan, discrimination against female sushi chefs is all but taken for granted. Like many other institutions, men claim superiority. Trevor Corson, author of *The Story of Sushi*, notes that the most common myth is that women's hands run too warm, heating the rice and harming the fish—it's the reason one 2003 Japanese book says outright that "sushi made by women is not as delicious." (In actual studies, women's hands have been shown to run cooler than men's).

In the U.S., it's unlikely that a chef would go on the record and admit to explicit bias like that. But many will not take on women as trainees. Like Stallworth, Kmitta, and Koo, few women set out to be sushi chefs, and the very few who do make it have largely fallen into it. Andy Matsuda, who opened the Sushi Chef Institute in Torrance, California, in 2002, points out that sushi discrimination is a problem not only for women: "Mexican and black Americans have a harder time too," he says. But "the window is open wider for men."

The restaurant industry on the whole has had problems with sexist discrimination and harassment, but the sushi bar puts the chef directly in front of the customer—an opening to be judged that doesn't exist for other chefs. Koo, who is of Korean heritage, and Stallworth, who feels her looks belie her African-American half, each say that appearing Japanese may have made customers more accepting. But they believe their gender has still made things more difficult. "I've had to work harder than my male counterparts," Koo says. Meanwhile, Soto, Kmitta's boss, once posted "An Open Letter to Bigot Diners" to his restaurant's blog, praising her work and lashing out at customers: "Should you refuse her fare based on her gender or race, you are an absolute fool."

Stallworth started a female-run Detroit sushi pop-up and catering business, *Geisha Girls*, last year. (The name is intentionally provocative: A geisha would never be a sushi chef, she says, but "they had to be skilled in all things—cooking, singing, and the art of hospitality.") She has eight women cooks lined

“Some people think it’s cool when they come in and see two women, and we’re turning out great sushi—it’s unusual in a great way.” – Koo



up to participate in her mentorship program, and hopes to raise money through GoFundMe to train 25. Koo similarly wants to use her restaurant to train the next generation of women sushi chefs. “I’ve had a lot of luck in my career,” Koo says, “but I also worked really hard.” She wants to make it easier for the next generation to find success “without the criticism, pushback, or flat-out discrimination,” but in the meantime, she sees hope in what she has achieved—and in some of the reactions. “I like that it’s remarkable. It’s something that I celebrate. Some people think it’s cool when they come in and see two women, and we’re turning out great sushi—it’s unusual in a great way.” As for everyone else, Kmitta says, the sushi speaks for itself. “We change minds one customer at a time.”

Chidui thinks that women have strengths that can work in their favor. “Women tend to have better communication skills, so that helps us really connect with our customers more and to create a warm atmosphere,” she said. “And since our hands are smaller, our rolls are slightly smaller. So they’re cuter and easier to eat.”

Even so, the all-female staff lineup feels like something of a gimmick. Nadeshiko Sushi is located in Akihabara, ground zero for Japan’s “otaku” or geek culture. The streets of the Tokyo neighborhood are lined with anime-fronted electronics stores, sex shops and maid cafes—a peculiarly Japanese institution where a young woman in a maid’s costume asks customers to meow when they want to order and draws ketchup hearts on

the food as it’s served. Customers must pay to have a photo taken with a maid of their choice. Curiosity seems to be the main draw at Nadeshiko Sushi. “I’ve never seen a women’s sushi bar before,” said Tetsu Fuji of Hiroshima, who said he was passing through Tokyo and wanted to check out the restaurant.

Another man at the bar that night, ruddy-faced Shintaro Horiyama, said that he thought the place was a bit like a sushi maid cafe. “Men will think that if the sushi is made by a pretty woman, it will taste better,” he said, reaching for another spicy tuna nigiri.

**IMAGES (FROM LEFT TO RIGHT):**

Sushi, Salmon Nigiri, Aubrie Legault, photo.