

Just a New Way to Roll

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It was in my third year of college that I had a chance to go on a three-month exchange program at the University of California, Los Angeles. In the 80s, being able to study in college was already a rare occurrence, even more so for a Japanese undergraduate to fly to America. In Los Angeles, I bunked in with one of my classmates at UCLA. His name was Dawei, but everyone called him Dave for short. He was born in America but his parents were both originally from Taiwan. He had taken it upon himself to show me around Los Angeles and make me feel as at home as possible.

One Sunday morning, he exclaimed to me that he had found what I would definitely love to eat. Eager to keep the details a secret, he hush-hushed me and took me on a journey downtown. After a twenty-minute long bus ride, we alighted at what looked like a path leading to an entrance of an amusement park. Alongside the path, many makeshift stalls were set up and stall owners were busy selling food to park visitors.

Staring up at the large board above the tent, I frowned.

"Authentic sushi from Japan. Get one now!" the board said. Confused, I turned to Dave for clues on what was going on. He was beaming from ear to ear.

"See? Told'ya. Your food here in LA! Oh yeah!" Dave said, clearly excited and proud that my country's food was available even in his country, halfway across the world.

Sushi? The word reverberated in my skull. Sushi is a delicacy in Japan that is steeped in history. Whilst the quality varies from chef to chef, simply put, it is vinegared rice with raw fish, wrapped in seaweed. I recalled when I was little, I once visited a sushi place with my mom. It was one of those traditional ones with limited counter seats in front of the tiny space where

the chef would slice the fish and mold the rice right in front of our very eyes. Out of curiosity, I asked my mom, why there is a need to wrap seaweed around the sushi. Overhearing my question, the kind chef told me that the seaweed not only adds flavor to the sushi, but also helps to keep the rice moist and juicy, thereby preserving the sushi in its best condition.

"C'mon, Hiroya, I'll get some for you!"

Dave's beckoning pulled me back from my thoughts. I nodded and followed him, joining the long snakelike line of customers. It was only after fifteen minutes that we finally got what we came for.

"Here, two for you and two for me."

Dan held out a paper plate where four rolls of 'sushi' stood. They were nothing like the sushi I knew. Instead of raw fish, I saw irregularly cut pieces of avocado, boiled crab and some greens stuffed in the middle. The pieces of seaweed were rolled underneath the rice and squashed together with the ingredients. A layer of rice surrounded the outside of the 'sushi'.

"What's this ...?" I asked with hesitation, not sure what I was looking at.

"California roll! The American sushi!" Dave said, as he grabbed a roll with his fingers and brought it to his mouth.

I reached out and closed my fingers around one of the remaining three rolls. Taking a leap of faith, I placed it inside my mouth. It tasted like salad, except that this salad had rice and seaweed in it. Sweet mayonnaise oozed from between the layers as I chewed the 'sushi'. Its sweetness covered the natural taste of the ingredients and made the 'sushi' taste like some sort of dessert. Having a sweet tooth, I thought that it didn't taste as bad as I had expected, but I knew that I would not go as far as calling it sushi.

Out of pure courtesy, I ate the second roll Dave had bought for me. With his rolls already in his stomach, Dave looked at me with expectant eyes, hoping that his discovery of sushi in LA had made me feel at home.

"It was good. Thanks bro," I said.

"Right? Right? I knew ya'd like it!" Dave said, "Reminds you of home, doesn't it?"

I hesitated. Although I didn't want to hurt him for his goodwill, I felt that lying to him would be even worse.

"No, not really. Sushi in Japan is ... well ... different. The sushi here is not really authentic."

The smile on Dave's face disappeared. *Oh no*, I thought, *now I have done it. I have just offended him.*

"Dave, I didn't mean ..." I started, but he cut me off before I could apologize.

"Come, let me show you something else." He led me through a nearby park and across several streets until we arrived at LA's Chinatown, an area where shops selling Chinese food and crafts were gathered.

We made our way into one of the restaurants, and before I had time to pore over the long menu of Chinese food, Dave had waved a waitress over and placed an order for a bowl of mapo tofu.

"Why are we here, Dave?"

"You'll see."

There was an awkward silence while we waited for the food to be served. Apparently, Dave didn't want to elaborate further on what his plan was and so I didn't want to pursue the subject either. Dave took out his discman and his headphones and started listening to "Another One Bites the Dust" by Queen. It was his favorite band and he had bought every one of their CDs.

Thankfully, the food didn't take long to arrive. Dave pushed the plate of mapo tofu towards me and gestured to me to try it.

"Aren't you having any?" I asked. He shook his head and went back to his music.

I took my first spoonful of tofu with the sauce. It burned like hell! My tongue and my throat were so hot that I grabbed a cup of water and drank it all in one gulp. *My gosh! What on earth is this dish?* This was not the mapo tofu that I had grown up eating. The ones I had were mostly sweet. *There is no way anyone could eat this!*

It was then that I realized Dave was laughing hysterically beside me. He laughed so hard that he clutched his sides. It took a huge amount of effort before he calmed down and asked, "How was it?"

"Whoa..." I tried to speak but I was at a loss for words. My mouth was still on fire; I had never eaten anything so hot before in my life.

"This is the original mapo tofu, ya know? The one you had in Japan isn't real."

It dawned on me the point Dave was trying to make, by dragging me here and forcing me to try this dish.

Mapo tofu is a popular dish that was originally created in Sichuan, China, a place known for its signature hot and spicy dishes. Dave shared with me his experiences of visiting Taiwan with his parents and eating mapo tofu in Taiwan for the first time. Mapo tofu in Taiwan is prepared differently from the Sichuan's dish, and sugar is often added to make the sauce sweet instead of hot, in order to cater to the palate of the locals.

It reminded me of the mapo tofu I used to eat in Chinese restaurants in Japan. Like Taiwan, the sauce in the mapo tofu was sweetened and likened to the taste of Japanese curry, which is mostly sweet. Not having tried the taste of the original Sichuan mapo tofu, I had always thought of the Japanese version as the real one.

"American sushi may not be Japanese sushi. But that doesn't mean it ain't authentic, ya know?" Dave concluded. "People love it, that's all that matters yo!"

That experience was the biggest takeaway from my exchange program in America. A few decades later, the California roll had made its way into the Japanese market, revolutionising the way people define sushi.

Now, whenever I chance upon a sushi bar and sit down to order a California roll, it always brings to mind what Dave had taught me back then.

It may not be the same as the original; it's just a new way to roll.