

Rise of the sushi machine: how robotics is helping promote Japanese cuisine globally

Conveyor belt sushi restaurants in Japan have long embraced robotics to boost turnover. Today, Suzumo Machinery is on a cultural mission to promote restaurant automation and Japanese cuisine worldwide.



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Minako Suzuki,
President,
Suzumo Machinery Company

The global rise in popularity of healthy eating has attracted fast growing international interest into the dietary habits and cuisines of Japan. In fact, the number of restaurants serving Japanese food overseas has jumped 30% in the last two years, from 118,000 to

156,000, thanks in large part to an expanding Asian middle class and the increased demand for Japanese delicacy in North America.

"The characteristics of sushi fit perfectly with the trend of health-conscious eating and triggered the first wave of the Japanese food boom," recalls Minako Suzuki, President of Suzumo Machinery Company, which manufactures and sells rice processing machinery and automated robots for the sushi industry.

"Sushi led the early days of this boom, coming to be sold at supermarkets and other retail shops worldwide, and continued to garner mass appeal with the appearance of conveyor belt sushi restaurants, helping consumers further deepen their understanding of Japanese food culture."

For decades now, conveyor belt sushi chains in Japan have embraced robots to boost serving efficiency and profitability amidst rising fish prices and part-time wages. Today, they are emerging as a role model for Japan's \$213 billion restaurant industry, with restaurants serving staples such as tempura, beef bowls and other Japanese cuisine racing to replace humans with machines.

Amid this increasing global trend,

it is hoped the country and its innovative manufacturers can become a leader in restaurant automation and encourage culinary diversity, especially at a time when labor shortages are forcing the international fast food industry to become increasingly homogenised (symbolised by the seeming ubiquitousness of bland burger, pizza, and coffee chains the world over).

Others fear, however, that automation could potentially devalue Japanese cuisine's characteristic human touch – its relentless pursuit for skill, artistry, and hospitality – that has gained fans all over the world. For Suzumo Machinery Company, its objective is not to undermine Japanese culinary traditions, quite the opposite, says its president. Through applying the advantages of robotics and automation to traditional food preparation, it aims to position Japanese food as a truly cross-cultural staple of the global diet as well as promote traditional Japanese cuisine beyond the realms of the popular dishes such as sushi.

"We dream that one day everyone in the world will be able to enjoy authentic Japanese food, much of which is still only available in Japan. For this reason, we at Suzumo see

it as our mission to make our technology and know-how available to everyone in the business of serving sushi or any Japanese cuisine."

Suzumo offers a range of equipment used to process cooked rice, but its mainstay is the sushi robot, which automates the preparation of sushi rice balls or *sharidama*, turning out up to 80 pieces a minute. *Sharidama* – which are traditionally prepared by a dedicated sushi chef – are bite-size rice balls made of cooked rice flavored with vinegar. The major buyers of the sushi robot include sushi chains and supermarkets, with the company also selling robots that prepare sushi rolls, sushi rice, and other products.

"Our product line-up ranges across 70 models, from compact machines to high-speed large ones for mass production, including sushi robots and other models that produce or serve *sushi*, *onigiri*, *norimaki*, *inari-zushi* and rice burgers with the consummate technique of a professional sushi chef," says Ms. Suzuki. "The most important mission for us is to make people in the world enjoy Japanese rice cuisine in a handy, healthy, hygienically, and of course delicious way.



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