

## **Japanese Restaurants & Sushi – What’s Kosher and What’s Not**

### *The Kosher Guide to Navigating Sushi and Japanese Cuisine*

Japanese restaurants—especially sushi bars—offer some of the cleanest and most manageable non-kosher menus for a kosher-keeping customer. Most dishes are made to order, ingredients are simple and visible, and many halachic concerns are either exempt or have multiple reasons to permit them.

This guide helps you choose confidently, eat fully kosher, and know what to avoid.

#### **Kosher-Friendly (No Questions Needed)**

These items are generally fine and don’t require asking:

- **Cucumber Roll (Kappa Maki)** – Seaweed, cucumber, sushi rice. 100% fine.
- **Avocado Roll**
- **Avocado-Cucumber Roll**
- **Pickled Daikon Roll (Oshinko Maki)**
- **Plain Vegetable Rolls** – Any combination of vegetables in sushi rolls is fine.
- **Poke Bowls (Vegetarian or Salmon/Tuna)** – Poke made with **kosher fish like salmon or tuna**, rice, and vegetables is permitted. Most sauces are soy-based and not a concern.
- **Edamame (Steamed Soybeans)** – Usually just steamed and salted. No issue.
- **Tamago (Sweet Egg Omelet Sushi)** – Fine if no meat broth is used (see below).

## **Sushi Rice and Bishul Akum**

What about bishul akum (cooking by a non-Jew) in the rice?

- Plain steamed rice might raise bishul akum concerns if served alone.
- But sushi rice is not just steamed—it is seasoned with vinegar, sugar, and salt, and more importantly, it is combined with other ingredients in the roll, like vegetables or fish.
- This makes it a *tavshil me'urav* (mixed dish), and according to halacha, bishul akum is batel when the cooked component is less than 51% of the total.
- Additionally, cooked rice is over 80% water by weight, making it an extremely diluted food, which further weakens its halachic status as “bishul.”
- It's also questionable whether rice qualifies as “fit for a king's table”, which would exempt it entirely from bishul akum.
- In addition, restaurant settings, where food is made by rotating staff for general customers, not for a personal guest, are often not subject to the *gezeirah*.
- In practice, with all of these combined factors (*tzirufei heter*), sushi rice in sushi rolls is halachically fine.

## **Kosher Fish (Fins and Scales)**

These fish are all kosher and commonly used in sushi:

- **Salmon**
- **Tuna (Maguro)**
- **Yellowtail (Hamachi)**
- **Mackerel (Saba)**
- **Red Snapper (Tai)**
- **Sardines, Branzino, Sea Bass**

💡 **Note:** Some Sushi restaurants frequently substitute cheaper fish for pricier cuts (Not usually the well-known or expensive ones). The most common substitutes—pollock, tilapia, albacore, whiting, cod—are all kosher fish with fins and scales. While asking is always good practice, there's generally no halachic concern with these common swaps.

### 😬 **Ask Before Eating**

These items may be kosher depending on ingredients:

- Imitation Crab (Kani) – Often kosher! Many restaurants use surimi made from kosher fish like pollock. Ask what it's made of. Often when they list crab, they actually use imitation. Ask.
- Eel Sauce (Unagi Sauce) – Often just a sweet soy-based sauce, but ask to confirm it does not contain real eel.
- Tamago (Egg Sushi) – Ask if it contains meat or chicken broth. If not, it's permitted.
- Seaweed Salad – Fine. Bonito flakes are made from kosher fish and are not a concern. No supervision is needed. Double check all ingredients. Each place makes it a little differently.
- Tempura (Any kind) – Permitted if the ingredients (e.g., vegetables, tofu, kosher fish) are kosher and it's fried in clean oil not shared with meat or seafood.
- Tofu Dishes – Ask if made with vegetarian or kosher-fish ingredients only.
- Udon / Ramen / Soba – Most broths are pork or meat-based. But if made from kosher fish (like dashi), they are permitted.\*
- Vegetarian Dumplings (Gyoza) – Ask about filling and how they're cooked.
- Poke Bowls (Other Fish) – Ask what kind of fish is used. If it's a kosher species, it's fine. Avoid bowls with eel, octopus, or shellfish.

## ✖ Avoid These

These are not kosher and cannot be made kosher:

- **Real Crab, Shrimp, Octopus, Squid, Clams, Mussels, Scallops**
- **Eel (Unagi)**
- **Meat Dishes** – Pork katsu, beef teriyaki, etc.
- **Soups or sauces made from animal bones or shellfish**

## 🍷 Drinks

- **Water, soda, green tea, jasmine tea, oolong tea, barley tea** – All fine.
- **Sake, Shochu, Japanese beer, Japanese whiskey** – All fine, no hechsher needed under these guidelines.
- **Table wine or plum wine** – May not be kosher unless labeled.
- **Mirin or wine-based sauces in cooked food** – Usually **batel** and **not a concern**.

**Note:** Drinking wine = issue unless certified.

Tiny amounts of wine or mirin used in food or cooking = not a halachic issue.

## 📖 Halachic Notes

- **Bishul Akum:** Not a concern for raw fish, and sushi rice is permitted based on multiple combined halachic grounds. Cooked fish is fine too, since they're eaten raw.
- **Pas Palter:** Not relevant in Japanese cuisine—there's no bread.
- **Yogurt and Gelatin:** Rare in this cuisine, but both are permitted under these standards.
- **Mar'it Ayin:** There's no issue with being seen in a sushi restaurant eating kosher. You're ordering known items, and this is a common halachic practice.

- **Toleh B’nemanim:** You may ask restaurant staff what’s in the food and rely on their answers. Today’s allergy liability environment makes almost all responses honest and accurate. You can rely on it.

**ENJOY!**

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**\*Footnote: Bonito Flakes and Fish Dashi**

Bonito flakes (katsuobushi) are made from skipjack tuna, and sometimes niboshi, which refers to dried sardines and/or anchovies. All of these are kosher species.

Dashi, the broth made from these ingredients, is halachically permitted even without certification. These fish are commonly eaten raw, so bishul akum does not apply, and there is no requirement for supervision.

Unless the restaurant explicitly includes shellfish, chicken, or meat, dashi and bonito-based ingredients are kosher without concern. (If they put non-kosher fish, they’re the more expensive ones; they will write it on the menu)