

food in the city

Wasabi

SO LONG, AND THANKS FOR ALL THE FISH.

CAN DELICIOUS FOOD SERVED ON CONVEYOR BELTS CONVEY A DEEPER MEANING TO ONE'S DATE? OR IS IT JUST AN EASY MEANS OF AVOIDING PERSONAL CONVERSATION?

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I have never been predisposed to trying sushi or sashimi. I was just never in the cards, and well outside my sense of adventure. Add a fear I grew up with in the West about undercooked pork, chicken and beef, well... let us say I had no plans to "go there." That all changed recently when a very sweet man I had met online told me he was passing through Budapest with a group of friends. Would I care to meet him for dinner, he asked? To my readers, the answer is a foregone conclusion. Yes!

First, he was flying in from Tokyo. So, three months in advance, he asked me out on a date on a specific day, which I put on my calendar and dutifully ticked off each week. It was either very smart or very naive of him to ask so far in advance, as this hungry bunny is a busy one. But either way, it was charming.

Not so charming was his single-subject discussion otherwise. In the interim, when we chatted online, he detailed his love of all things *Star Trek*. I admit to being a fan of the whole saga. It's how we met, editing the Memory alpha wiki site about the franchise, and hanging out in a chat room for its fans. It was a phase, and long before we met I had moved on. I put away my doubts, though. Geeky mating rituals often include references to common ground. It's a kind of substitute for that scary intimacy thing (and to be honest, I also found it cute on that level).

When the day finally came, he called. I immediately liked his British-sounding accent, smiled at his nervous confirmation of our date, and gave him my address. He appeared 10 minutes early, and I did not keep him waiting. He was very secretive about his plans, and handed the cab driver a slip of paper, then fumbled with his bag after an awkward in-the-cab hug. Thankfully, the *Star Trek* uniform from his online profile was not in evidence.

"How is your trip so far?" I asked.

"I enjoy Europe, but I have been looking forward to tonight," he said. I noted a blush, and the overall effect was to make me think, "Oh, how sweet!"

When we pulled up in the 6th district in front of a red sign saying, "Wasabi," I thought, "Oh? Japanese? But why would someone from Japan want to eat Japanese when they travel?"

"I wanted to share something from Japan with you, because you have not been to my country before," he said. "My friends tell me this place is better than the others." We walked in and were seated promptly near a bar where chefs and cooks busily prepared dishes. I ordered a Japanese green tea and he smiled his approval, but proceeded to order warm sake. All the while, a conveyor belt trundled by, with small bits of cooked food atop and cool food below. He followed my eye, and reached to the lower belt.

I froze in place when he set a plate of what I knew was sushi right in front of us and looked into my eyes. "This is maki (sushi in a roll with a dried seaweed wrap)," he said. "I think you will like it." After sliding a piece of gari, or pickled ginger, I later found out, and dabbing some green wasabi (a horseradish garnish) on, he popped one expertly into his mouth and gave me a grin. "This is very good sake, a salmon sushi."

I was completely paralyzed. Apparently this is a symptom of both fear and eating an improperly prepared sashimi, known as fugu (luckily not on the menu). He looked at me for a moment then gestured for me to try a piece. It



was not fugu, but it was still raw fish. I reached for the chopsticks, fully intending to fumble the piece strategically onto the floor. But he stopped me. "Oh, we are sitting in front of the itamae (sushi chef). Maki is not for chopsticks."

I imitated my beau and tentatively slipped a small bit of the sushi into my mouth, then the rest as the salt of the soy sauce hit my tongue. I was fully prepared to fake chewing then swallow whole, perhaps grabbing a plate of teriyaki or yakitori to busy myself with. But instead, I thoroughly chewed the sushi and found myself wanting to reach for more.

My date did first, but, holding his next piece up, questioned, "It's good?"

It was more than good. I nodded as a smile took over, "Yes, thank you."

He blushed a bit and whispered, "You were very afraid, I think, but you were very brave to go ahead and try it."