



INFOFISH speaks to ...

YUKI CHIDUI

Vice-President of the Nadeshiko Sushi restaurant; Principal and CEO of the Nadeshiko Sushi School; first female sushi chef in Japan.

Q When you joined Nadeshiko Sushi in 2010, did you have a clear vision in your mind that you wanted to make your mark as the first female sushi chef in Japan in a male-dominated industry? Did you ever think of quitting?

YC I knew from the beginning that I was going to be the manager, and my clear vision for the Nadeshiko Sushi restaurant was complete when I joined the company. There were many difficulties along the way but I've never wanted to quit.

Q For non-Japanese people, it's hard to imagine why the sight of a woman (especially a young person) as a sushi chef would be so revolutionary. You must have run into quite a bit of hostility from male sushi chefs. Help us to understand why women have not been allowed, nor encouraged, to work as sushi chefs before this.

YC From my experience when I was working with sushi chefs and male staff around me, it is difficult for women to do long-term physical labour due to the ingrained attitudes related to male dominance and hierarchy in the field. The training and instruction on the job is strict, almost brutal at times. There is also no system or arrangement that allows women with families to continue working, such as childcare leave, long-term care leave, and maternity leave, so only young single women are able to work. Above all, male chefs are not willing to change their attitudes or make changes to the environment because the existing rules are so comfortable for them. As a result, many women soon retire from the industry.

Q How have first-time Japanese male customers reacted to seeing you prepare the sushi, and also seeing your all-women staff?

YC For a long time, many customers came to the store thinking that it was part of Japanese pop culture especially as we are located in the Akihabara area of Tokyo. We never admitted that we were full-fledged sushi chefs.

Q What led you to set up the Nadeshiko Sushi Academy? What do students learn at the Academy and do they easily find employment in Japan after they graduate?

YC By setting up the Nadeshiko Sushi Academy, my aim was to enhance the employability of female sushi chefs. I also have plans for a franchise. The Academy teaches not only sushi preparation but also customer service, business administration, and management – it is a curriculum not found in other sushi schools. As for job prospects after graduating from the Academy, it is not easy for sushi school students, not just my students, to get a job in Japan as employment is tough now. However, most of my students successfully obtain jobs at overseas sushi restaurants, so I'm satisfied with the quality of our graduates.

Q How do you counter the argument that to become a sushi chef takes many years of practical experience under master chefs, and not just through an intensive course of a few months?

YC We can teach the technology in a few months but what is important for sushi chefs is having sushi skills as well as customer service ability based on life experience. So yes, that cannot be achieved in a few months. However in my school, we do teach important points beyond just sushi preparation.

Q Sushi consumption in Japan is linked to tradition and culture, where the food resembles works of art and people take their time to savour the delicate flavours. Sushi, after all, has been so much a part of Japanese history for hundreds of years. However, according to Fuji Keizai Co.'s Food Service Industry



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Marketing Handbook 2017, the top five sushi chains in Japan in 2017 – Akindo Sushiro, Kura Corporation, Hama Zushi, Kappa Zushi, and Genki Zushi - were the casual conveyor belt type (kaiten) and some of these outlets even serve non-sushi items such as burgers to attract families with children. Do you see a need to adapt Nadeshiko Sushi's food service to suit this rising customer trend?

- YC Nadeshiko Sushi's food service pledge, and my motto as a sushi chef, is combining the best of the old and the new. There is a Japanese saying called *onko-chisin* which calls for changing with the times, but also preserving old traditions. That balance is very important. However, instead of always following the trends of the times, I have a motto that I want to lead the times.

Thinking about new sushi without being locked into stereotypes. Ensuring permanent female employment. Creating a new profession. Education for children who bear the future



Credit: nadeshiko-sushi.com

- YC **Focusing on the sushi itself, what are the main fishery species that you use in your creations? Are they from local sources or do you use imported raw materials such as salmon from Norway? And for anyone visiting Nadeshiko Sushi, what are some items on the menu that they should try?**

- YC The main fish are those that in a sense, honour the seasons of Japan. It's spring right now, so I often use *sayori* (Japanese halfbeak), *sirauo* (whitebait), and *hotaruika* (firefly squid). And I value the information in the market every day. I also bring in imported species because I believe in using fish from all over the world to get people to eat sushi. My recommended restaurant menu item is *yakuzen* sushi which incorporates Chinese traditional medicinal herbs. This is a healthy sushi dish which can be eaten every day. And my *omakase* menu, where the customer leaves the food composition up to the

imagination of the chef, is the only sushi dish in the world that is different for each customer.

- YC **How has the coronavirus pandemic affected your business?**

- YC Last year we were forced to temporarily close the school and restaurant. It was the first such experience in my long sushi life. However, now I have begun to think again about sushi, and preparing healthy fish diets.

- YC **What is your vision for the future? Do you have any long term plans to set up more sushi outlets in Japan, or perhaps overseas?**

- YC In the future, we will improve the status of sushi chefs and spread the environment-friendly fish food culture. More specifically, it is to achieve the philosophy of the Next Generation Sushi Association that I have established, where we aim to develop new ingredients and techniques for sushi, and revitalise traditional (forgotten) ingredients so that they can be updated for modern consumption trends. My aim is to promote healthy and safe fish consumption all over the world. And of course I want to establish more branches of my sushi school all over the world and franchise my sushi restaurant. The plan is to expand and stabilise employment opportunities for sushi chefs.

- YC **And finally, do you have any messages that you'd like to share with young women who may be considering a career in the sushi business?**

- YC First of all, value your dreams and inspiration, and maintain a love for fish and sushi. Then you will know what you should do and never give up!



Credit: nadeshiko-sushi.com