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Sustainable sushi for your pocket, and in Portland

Posted by Shelby Wood, The Oregonian October 31, 2008 06:00AM

For the occasional sushi eater, ordering can be tricky. This is particularly true if you don't speak Japanese.

Now environmental groups are adding another layer of complexity, via a series of "sustainable sushi" guides [rolled out this month](#).

To some extent, the guides are meant to protect sushi eaters from mercury and other contaminants in some fish. Mostly, though, the guides are meant to protect fish from sushi eaters.

Amid the buzz about locally grown and/or sustainable food -- including debates over farmed vs. wild salmon and the plight of the Chilean seabass -- sushi escaped the microscope. Until now.

It turns out that many of Americans' favorite sushi dishes -- certain kinds of tuna as well as farmed salmon, imported shrimp and most yellowtail -- often arrive on the plate as the result of overfishing or farming practices that pollute the ocean, destroy habitats or kill sea life, according to Seafood Watch, a program of California's Monterey Bay Aquarium, which published a [pocket sushi guide](#) to send the message that a diner's choices affect the ocean's future.

In other words, the conservationists say, if we don't start eating more sustainable sushi, we may end up with no sushi at all.

And yet...it goes without saying that a color-coded, asterisk-ed list of dos and don'ts with which to analyze a menu and grill the waitstaff does not scream "awesome date night" to most people. Pocket guide or not, it's tough to be sustainable in a typical sushi restaurant.

Take yellowtail, or hamachi, which is on the Seafood Watch red ("avoid") list...but also under "good alternatives" -- as long as it's U.S. farmed. Ditto for shrimp (ebi), although wild-caught is fine, too. Bigeye tuna (maguro) is acceptable, if caught by troll or pole.

You won't find such details on most menus. At a Northeast Portland sushi spot last week, the waiter was clueless -- and seemed worried by my quizzing, as if he suspected I work for the health department. Suffice it to say, we did not make it to the troll or pole question.

At a downtown sushi bar, I extracted more information from the mostly Japanese-speaking chef...but eventually gave up on divining a guilt-free lunch from the salmon/yellowtail/tuna trifecta in hopes of returning to the office before sunset. I settled on a dish that doesn't show up on the red list: sea scallops (hotate). Not coincidentally, this is the strategy recommended by the pocket guide people.

"When people are given a choice, I think people want to act ethically and responsibly," said Ken Peterson, a Seafood Watch spokesman. "Who wants to be responsible for exterminating eels from the ocean?"

Dang, there goes the [unagi](#).

Still, if it were just you, Joe Sushi-pack, attempting to safeguard the oceans, the 20-questions approach might feel futile.

It's not just you, Peterson said.



Sustainable sushi

- New guides from conservation groups say diners should avoid some of the most popular sushi dishes -- including **bluefin tuna, freshwater eel and farmed salmon** -- because they are caught or farmed in ways that harm the environment.

- Better bets, according to the guides, include **wild-caught salmon, scallops and Pacific halibut**.

- Read, print, or **get the guides** on mobile devices:

--Seafood Watch [Sustainable](#)

Nationally, it's also food giants including Aramark and Wal-Mart that, under pressure from conservationists and consumers, have begun to shift some of their seafood buying practices toward more sustainable sources, he said.

In Portland, it's New Seasons Market, which [uses the Seafood Watch color-coded guides](#) at the fish counter. And it's colleges including Reed, Lewis & Clark and the University of Portland -- all served by Bon Appetit Management Company, which says it will follow the Seafood Watch sushi rules in all its food service operations.

Soon, Portland diners in search of sustainable sushi will be able to chuck the pocket guides altogether and let a restaurant bear the burden -- a more attractive option than any tiny, tiring list.

Masu East in Southeast Portland will reopen Nov. 6 as [Bamboo Sushi](#), which owner Kristofor Lofgren said will be the first certified sustainable sushi restaurant in the nation. You won't eat a red list fish at Bamboo, he said, because he won't serve them.

"We're not doom and gloom, and we're not going to preach to anybody. If you just want to come in and eat great sushi, that's fine," Lofgren said. "We are doing the job for you."

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[Sushi Pocket Guide](#)

--Environmental Defense Fund's [Sushi Selector](#)

--Blue Ocean Institute's [Guide to Ocean-Friendly Sushi](#)

• Bamboo Sushi, [310 SE 28th Ave.](#) in Portland, will be the nation's first certified sustainable sushi restaurant when it opens Nov. 6, says owner Kristofor Lofgren. **Information:** 503-232-5255 or [bamboosushipdx.com](#), or read more in [The Oregonian's dining pages](#).

--Shelby Wood