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## WHITE PEOPLE CAN'T SELL SUSHI: UNPACKING KOREAN INFLUENCE OVER SUSHI PRODUCTION IN NZ

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*When we change recipes, we alter histories and nuances, replacing them with others.*

Brenda Gay Plummer, 'Restaurant Citizens to the Barricades!'

### **Introduction**

Globalization and food have attracted considerable attention from both academic and vernacular media in recent years. Food-identity nexus, in particular, has been a focus of a number of studies (Oum, 2005; Yiakoumaki, 2006; Givon and Trostler, 2008; Karaosmanoglu, 2009, for example). Studies of migrants and their diasporic cultural influences (Smart, 2003; Mankekar, 2005; Hage, 1997, 2010, for example) have located their subjects within complex matrices of interpersonal and deterritorialized foodways. While food itself has attracted, and continues to attract significant media and academic attention, it is the relations between the movements of people and the food that they produce that is the focus of this study. We believe, like Phillips (2006), that we need to attend to 'how people are being mobilized in new ways through globalization processes and how they produce new meanings as they undertake their food-related practices' (46).

Food is an essential part of the human condition, and as the world's communications improve, and as people move more freely around the globe taking with them their food cultures, cities everywhere are experiencing culinary multiculturalism. Indeed restaurants have been described as participating in 'food tourism', what Plummer has referred to as the need to please consumers by offering the consumption of exotic foods outside their natal social and cultural contexts (Plummer, 2008: 24). As Turgeon and Pastinelli (2002) have suggested, ethnic restaurants become 'ethnosites', where consumption of ethnic food is equated with consumption of the otherness.

At the same time, however, the production and consumption of ethnic food in contemporary global cities cannot be understood purely as a matter of food tourism and consumption of otherness. As ethnic food gets firmly incorporated into the culinary landscape of urban cosmopolitan everyday life, it also becomes a sign of multicultural here and us, rather than that of foreign and exotic otherness. The signifier of otherness such as 'Italian pizza' or 'sushi of Japan' in itself is no guarantee that actual food and its production have much to do with its purported origin. To illustrate this, this paper will unpack the development of what we call 'Kiwi standard' sushi, which is neither authentic Japanese nor a simple hybrid between Japanese and New Zealand culinary influences.

In Auckland, New Zealand, the nation's largest and most culturally diverse city, something akin to 'food tourism' is available through a variety of ethnic or culturally-specific foods sold through restaurants, take-out stores, shopping mall eateries, in pubs and hotels, making Auckland a 'unique culinary crock-pot' (Auckland Museum, 9). A quick perusal of Auckland City's 2010 Yellow Pages business telephone book lists in its cuisine guide the following number of restaurants in the CBD: European (34), Chinese (32), Japanese<sup>1</sup> (31), Asian<sup>2</sup> (31), Italian (31), New Zealand (25), Indian (24), Thai (24), International (22).<sup>3</sup> This is in contrast to national listings that are much more Europeanized than Auckland's heavy Asian orientation.<sup>4</sup> The categories chosen by the editors of the phone book are interesting in that they reveal the changing nature of the CBD's cuisine map; the prevalence of 'Asian' restaurants reflects a significant cultural shift in the population base, and a concomitant shift in popular and desirable tastes.<sup>5</sup> It seems that customers have plenty of opportunities to take part in 'food tourism' in Auckland, particularly if they like 'Asian' food.<sup>6</sup>

The Yellow Pages lists each of these as authentic ethnic restaurants. And why should they not? They are, after all, selling ethnic food to mainstream society as representative of that culture. However, as the literature shows us, things are rarely as simple as they appear at first glance; cultural ownership, or claims to cultural ownership, of icons and symbols need to be unpacked to understand more about what it is that is being produced. James' work in Melbourne, Australia, for example, asks questions about how people from different backgrounds come together in a culturally pluralist setting (2001): her work on Italian and Islamic communities making hybrid products in Melbourne provides us with a sophisticated account of how two cultures engage in urban Australia to produce something that is a symbol of cultural accommodation and localization. The 'halal pizza' she described, she says 'characterizes cultural production in a multicultural space' (2).

Across the Tasman in Auckland, New Zealand, like Melbourne a multicultural space, the production of Japanese food, and sushi in particular, has a quite different set of connotations that move beyond the accommodation and localization of cuisines and

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- 1 Smaller sushi stands and take-out stores are not listed in this guide, and the 60 or so retailers in this category lie outside the formal 'ethnic' categories.
  - 2 Within the 'Asian' category are some Chinese, Indian and Thai listings, but mostly Korean, Japanese, Mongolian, and a range of fusion/cross-over restaurants.
  - 3 The number in brackets is the actual number of restaurants listed in this category. There are overlaps between Asian and Chinese though, and between New Zealand and European (*Yellow Pages*, 2010 edition).
  - 4 The national listings are: European (240), New Zealand (205), Asian (190), Indian (173), International (152), Chinese (150), Thai (131), Italian (112).
  - 5 See below for a breakdown of the immigration and cultural statistics of Auckland City in particular.
  - 6 For a history of restaurants and dining culture in New Zealand as a whole, see Perrin Roland's *Dining Out* (2010). David Veart's *First Catch your Weka* (2009) also examines the history New Zealand cooking through reading of recipe books. While they discuss international influences in New Zealand food culture, Korean-owned sushi restaurants are not mentioned in these works.

cultures. Most sushi is produced and sold by Koreans; hence there are effectively three specific cultural contexts in play in sushi's case: those of Japan, Korea, and New Zealand. The production of the sign of Japan is consciously undertaken by Koreans, and sushi is sold as 'Japanese' to customers in New Zealand, regardless of the makers' personal or cultural origins. While it is a form of cultural production in a multicultural space, there is little sense of the coming together of cultures in the product that is being sold.<sup>7</sup>

The new types of sushi being produced in New Zealand are clearly different in shape and substance from sushi in Japan, and from other 'international' sushi (that is, the California Rolls, Spider Rolls etc. first made popular in the United States). Sushi in Auckland's CBD is mostly *futomaki* (fat rolled sushi with a layer of *nori*, or dried seaweed) often filled with avocado and raw salmon or smoked chicken. The sushi flavour is sweet; it is densely rolled and heavy; and it is invariably served with extra *wasabi* and soy sauce. In Japan sushi pieces weigh from 17 grams to 22 grams. In Auckland, each piece weighs almost twice this amount. And it is popular; there are more than 90 stores and restaurants that stock this kind of sushi in the CBD alone.

Why has it become so popular? Why do Koreans choose to enter the sushi business in Auckland, having little or no experience in the industry before arriving? Given the cultural and historical tensions between Korea and Japan, how is the sign of Japan modified by expatriate Korean retailers? To engage these themes we look at sushi's translation, mutation, hybridization and standardization in the multi-cultural context of Auckland City.

In this study then we start with a brief history of sushi in Auckland, then narrow our focus to four Korean owned 'Japanese' restaurants that sell sushi in Auckland city (Sumo Sushi, Uni Sushi, Niwa, Genji). At the time of writing, there were nine Japanese-owned Japanese restaurants in the Auckland CBD selling sushi, and approximately 30 Japanese restaurants owned by non-Japanese, also selling sushi. There were approximately another 60 sushi specialist outlets, all owned by non-Japanese, often small take-out franchises. In Auckland's business precinct today, sushi is as readily available as sandwiches, 'filled rolls', meat pies, and chips, staple fare of the Kiwi office worker throughout the 1980s and 90s. There is a sushi boom occurring in Auckland today, and it is largely driven by Korean proprietors. It is important to locate this dominant group within appropriate historical context, and we do this in the following section.

### **History: building a new template for a 'Kiwi standard' sushi?**

The expatriate Japanese community in New Zealand, some 10,000 strong in 2009, has been historically serviced by a number of Japanese-owned Japanese restaurants, all of which have sushi on the menu. The sushi at these restaurants are comparatively expensive, and usually consist of more traditional rolled and handmade (*nigiri*) sushi.

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7 Although sometimes Korean elements such as *kim-chee* are available in sushi at different outlets, the name 'sushi' is retained and the branding as Japanese remains intact for the consumer.

Those Japanese-owned restaurants have become increasingly seen as upmarket, elitist, and very expensive, and today they occupy a very small, specialized niche in Auckland's popular food culture. However, the driving forces behind the current sushi boom in Auckland are sushi restaurants and outlets that are owned and run by Koreans; currently there are no Japanese-owned sushi specialist restaurants in Auckland.

To put Korean sushi in Auckland into historical context, we first need to acknowledge the role of St Pierre's Sushi of Japan and the templates they established that led to the emergence of what we refer to as the 'Kiwi standard' sushi. New Zealand's largest sushi producer, St Pierre's Sushi, is owned by a family of Greek immigrant fishermen and fishmongers.<sup>8</sup> The Katsoulis brothers' expansion of their St. Pierre's seafood wholesale and retail business into sushi was the earliest large-scale sushi enterprise, and started in the late 1980s. At the time it was a dismal failure. In the early 1990s, a friend who ran Cin Cin's, a well-known haute cuisine restaurant on Auckland's waterfront, suggested that they try the sushi again because they believed more people would eat it as it was becoming popular overseas. A white New Zealander chef from Cin Cin's came to make rolled sushi at a sushi stall in front of the downtown St Pierre's branch, but few Kiwis were interested in 'raw fish' on this occasion. When a Korean friend volunteered to wear a kimono (effectively masquerading as Japanese) and sell the sushi at the same stall, it was an instant success. Recognizing that they needed to market the product as 'Japanese', they hired Asian staff to operate the businesses to create the impression of the food being 'genuine' or 'authentic'. Nick Katsoulis, the older brother, says that this was a necessary step in being taken seriously by the public; in short, they gave the public what they wanted – 'Japanese' people selling 'Japanese' food (even if they were sometimes Korean). This approach swings around a simple principle – the general public can't differentiate between Asians, but they can differentiate between white people and Asians. And sushi is seen as 'Asian' and specifically 'Japanese'.

The Katsoulis brothers' business trades today on the use of 'authentic' and 'traditional' Japanese raw materials in its products. These products are made by ethnically Asian people (often Japanese on working holiday visas), and sold by ethnically Asian people (also often Japanese on working holiday visas). Images are crucial in marketing a culturally esoteric product, and the image of Japan was clearly crucial in establishing the foundations of the business. Business was so successful that the brothers' 10 original stores became 23, and they expanded into the sushi retailing business. Demand was so high that they expanded into corporate sales, catering, and supplying secondary resellers with their product. They have even opened a Sushi Academy, where all new, aspiring chefs for St Pierre's are required to take a six-week course on sushi making before working in the kitchens. They now employ around 300 workers, of whom about 100 are Japanese.

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8 It should be noted that the St Pierre's chain uses an interesting mix of cultural and linguistic cues to sell its products; that is, Greek owners using a French name for the business that sells Japanese food to New Zealanders. The fact that this is by far the biggest single retailer of sushi in New Zealand is also noteworthy – no pretend 'Japanese' or 'Asian' name!

The Katsoulis brothers experimented with the sushi form from the early 1990s, introducing new varieties to consumers by adding a new product every six weeks in their outlets. If these were popular they were kept, and a less popular line was dropped. Products included smoked chicken, chicken and avocado, smoked salmon, raw salmon and avocado, seaweed salad, shrimp salad, tinned tuna mix, crabmeat mix, deep fried prawns and mayo, and various forms of *inarizushi* (sushi rice in a sweetened soybean ‘packet’).<sup>9</sup> There was also a clear focus on rolled sushi, and fat rolled sushi in particular. However their staple sushi – the most popular – remain raw salmon and chicken and avocado (either smoked chicken or *teriyaki* chicken) rolls.

In terms of what constitutes the ‘Kiwi standard’ sushi, St Pierre-type sushi is archetypal. It is the model on which much of the Korean sushi in New Zealand is based, and is the model that consumers reproduce at home using sushi rolling kits. Unlike Japanese rolled sushi which comes in two forms, *hosomaki* (thin rolled, with a single filling) and *futomaki* (thick rolled, with multiple fillings), and unlike the California Roll, which is *uramaki* (reverse rolled with the *nori* on the inside with specific fillings), the ‘Kiwi standard’ sushi is *futomaki* in shape, but *hosomaki* in concept. That is, it is mostly fat rolled sushi with one or two main ingredients, usually including avocado. And it is very large, even compared to *futomaki* in Japan. It also always comes with *wasabi* – either on the roll, or in a small sealed take-away packet sold with the sushi, or indeed in both forms.<sup>10</sup>

### The Koreanization of Kiwi sushi: making the ‘Kiwi standard’

St Pierre’s success led to many other sushi restaurants opening to meet this relatively new demand. In the early 1990s sushi take-out stores began to appear throughout city and suburban shopping malls, in business districts, hospitality centres, and in entertainment centres around Auckland. Commonly run by Koreans, these stores produced relatively cheap, ‘value for money’ rolled sushi with a limited range of fillings, usually smoked salmon, avocado, and chicken. The rolled sushi was often larger than is commonly found in Japan, and the flavour of the sushi rice varied from store to store; some were sweet, some salty, some had sesame tints in the flavour. By the 2000s, the number of these sushi retailers had increased considerably, with many selling highly creative sushi made in a variety of styles, with interesting fillings. There were very large *onigiri* – triangle-shaped sushi with *nori* on the outside (but made with sushi rice), deep-fried spring rolls placed on *nigiri*, fruit sushi and so on. All were sold as ‘sushi’, with the ‘Japanese’ branding attached.

As some of the first of the new Asian sushi retailers, Koreans traded on the positive image associated with the signifier ‘Japan’, ironically developed by the Katsoulis

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9 It is important to note here that these ingredients are not used in Japan in ‘traditional’ sushi retailers.

10 While *wasabi* is sometimes added to *makizushi* in Japan, it is not common. In New Zealand, Japanese sushi chefs note that consumers eat a great deal more *wasabi* and soy sauce with their rolled sushi than is the norm in Japan (interviews 2009).



brothers, who were selling what they termed 'authentic' Japanese sushi. Selling sushi to ethnic Koreans, other Asians, as well as to Maori and Pakeha<sup>11</sup> in New Zealand (henceforth collectively referred to as 'Kiwis'), the size of their product, the perception that it was good value for money, tasty, and healthy drove market demand. One key person in the expansion of the Korean sushi business in Auckland was Roy Cho, who established the first sushi store in a large shopping mall in central Auckland. He was a pioneer in transforming the nature of the sushi business by introducing a fast-food model using standardized menus and ingredients, and applying a franchise marketing approach among the Korean sushi vendors. He also supplied training in sushi making, in preparing food, in meeting local health and safety requirements, and in anticipating markets. Through his long-term and successful involvement with the business, he personally influenced a number of Koreans to visit Auckland, and to become involved in the sushi industry (interview, 2009). Mr Cho's engagement with the industry, and the take-up rate of Koreans drawn to the industry has led to the situation today that up to 90 percent of all sushi businesses in Auckland are owned by Koreans (Keum, Lee, Katsoulis, interviews, 2009).

Korean retailers of sushi are aware of the familiarity and attraction of the signs of 'sushi' and 'Japan' among Kiwi consumers, and go so far as to employ Japanese or other Asian people to sell the product, and often make it, as the Katsoulis brothers did. This principle of selling sushi as 'Japanese' to Kiwis who are unable to distinguish one Asian ethnicity or culture from another underwrote the early Korean attempts to sell sushi in Auckland, and is still part of the strategy of such restaurants, as we will discuss in some detail later. The signifier of Japan is consistently used even though the actual sushi they sell are quite different from sushi in Japan. Partly influenced by international trends such as California rolls, partly by Korean food culture, which includes using *kimchee*, and partly by developing original creations, these sushi demonstrate some quite unique mixes of cultures and tastes. At this stage it would be useful to locate the phenomenon of the Koreanization of sushi within the context of New Zealand's cultural background, because migration in particular was an important factor that underscored this trend.

### **Korean Migration and New Zealand's cultural background**

From the early 2000s to the present the sushi business has continued to expand in Auckland. Interestingly this runs against national trends in the hospitality industry, which was experiencing significant declines in profitability, and high numbers of business turnovers and closures.<sup>12</sup> Korean investment in the sushi business coincided

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11 New Zealanders of European and British origin.

12 New Zealand was hit severely by the global financial crises of 2007-10, and hospitality figures show declining returns across the sector, a significant number of bankruptcies and sales of business. Moreover, the contraction of the inner city apartment market which coincided with the downturn in international student arrivals from 2008 onwards has led to oversupply of accommodation, and lower returns for businesses which were basing their potential profitability on the existence of a significant Asian student demographic.

with the height of Korean immigration to New Zealand in the past decade (from 2000 to 2006).<sup>13</sup> There were local, Korean and global influences mitigating such statistics though, including the buoyant global financial economy, Korea's continuing high growth rates, the global branding of 'Japan', sushi's emerging popularity around the globe, and the apparent demand in the New Zealand market. Moreover, New Zealand's immigration policies of the late 1990s, which sought skilled migrants, looked favourably upon those with previous business experience and access to cash. Koreans were well regarded by immigration officials in these respects, and the Christian orientation of many business applicants was also viewed positively.

Since the turn of the millennium, New Zealand has experienced some interesting demographic shifts. Approximately two thirds of the total population of New Zealand in the 2006 Census was made up of Pakeha people, though the total percentage of Pakeha had decreased by 11.7 percent since the 2001 Census.<sup>14</sup> The Maori population increased by 7.4 percent over the same period to reach approximately 15 percent of the total population. People of Pacific Islands ancestry experienced a surge in growth, numbers increasing 14.7 percent over the 2001-6 period to account for about five percent of the total population. But it is the Asian population increase over this period that is most noteworthy; numbers increased just over 50 percent during the 2001-6 period, and the vast majority of these people moved to Auckland (Statistics New Zealand, 2006).

Auckland's population base is quite distinctive in New Zealand. Only slightly more than half the population identify as Pakeha; 20 percent identify as Asian; 15 percent identify as Pacific Islander; and 11 percent identify as Maori. Only five years earlier Asians accounted for about 10 percent of the population. This trend of Asians moving to Auckland has led to the perception that Auckland has become increasingly 'Asian-ized' over recent years. Stores in the CBD specifically cater to culturally esoteric food, fashion, and lifestyle tastes. This is to service the increasing numbers of Asian students, business people and tourists who are accommodated in and around the city centre. Auckland's CBD has recently gone through a growth phase in building and renovation of high-rise apartment buildings, primarily as a response to increasing demand for inner city apartments for overseas-based Asians. While many Kiwis dream of their quarter acre block of paradise in the suburbs, such dreams are not necessarily culturally relevant for the many Asian residents and visitors from densely populated parts of Asia who find urban living convenient and familiar.

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13 Although there were only 426 Koreans living in New Zealand in 1986 (Statistics New Zealand, 1996), with the changes in immigration policy in 1991, the number grew quickly in the mid 1990s. Between July 1997 and September 2011, a total of 19,017 South Korean applications were accepted under the 'Business/Skilled' migrant category. This is almost five times larger than the number of Japanese in the same category (3,933). Moreover, during the peak between 2000 and 2006, on average 2,000 business migrants from South Koreans migrated to New Zealand each year. (Immigration New Zealand Statistics 2011). The majority of Korean migrants settle in Auckland.

14 Both the percentage and the actual number of people primarily identifying as Pakeha declined in 2006. A change in self-identification policy for the 2006 Census somewhat complicates matters, but even allowing for the change in nomenclature on the Census form there was a significant decline in the percentage of Pakeha from 80 percent to around 67 percent.

In this context of an increasingly multicultural and ethnically Asian population, with an appetite for eating out in the city, Korean retailers of sushi have located themselves in a diverse cultural market, with diverse cultural experiences and expectations. As we see below, some of these retailers have chosen to blend a Japanese product with a Korean slant and ingredients that appeal to Kiwis – the perceived market that includes the diverse population of the city. This perception of the market is fundamental to the attitudes of the Korean restaurateurs we interview below.

### **Korea and Japan: cultural overlaps**

Before we introduce the interviewees, we would like to preface the following section with a brief statement about the historical relations between Japan and Korea. From the late nineteenth century when Japan forcibly opened Korea to trade, until the end of World War Two, Japan dominated Korea's society, culture, and politics. A Japanese colony from 1910 to 1945, but commercially and militarily dominated by Japan since the late nineteenth century, Koreans were brought up in that period to speak, read and write Japanese, and to accommodate Japanese culture in their own. It is the food of the former colonizers, Japan, that is being appropriated and sold by Koreans *as Japanese food* in Auckland. And, as people who from a young age were exposed to Japanese food – a cultural remnant of colonialism, which includes 'authentic' Korean Japanese restaurants in Korea – the transition to sell the former colonizers' food as their own in a third nation rather complicates questions about authenticity, location, diasporas and motivations.

The interviewees are Mr Keum, a former night-club owner, a fit, lively man in his fifties with experience in the bar business. Mrs Ahn is a short, slightly rotund, self-proclaimed housewife in her late fifties, who had an epiphany at age 55 to start a sushi business. Mr Lee is a sharp, well-dressed thirty-something entrepreneur, who has worked in hospitality since graduating from university. And Mr Chung is a slight man in his sixties, a former executive with the LG Chaebol, with some experience in café ownership in Auckland. Although from radically diverse backgrounds, they share a cultural proximity to Japanese food; each has grown up with it, and each feels comfortable in producing and selling it as Japanese. And while their markets are discrete, and their concepts of 'Japanese' are idiosyncratic, their proximity to Japanese food, the normalization of this food into their own historical experiences, and their recognition of a market demand in New Zealand for their own respective interpretations of sushi are consistent motifs in their stories.

Mr Keum, the owner of Sumo Sushi, a specialist sushi restaurant and take-away business in Albert Street in Auckland city, described his introduction to the sushi business:

After trying different bar businesses, I received training from my 'brother' who owns several sushi places in Auckland... I call him brother but he is my cousin. When I was young we grew up together so he's more like my real brother than cousin... He offered to give me training in sushi business.

I knew how to cook Korean dishes at home but didn't have any professional cooking skills. He gave me all the recipes and the training in Japanese cuisine (interview, 2009).

Mr Keum's 'brother' from Korea, Roy Cho, who was well-established in the sushi manufacturing and retail industry was his 'in' into the industry in New Zealand. With no personal experience whatsoever in making sushi, and no real interest in the first instance, Mr Keum was convinced that the sushi business could be profitable, that it would provide him with a living outside of Korea for his family in a safe and comfortable environment, and that it would be within his own cultural ambit to make and sell a Japanese product:

Our father's generation were under Japanese colonization so they can speak Japanese fluently and my mother used to make *inarizushi* and *onigiri* for us when we went on picnics. So we are familiar with Japanese food. And we have *kimbap* which is very similar to sushi so it was easy to make the transition. (interview, 2009).

Clearly for Mr Keum, Japanese colonization is the context in which his familiarity with Japanese food emerged; and *kimbap*, a Korean form of rice rolls, similar to sushi, but neither sweet nor associated with raw fish, made sushi familiar enough to consider it as a business.

Mr Chung, the owner of Niwa Japanese Restaurant in High Street has a similar perspective:

I think Koreans living in Korea are very familiar with Japanese food. I don't think of Japanese food as 'foreign' food. Japanese is already part of Korean food. If you have a chance to visit Seoul or Pusan, there are so many high quality Japanese restaurants there.

A businessman who worked for a Korean trading company before buying the former Korean noodle restaurant in Auckland, Mr Chung has a very focused business orientation too. Japanese food, while similar to Korean food, was potentially a more profitable business, he believed, so he closed the noodle shop after six months of operation, and transformed a Korean restaurant into a Japanese restaurant. This was done with no cultural quibbles – it was, after all, simply a business decision. Mr Chung believed that Japanese food was more popular in Auckland City than Korean food, and that he had the requisite skills to make it.

Mr Lee, the proprietor of Genji restaurant in Ponsonby Rd, like Mr Chung, got into the Japanese restaurant business because it was affordable, within his range of expertise (he was trained in management in a Korean hotel chain and spent 12 months in Japan with the company and has a Commerce degree from Auckland University), and he believed it could be successful as a business:

From a business viewpoint as you say, nowadays Japanese food is most popular around the whole world, in any country. That's one reason. And to Koreans, Japanese food is similar to Korean food but Korean dishes have more side dishes. Japanese food is simpler.

Mrs Ahn, from Uni Sushi, followed her son to Auckland when he went there on a golfing scholarship. She was concerned that he would not be able to look after himself. Finding herself with a lot of time on her hands, she started her sushi business after it was suggested by a fellow member of her church congregation. Mrs Ahn's orientation towards sushi is quite culturally sophisticated; recognizing that the customer base in Auckland needed to be differentiated, she also has a small kimbap stall on the University campus which sells mostly to Korean students. However, her focus is on sushi, and like the other proprietors, she has had considerable exposure to Japanese food, which she uses to legitimate her interest in making and selling sushi:

Even back in Korea, I used to make sushi instead of kimbap for my kids. I learned traditional cooking in Korea because the cooking methods are similar, and when I learned cooking from my mother half was Korean cooking and the other half was Japanese (interview, 2009).

This perspective of the cultural proximity of Japanese food and culture with Korea is a consistent theme in the interviews. All the restaurateurs are conscious of their cultural backgrounds, and of the need to rationalize their involvement with Japanese food to the interviewer. Indeed, each interviewee's cultural orientation forms the background of their narratives. It is important to note, though, that each interviewee openly acknowledges the Korean flavour attached to the products they make, whether intentionally or unintentionally. In the case of Niwa, it may be unintentional, in the sense that they are striving to be 'authentically Japanese', but in the cases of Sumo, Genji and Uni, all intentionally produce sushi that is different to that offered in Japan, but similar to other sushi offered for sale in New Zealand.

### **Educating Kiwis about sushi**

As we have mentioned, on one level, Korean sushi retailers have exploited the positive image of Japanese food and are playing 'Japanese.' For example, Mr Cho, the aforementioned pioneer of Korean sushi in Auckland, traded on the cultural naivety of the general public to distinguish different Asian cultures (Mr Keum, interview, 2009). Many of these restaurants use the signifier of 'Japan' consciously; the Japaneseness of the food and restaurants is often indicated in the names of the restaurants, interior decorations, language of the menu, the Japanese script on the menu itself, and so on. Niwa restaurant in particular emphasized their sushi as 'authentic.' We have also seen that the owners often explained their engagement with sushi as Koreans from their personal experience and understanding of cultural proximity. From a purist's perspective, such a practice could be seen as an opportunistic appropriation or ethnic passing or even cultural misunderstanding. However, if we look closely, it becomes obvious that it is not so simple.

Restaurateurs' main concern is making and selling a product that will appeal to the public;<sup>15</sup> that is, they are primarily focused on running a successful business. The issue of sushi's Japanese origins and the related question of the authenticity of the product could arguably be seen as secondary to the primary orientation of being commercially successful. Indeed, in an ironic twist, the creation of new forms of sushi made specifically for New Zealanders by Koreans has led to the emergence of the 'Kiwi standard' sushi which is proving to be commercially successful.

Unlike Goody's work (1999), for example, which looks at relationships between diasporic communities and their traditional foods, our study demonstrates that a product which is identifiably from a specific culture can be appropriated, complete with its signifiers by people from another Asian culture, and then be remodelled and repositioned within a market that is educated to consume the new-style product as 'authentic'. The creation of this new 'Kiwi standard' has implications about what constitutes original 'authenticity' and whether consumers can in fact distinguish different types of sushi; or whether it is important that they can.

The creation of a market for their product is of some significance in the context of current globalization theory. As Lukacs has noted, perceptions of globalization, and the translation of products to other societies are predicated on Fordist systems of production, with assumptions made about how goods and services should be seen in terms of mass consumption. She makes the point that the transformation of local markets is often overlooked in making assumptions about the penetrability of global products into local markets (2010: 419). This leads us to ask about the receptivity of the market, its capacity to change, and the agency of the sushi outlet owners in educating their customers in what is 'authentic' sushi.

Most of the Kiwi customers don't really know about Japanese food so our staff has to help them choose. We explain the menu.

This comment was made by Mr Chung, the Korean owner of Niwa. Aware of the need to educate 'Kiwis', he instructs staff in how to sell particular Japanese dishes to customers, emphasizing that the sushi has cooked ingredients inside, and that it is not simply about eating 'raw fish'.

On the other hand, the need to accommodate perceived tastes of 'Kiwis' is reflected in Andy Lee's approach to sushi in his restaurant:

In Rainbow Roll sushi, we put vegetarian tempura in the sushi roll because locals like 'deep-fried' dishes. And we put *tobiko* or sashimi on top.

This approach reflects his disdain of the 'average' sushi, and his need to both meet market demand and create imaginative new products. However, this is tempered with the recognition that sushi in New Zealand is driven by the staples – salmon and chicken:

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15 All the interviewees corroborated this position, emphasizing their location within a wider market, and the need for their businesses to be profitable.

90 percent of our customers prefer normal *maki* sushi... [and] it's normally like 'Can I have chicken sushi roll or salmon sushi roll?'

In the absence of competition from Japanese sushi restaurants, Korean sushi makers have effectively standardized sushi production around the salmon and chicken *maki* sushi, introducing new product lines (almost always with avocado), but retaining their main products. Collectively they have influenced the market's perception of what sushi is; but it is not a collective enterprise. Rather it is about individuals, often with shared perspectives, but who pursue different courses of action in generating products that closely resemble each other. One way they do this is to visit other sushi shops to check out what the competition is making. If an owner likes the look of it, s/he may incorporate it into the menu (Matthew Seo, interview, 2010).

There was, however, a constant motif apparent in the interviews that it was okay to use Japanese products as a foundation for their businesses, because

Kiwis like Japan and Japanese things have good reputation. Koreans haven't established that kind of image in NZ yet (Mrs Ahn, interview, 2009).

None of the interviewees had any problems with the concept of making and selling sushi, its Japanese origins notwithstanding; it was 'good business' primarily. This relates to the positive global image of Japan in general and Japanese food in particular (McGray, 2000). In contrast to the above, one factor that is not consistent is how the signifiers associated with Japan are accommodated, reproduced, mimicked, hybridized, or ignored by the owners. There is little doubt that they are all aware of the positive global image of Japan – its so-called 'soft power' – and that this is an important consideration in choosing their business ventures. These signifiers, consciously acknowledged by the restaurateurs, are important in determining how consumers recognize or consume their product, and are closely tied to how the restaurant owners identify with the product they are selling. More importantly, in the context of studies of food and identity and of culinary globalization, the appropriation, translation, transformation and successful establishment of sushi sold to non-Japanese is noteworthy in the multiple conscious manipulations of the sign of Japan.

Recognizing the legitimacy of their cultural investment in the product, how Korean sushi restaurateurs read the local market, and how they influence it are important considerations in understanding the engagement of local and global forces in this context. All the restaurateurs consciously manipulate the sign of Japan in producing their sushi, and all are conscious of the cultural orientation of their customer base. For example, Mr Lee from Genji manipulates the signifiers of culture in providing specialized food for customers based on the wait staff's assessment of ethnicity. He provides larger servings for Pakeha customers, and has his staff mark the order form with E (European) or A (Asian). He also talks frankly about his fusion of Japanese and non-Japanese cooking techniques, emphasizing his disdain for the old-style, traditional Japanese flavours – those tastes that do not 'match' the 'Kiwi' palate.

I employed a mixture of Japanese and Korean staff. Because I find that Japanese chefs only want to serve authentic Japanese food, which doesn't really match the taste of local people.

The orientation of the restaurant owner is clear – meet the market and dispense with authenticity. For Mr Lee, this perspective was based on personal observation and experience. However, it is clear that in producing a response to his perceptions of Kiwis' tastes, he has also both modified the product to meet the market, and influenced the market by his development of new, hybrid products through the conscious decision to employ both Japanese and Korean chefs in his kitchen.

This orientation is similar to the case of Mr Keum from Sumo Sushi, who similarly manipulates the signifiers of culture, and does so in a way that attempts to both adhere to and influence the market. This is based on the notion that sushi is a new, flexible and truly global food medium:

We get the same customers everyday so we have to keep the same quality and style so they keep coming back. [...] When Japanese customers come to my place and eat, they realize that this is not real sushi; they think that something is wrong. We make different sushi compared to other places. Most of our customers are white business men or women. We get more ladies. Maybe because it's not too oily. We are thinking of putting fruit such as pineapple or mango with cream cheese. And it's popular with the customers.

Unperturbed by the differences between his style of sushi and that which might appeal to Japanese people, he emphasizes the originality of his approach to making sushi, talking of how he is able to both meet demand and influence it through his original sweet sushi. From his perspective, it is his customers who drive the products he makes; his customers are primarily Pakeha office workers, many of whom are women, and he responds to their demands.

This leads to the concept of how the new 'Kiwi standard' is emerging in Auckland, driven by both demand of the market and by the imaginative and culture-bound responses of Korean restaurateurs. Mr Keum supports this view:

Our customers like *futomaki* usually. Our size is different to Korean or Japanese style which is about 3 to 5 cm (in diameter). Kiwi style has bigger fillings, and is bigger because that's what people want.

While the size of the sushi may be important, as with St Pierre's, there is an emphasis on quality and authentic Japanese ingredients too; using high quality food sourced by Tokyo Foods, and getting fresh salmon and tuna is crucial to his endeavour to be seen as a high quality sushi store.

The size of the sushi reflects its location in the market. This kind of sushi, designed to appeal to urban office workers and residents, is situated to compete with other 'ethnic' fast food outlets in shopping malls and urban centres – Chinese,



Thai, Italian, Lebanese, Greek, etc – and with the ‘traditional’ fast food franchises – KFC, McDonalds, Burger King, and sandwich retailers, and is highly price sensitive. Recognizing that value for money is a significant element in consumer choice, the Katsoulis brothers consciously made their product larger and ‘value for money’ in order to compete with the range of other ethnic food available at a particular price point (in 2010 it was approximately \$NZ10 for a meal). This model of ‘value for money’ sushi, complete with the signifiers of Japan attached, is what has attracted many Korean business people into the industry. Moreover, its flexibility as a medium, reinforced by the Katsoulis brothers’ manipulation of the product since its inception in New Zealand, has led to the wider public recognition that sushi is a constantly evolving food medium, but that the basic formulation of a fat rolled sushi style with few fillings remains a standard. This is the model upon which Korean sushi retailers base their products.

When Korean owners establish or buy existing sushi businesses they are faced with a number of decisions about sushi. One of the first is where to locate themselves in a market. Some owners like Mr Chung, establish a restaurant that attempts to ‘pass’ as Japanese, one that sells food that is attempting to be culturally ‘authentic’:

Customers who come and eat tell us that our food is very similar to Japanese food. We are doing our best to make our food taste as ‘Japanese’ as possible (interview, 2009).

Mr Chung’s restaurant distinguishes between Japanese and Korean food and he believes he understands ‘authentic’ Japanese food. He says that while his restaurant is aimed at the Kiwi market, and the food he produces attempts to be good quality Japanese cuisine, it is not authentic. It is something a little different, as his product line suggests. In particular his *kim chee* on sushi stands out as something unusual in sushi in Japan.

Similarly, as we have seen, Mr Keum is comfortable that his product would not be seen as ‘sushi’ by ethnically Japanese people. He is meeting the local market demand. The same can be said for the large number of Korean sushi retailers in shopping malls and suburban shopping centres throughout the Auckland region. The product line they have developed meets the demand of the market, hence the overwhelming popularity of smoked chicken and avocado, and raw (or smoked) salmon and avocado. The recognition that there is no need to conform to Japanese sets of values of what constitutes sushi in the New Zealand marketplace has freed Korean makers of sushi to produce their own idiosyncratic takes on it.

And why is it that the New Zealand public has taken to eating sushi so readily, and in whatever guise it is presented? Katsoulis suggests that one main factor in the establishment of iconic sushi in New Zealand is that there is no strong local culinary

tradition to supplant or with which to compete.<sup>16</sup> New Zealand's market is open to interpretations of sushi as a genre, partly due to the increasingly cosmopolitan nature of its client base, partly due to their exposure to the market-leading attempts of chains such as St Pierre's to recast sushi as a value for money lunch food, and partly due to the strong influence of Koreans and Korean culture in the current iterations of the products available in New Zealand.

## Conclusion

Current globalization theory suggests that transnational movements of people, goods and technology can best be understood as reflecting processes of accommodation, negotiation, mutation, and/or hybridization, and in this case elements of each are apparent. Hybridization can account for aspects of the case of sushi and Koreans in New Zealand, but there are layers of meaning that confuse and complicate globalization models. In particular the idiosyncratic historical circumstances of the Korea-Japan relationship, the serendipity of raising New Zealand's profile for Korean immigrants on business schemes, changes in New Zealand immigration policies, informal Korean business networks, the timing of Japan's soft power prominence, the readiness of the market for sushi, and the creation of new price-point specific and new authentic sushi are quite case-specific.<sup>17</sup>

As we have pointed out, the New Zealand case has some interesting underlying tensions that give it a very specific historical and cultural texture. These complicate the global-local relationship, because it is not simply homogenization, nor is it simply 'hybridization' as localization, in the sense of a mixture of New Zealand and Japanese elements. Unlike Ng's study of sushi in Singapore (Ng, 2001), which found that in Singapore chefs and staff of sushi restaurants were Singaporean and that the content and taste of the 'tremendously localized' sushi there 'is very Singaporean' (15), for example, the sushi commonly available in Auckland is strongly influenced by Koreans rather than by Kiwis.

The context of the colonial relations between Japan and Korea, and the prominence of the 50 year occupation in historical narratives in Korean education, combined with

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16 This may be something of a simplification, depending on how one defines New Zealand's cultural traditions. However, it was not until the economy recovered from the 1987 global market collapse that the restaurant industry became invigorated. Almost exclusively international cuisine was offered – as Katsoulis notes, New Zealand's cultural traditions are primarily British, hence fish and chips, meat, potatoes, starch, Chinese take-outs etc, form the historical foundations for New Zealand's contemporary cuisine.

17 It is important to acknowledge that structurally similar phenomena – that is, people of different cultural backgrounds to the origins of the food they are selling – have taken place throughout the 'new world': such as Chinese, Indian, Lebanese, and Thai food for example, sold in Australia, Europe, the US, UK, and New Zealand, or Mexican food sold in the US. That is, all these products are sold by people with cultural backgrounds different to the product they are selling. The common thread is that they are selling foods as 'ethnic' mostly to white people, and that the customers buy it as 'authentic'.

the cultural and culinary remnants of Japan's domination of Korea apparent in the two nations' foods adds depth to the idea of 'hybridization'. It is more though than simply the blending of elements that is being played out here. It is the recolonizing of a product in a third country; Koreans are doing this against the backdrop of colonial subservience and a long history of cultural proximity, compounded by an equally long history of cultural antagonism. While it is clear that the Korean restaurateurs are in fact taking advantage of the positive branding associated with the 'Japan' brand, they continue to produce new lines of their own new sushi; bigger sushi, bigger fillings, more *wasabi*, better value for money.

How, then, does this case engage the global-local nexus? The idea of the new 'Kiwi standard' can be seen as an alternative to 'hybrid culture'; that is, the multiple factors that appear to organically come together in producing this new style sushi incorporate conscious intent to exploit the sign of the former colonizer, and make profit in the process. The local also fits into this, because it is the need to adapt a product to meet local demand that drives its evolution, as was suggested by Keum and Lee (interviews, 2009). This also says a lot about the flexibility of sushi as a medium. It can withstand various cultural interpretations and retain its recognition factor, and arguably even its Japaneseness. Taco sushi (Mexico), curry sushi (Singapore), spam sushi (Hawaii), etc. all carry with them signs of otherness mixed with the sushi.

Multiple layers of meaning then are attached to the production and consumption of sushi in New Zealand. A Japanese product, it has become something else in a new geographical context; but its links with history cannot be separated from the contemporary domination of the local market. What we can read in the story of sushi in Auckland is that through the convocation of idiosyncratic circumstances Koreans have come to control the sushi market in New Zealand. In the process they have created new forms of sushi which have been embraced by the public at large; what we have referred to as the new 'Kiwi standard' sushi. As 'New Zealand' sushi makes its mark overseas – sold for example in Sydney at a number of restaurants and take-out stores<sup>18</sup> – the expansion of sushi's globalization continues, as does its idiosyncratic, culture-bound history.

The selling of Korean versions of Japanese food as *Japanese food* is done consciously by the restaurateurs, who are prepared to mimic to some extent the cultural tropes of Japan, yet produce a form of sushi that is true to roots other than Japan; it is culturally infested by Korea and New Zealand. What we have is not simply an example of cultural globalization taking place, it is also arguably a specific kind of intentional transformation of Japanese food. It is also important to note, once again, that unlike the literature that links diasporas with culturally-specific culinary development, the case of sushi in New Zealand stands out as an example of a diaspora appropriating the cuisine of a different nation, and marketing it as being of that nation in origin. In this case sushi's authenticity is as a new variant of global sushi – Kiwi sushi – *not* as authentic Japanese sushi. It remains, though, a product of the coming together of very specific

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18 At Sydney Airport, for example, fat rolled salmon and avocado sushi were advertised as 'Kiwi sushi' in a Korean-owned sushi outlet.

historical circumstances, and should be read, as should all examples of global-local interactions, as another of the multiple layers of complexity and unpredictability that collectively make up the richness of today's culinary globalization.

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