



Baby's First Sushi: Toddler Cultural Enlightenment

by Libby Carty McNamee

After a busy morning running errands, I decided to treat my son and myself to some sushi at a bona fide Japanese restaurant, not the laid-back sub shop next door. After all, I rationalized, Sam would benefit from the cultural experience. Of course, I would be the only one actually eating sushi, since he was only 14 months old. Nonetheless, I was convinced that the exposure would be enriching for him and enhance his general worldliness.

I had brought along a tasty lunch of mouse-friendly tidbits, including goldfish crackers, string cheese, scrambled egg, corn muffin, and peas—"tapas for toddlers." Before I knew it, though, he had my chopsticks gripped horizontally between his teeth and my straw clenched in his sweaty and surprisingly strong little hand. (Although sweaty and maybe a bit greasy too, it is a very cute little hand. I should know.)

I indulged myself by ordering steamed dumplings and three delectable sushi rolls. With his belly full of "tapas," Sam was one happy little dude. He started singing jibberish in a high-pitched tone and craning his head to stare at everything and everyone in the restaurant. As I predicted, it was a wonderful cultural experience for him, even if we were in a suburban strip mall light years from Tokyo.

As I bit into my absolute favorite roll, the soft shell crab doused in soy sauce with a hint of wasabi, Sam started to wail. It wasn't the usual "I'm tired" kind of cry or the "I'm hungry" cry. It was the "HELP ME NOW, MA-MA" kind of shriek. I snapped my head over to him to find out what the heck was going on. What happened? I couldn't figure it out for the life of me. In a panic, I went through my mental checklist. He had just finished eating, thus he wasn't hungry. He was still in his highchair, so he couldn't have gotten into any trouble. He wasn't ready for a nap yet, and he wasn't constipated (trust me on that one). What was it then? He began to screech even louder. My heart lurched, but I was at a loss. I felt so powerless to help my pitiful little Saminator.

I glanced down at his crumb-covered lap and saw a familiar bright green color smudged on his pudgy little hand. No-o-o-o-o-o-o! It couldn't be that!

YES! Sam had scooped up the huge gob of wasabi off my wooden tray and stuffed it into his tiny unsuspecting mouth. The poor little guy! How had he managed to do that without me noticing? I was just inches away from him playing the doting mother! Some doting mother I was....

First, I tried to get the remainder of the runny green gunk out of his mouth, but to no avail. Then I kept trying to get him to drink some milk out of his sippy cup to wash it all down. He kept pushing it away as if to say, "Mom, I've got enough going on in my mouth right now!" I couldn't get through to him that it would help!

Finally, it all blew over like hurricanes eventually do, and it was time to settle up on the bill and head home for naptime. Our table looked like a war zone with used napkins scattered everywhere and various partially chewed tapas spackled all over the otherwise immaculate floor. After giving a generous tip to the waiter, I scooped up Sam and fled the scene, the diaper bag slapping against my thigh with every step.

As I exited the scene of Sam's cultural enrichment, I began to worry that he would have a mysterious aversion to all things Japanese for the rest of his life. I knew what I had to do—take him back there for more sushi before this unfortunate episode became rooted in his subconscious. Maybe I would even give him a bite-sized piece of soft shell crab to try to develop his taste buds. Of course, I would help him out by polishing off the rest of the roll for him so as not to overdo it.

I must admit that I looked longingly into the sub shop as we hightailed it to the car. I'm sure that Sam could have some sort of cultural experience there on a later excursion. They do have Italian subs after all, another regional cuisine to expose him to at an early age. Don't worry—I'll be sure to keep a close eye on the jalapeños. ▽

Libby Carty McNamee is a local freelance writer and attorney who is confident that she will love sushi all her life. However, she is not so sure that her son will ever want to try it again.