Sustainable sushi for your pocket

Sushi became popular in the United States about the same time as the macarena, around 1996. But while the pop rumba, worldwide smash hit fizzled the next year, sushi — another worldwide smash hit — was here to stay. Healthy, tasty and perfect for creating the reaching and grabbing mayhem associated with family-style dining, a fashionable new food industry was born seemingly overnight. And why not? Dipped in a bit of soy or ponzu, the stuff is absolutely addictive. In fact, if there is a downside to these aquatic morsels of delight, it is the unfortunate effect that sushi consumption has on oceans that were already in danger of being overfished. But don’t despair. All it takes to be a better sushi connoisseur is a wallet-size sushi guide from the Monterey Bay Aquarium, which can be downloaded at www.montereybayaquarium.org. The guide lists the Japanese names of fish — sake (salmon), hotate (scallops) and katsuo (skippack tuna) — then lists best and worst choices based on where the fish came from and how it was caught. There is a column for good alternatives, which are options that have some health or ecological concerns but nothing ominous that would keep you from enjoying them.

Of course, the best strategy is to have the pocket guide handy and ask the itamae, or sushi master, what’s up with his fish. This exercise can be a lot of fun. You might start with asking what kind of tuna is in, say, the tuna roll.

Hon maguro (bluefin), while exceptionally tasty and easily identified by its high price, is a no-no. The reason: Today’s bluefin population in the Atlantic is 3 percent of what it was in 1960. Hon maguro is in the red column of your sushi guide. But katsuo (skippack tuna), which is in the blue column, is a great choice.

Experience has shown that this type of conscientious ordering, driven by lucid research and a fierce passion for the Earth’s environment, can draw a blank stare from the waitstaff or chef. Again, don’t despair. Simply offer your sushi guide as a gift and enjoy your meal. You have made one more person aware that savvy consumers want sustainable sushi.

Still uneasy about ordering sushi? Here’s a primer.

Aside from the notion of eating raw fish, there is more to brace yourself for if you’ve never eaten in a sushi restaurant, but you are in good company. There are plenty of people who haven’t mustered the courage to give sushi a try.

One event in particular awaits the sushi newcomer with twisted glee. This is maki zushi. Then, of ways, but the most popular way is fish and veggies rolled in rice and seaweed wrappers. This is maki zushi. For instance, sticking your chopsticks straight up in your rice resembles incense sticks and brings to mind a Japanese funeral. Not polite. In the typical American eatery, however, having fun is the name of the game. And when you are done, simply say, “Arigato.”

A profusion of terms

Many artists and critics use the words “environmental art,” “eco-art” and even “land art” interchangeably or at times use the same term to mean different things. At greenmuseum.org, we use “environmental art” as an umbrella term to encompass “eco-art,” “ecocentries,” “ecoventions,” “land art,” “Earth art,” “Earthworks,” “art in nature” and even a few other less-common terms.

“Environmental art” is an older term that is useful but might best be thought of as a starting point for the further exploration of ideas and, given plenty of sun, fertile soil and water, should be expected to transcend its roots. The urge is sometimes just to make up a different term, such as “green art” or “sustainable art” or “Post- Carbon Art” and hope that solves the need for freshness. “Restoration art,” another term that appears occasionally, refers to art that “restores” polluted or damaged ecosystems and landscapes. This would be considered a form of “eco-art.”

Then, there is ecovention. Coined in 1999, the term “ecovention” (ecology plus invention) describes an artist-initiated project that employs an inventive strategy to physically transform a local ecology. As an exhibition-based concept, ecovention is steadily becoming more familiar.

And we’re not done.

There is also the term “art in nature,” which is used more often in Europe, and refers more to creating beautiful forms (usually outdoors) with natural materials found on-site such as flower petals, mud, twigs and icicles. Content-wise, contemporary “art in nature” seems to find more inspiration in a type of Romantic Minimalism, revealing in the abstract beauty and decorative potential of ephemeral natural forms. As such, it usually lacks overt feminist, ecological or political content. What “messages” these works have are much more subtle. Many projects take the form of site-specific performances or installations carefully documented in often stunning photographs which are then sold in galleries or in elegant coffee-table books.

Many of these same artists also describe their work as “land art,” which is an older term from the ’60s and ’70s that has survived in common usage and suggests art made outdoors on the land. Early innovators created simple lines and geometric forms on the earth by walking back and forth and considered it “land art.”

“Crop art” could be considered a variation of “land art” and typically refers to large images made in agricultural fields visible from the air. Some aerial projects involve large numbers of volunteers and a wide range of objects arranged to form an image or convey a message.

“Earthworks” and “Earth art” are also considered as specific forms of “land art” where the idea is to shape the land in aesthetic ways. Many earthworks have involved bringing soil indoors, carving large shapes into the earth in remote places and the creation of monumental cement constructions in the desert that essentially use the earth itself as stage, material and canvas for conceptual art ideas.

Painting and photography addressing environmental issues are also an important part of this movement. “Social sculpture,” “slow food,” “new media art,” “bio-art” and “recycled art” all fit in here, too.

How much the many forms of “environmental art” ends up benefiting the Earth is a matter of further discussion and analysis. If our goal is to create a sustainable human population on the Earth, then I think we are just seeing the very beginnings of where this work is headed. Most art that claims to be “environmental” or “ecological” isn’t really helping the worms and watersheds at all. Until we begin to consider art for non-humans seriously as a means of healing our relationship with the natural world, we will just be scratching the surface of what’s possible.

 Hospitals for the under-35’s are usually given large shapes into the earth.