

Fish in the fast lane at Sushi-go!

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NEWPORT -- "SUSHI DOES NOT MEAN RAW FISH!"

That's what it says in bold all-capital letters, the DOES NOT emphasized in red, at the top of the take-out menu for Jefferson Dube's new Sushi-go! shop in the Brick Market Place.

For emphasis, Dube says it himself during an interview in his spotless restaurant with its black tables and chairs, grass-mat wallpaper, paper lanterns and display cooler filled with Japanese sodas and bottled teas.

Even though, as Dube says, "Sushi is going global" and sushi stations are popping up even in local supermarkets around Rhode Island, there are still sushi novices who may enter his shop, brought in by a more sushi-savvy friend, exhibiting a bit of queasiness. That's especially true if they should happen to peer into the case at the front of the shop, where Dube slices his fresh seafood, and spot a stray octopus arm, complete with suction-like suckers, "staring" back at them.

Yes, Dube, who is of Japanese-Italian descent, can fix up a plate of sashimi for you. That's the Japanese method of slicing raw fish and serving it with such condiments as shredded daikon radish or ginger root, hot-tasting wasabi and soy sauce.

But Dube, who was born with the unlikely name of Jefferson Davis Fukuda, assures these timid souls that "I would say 60 percent of what we serve is cooked, and that's not counting the veggie items."

He gently explains that "you have to take time with people who come in. I'm the guy who's going to turn them around. You have to be user-friendly. I don't want people to eat what we have. I want people to eat what they want."

Dube, who has a go-getter personality that's the very opposite of fabled Japanese reticence, says this with total confidence.

Younger customers, he finds, tend to be familiar with sushi and are more open to trying something new. Recently, a busload of high school students visiting Newport scarfed down 37 California rolls, whose ingredients include chunks of cooked crab, cucumber and avocado surrounded by black seaweed and rice, plus avocado rolls and his spicy tuna rolls.

This last, known as Spicy Tekka Maki, is "probably the most popular" menu item. It contains cooked fresh tuna and cucumber mixed with spicy sauce and scallions, rolled inside and out with sesame seeds.

A 17-year veteran of the restaurant business -- he started as a busboy at Jamestown's late Cafe when he was 13 -- Dube began Sushi-go! as "an evolution of the supermarket take-out business." While there are several tables where people can eat-in right there and Dube can personalize a sushi roll with your favorite ingredients on the spot, much of his business is ready to go.

There's a big case in middle of the shop where Dube has pre-packaged some of his most requested items -- ranging from seaweed salad to the tuna-and-salmon Newport Roll to flavorful Inari, sweetened soybean pockets filled to bursting with sweet sushi rice -- so people can just grab their sushi and, well, go.

He says this sushi-on-the-run idea appeals to people who "like the price point and convenience of packaged sushi, but don't like the quality they find in supermarkets. The markets lease those sushi stations to a company that installs chefs so you can see them making sushi in the store, but a lot of the ingredients come in pre-sliced. So I decided to put in the high quality."

Dube slices all his fish by hand in the shop and cooks the rice -- using up to 60 cups of raw rice a day -- in the back.

You can taste the difference.

"Rice is the key to good sushi," says Dube, bringing out a cup of his cooked rice to sample. Although it looks sort of like Uncle Ben's, the taste is sweetly sublime.



Journal photo / Bob Thayer

SUSHI-GO! a shop in Newport's Brick Market Place with a focus on high-quality sushi and sashimi, made fast and fresh. the atmosphere of the shop is that of a Japanese mountain retreat. Lisa Doucet of Providence is the person in the window.

You don't notice this so much in a sushi dish, when the rice is wrapped around smoked salmon or scallops or tuna and then topped with soy sauce and spicy wasabi or slices of ginger. But alone on a plate, the rice's other flavors surprise the palate.

In a process that takes about 90 minutes, Dube begins by washing the rice "to get the extra starch out" in a special rice bag under cold running water. Then he puts it in a rice cooker with water and lets it sit "for 15 to 20 minutes."

Then it's time to cook, a process that takes between 45 and 50 minutes. After cooking, it's taken out and fan-cooled. Traditionally this was done with paper fans in Japan, but Dube has gone electric.

As the rice is cooling, he adds a mixture of rice vinegar, sugar and salt, "the proportions of which are our secret. As you mix the ingredients in, the fanning sets the starches on each individual grain of rice."

The end result is a somewhat sticky rice that can be easily maneuvered with chopsticks or into a sushi roll, yet has what Dube calls a "pearl essence" and a wonderful flavor.

This is all pretty darned good for a man of partial Japanese heritage who is self-taught.

Dube says he learned to cook Japanese from cookbooks, from self-testing and from watching and picking up little secrets from friends who owned sushi restaurants.

"I've always been interested in ethnic food, even when I was younger," he says, putting on a loose-fitting traditional Japanese Hopi coat over his black Sushi-go! T-shirt.

His father had met his mother when they were students at Boston University. He was their second child and, when he was 2, his parents divorced and his father moved back to Tokyo. His mother later married Jamestown Police Sgt. Jack Dube, who adopted Jefferson.

"I didn't see my birth father for 18 years. I had no memories of him. But I was curious and I was becoming an adult. There was a strong need for me to be in touch with my roots as a person."

That was when he visited his birth father and his extended family in Japan. "It was a really good experience. It fulfilled me as a person."

He especially enjoyed the food, although he'd eaten Japanese food before visiting Japan. So when it came time several years ago to seriously decide on his course in life, after toying with the idea of going into law enforcement, Dube says he was profoundly influenced by the late Jimmy Kelso, one of the owners of Narragansett's Coast Guard House, where he was working at the time. And when it came time to decide on a theme for his restaurant, his Japanese roots won out over the Italian side.

"I'm proud of who I am and of my ethnic heritage," he says. "Besides, anyone can cook Italian food. I found cooking Japanese much more challenging. And I'm a person who tends to rise to a challenge."

No kidding! Dube designed and constructed his shop singlehandedly without ever having built anything before.

"It's lucky it came out the way it did," he says with a laugh. "I just went to Home Depot and loaded up a truck with a couple of thousand dollars worth of wood and started, using a trim saw and drill set that was a gift from the waitresses at a restaurant where I used to work."

The results were as happy as his culinary efforts, which he says were "validated" during this summer's Black Ships Festival, which celebrates Newport's Admiral Perry's opening up of Japan to Western culture. When Japanese tourists descended on Sushi-go! during the festival, they pronounced Dube's food authentic.

Certainly they must have also felt at home with the many made-in-Japan snacks in his case, including Japanese fruit bubblegum and sweetened rice crackers shaped like Italian rotini twists.

There are also bottles of refreshing brewed-in-Japan green tea and a raspberry-flavored soda that is an adventure just in the opening of the bottle. After peeling off the plastic wrap at the top, you find a plastic cap with a marble embedded in it. Slam down on the cap and the marble shoots into the hour-glass-shaped bottle, where it lodges and creates a fizz.

Although Sushi-go! opened just two months ago, shortly before Dube's 30th birthday, it has already built up such a strong reputation among locals that he may begin franchising the concept much sooner than he had envisioned.

"This is the pilot store," he says, alluding to his plans of thousands of Sushi-gos! in high-traffic areas across the country. "I started the company. I'm the Dave Thomas of sushi."

Sushi-Go!, 215 Goddard Row, Brick Market Place, Newport, is open daily from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Most prices are \$5 and less. They range from the Super Veggie Roll for \$3.50 to the very popular Spicy Tekka Maki tuna roll at \$4.75. At the high end are a marvelous Crazy Roll, consisting of tempura shrimp, cucumber, avocado and spicy sauce, for \$7.75 and a Rainbow Roll, featuring crab, cucumber and avocado with layers of tuna, salmon, eel, shrimp, yellow-tail and snapper, for \$9.25. The Inari rice-filled pockets are \$3.

A bottle of raspberry soda, complete with marble inside, is \$1.75.

Customers get free validated parking for an hour at the Brick Market Place lot. An hour before closing every night, Dube discounts his packaged sushi items 50 percent.