

Stuffed to the Gills: All-U-Can-Eat Sushi

David Freedenberg • Web Contributor • New York

As a longtime lover of sushi and a lifelong glutton, the concept of all-you-can-eat sushi enralls me. When I first moved to New York almost a decade ago, I quickly learned that sushi, like good seats at Yankee Stadium or cab rides to work, is a luxury that only people from the city's upper crust can afford on a regular basis. Just one sushi feast a week could blow my entire food budget for the month.

But my brother had been living here for a couple of years by the time I arrived, so he had a trick up his sleeve. Since meals at **Blue Ribbon Sushi** or even **Tomoe** had to be saved for special occasions or parental visits, my brother suggested all-you-can-eat as a way to load our bellies without completely emptying our wallets. Naturally, I was game.

We met at a now long-defunct sushi joint at the acute corner of Bleeker and Barrow at 7th Avenue. The once-a-week deal was \$17 for the sushi plus \$3 per piece left on your plate. The fish was good, but my memory is hazy because of how high I got from my brain being depleted of oxygen—all of the blood in my body rushed to my belly to help digest the massive infusion of raw flesh. I do, however, distinctly recall pulling no less than three pieces out of my mouth upon discovering, long after beginning to chew, that they were inedible. But my brother and I just chalked those pieces up to the understandable pitfalls of dining at an all-you-can-eat sushi joint.

Since then, sushi grade fish deliveries in New York have vastly improved. I've partaken in more than my fair share of all-you-can-eat sushi meals, and inedible pieces seem a thing of the past. **Funayama**, a spin off from the high class **Yama** just blocks away in the West Village, does two \$23.10 all-you-can-eat nights per week (that's an even \$30 with tax and tip). Their massive cuts are delicious, although the white tuna, my personal favorite, tends to be sub par. Since I discovered Funayama, the thought of paying full price at Yama seems ludicrous. These days, I hardly ever eat any sushi but the all-you-can-eat variety.



photo: Dave Freedenberg

About half way through my gluttonous adventure as a transplant in New York, I made fast friends with a fellow glutton named Gary Washinsky. Gary is half Jewish, half Italian, and one hundred percent native Brooklynite. He lives in the basement of a two story aluminum-sided house in Bensonhurst. His great aunt lives on the top floor and his grandmother lives on the ground floor. When dinner is ready, his grandmother need only poke the ceiling with a broom handle to call her sister and stomp on the floor to call Gary. Life just doesn't get more Brooklyn than that. And luckily, Gary may be the only person in New York who loves sushi more than I do.

For years, every time I visited Gary down in Bensonhurst, I'd demand to eat at **John's Deli** for a roast beef and fresh mozzarella sandwich, **Casa Calamari** for garlicky broccoli rabe, or **L&B Spumoni Garden** for a thick slice of Sicilian square pizza and spumoni. That, or I'd squeeze in at the kitchen table and eat his grandmother's cooking like I was some annoying new character on a long-running sit-com. Gary would always tell me of the all-you-can-eat sushi craze sweeping his neighborhood, but I had my Manhattan spots, and I never wanted to miss an opportunity for Italian food in that classic old Italian neighborhood.

So Gary didn't press the issue, and he gladly joined me for all-you-can-eat sushi in Manhattan. Our culinary relationship continued unchanged until one fateful day when we went to a new all-you-can-eat sushi lunch for \$18 on John Street. We were both very excited, as usual, to sit down and stuff our faces full of sushi with no reservations about price. Indeed, the beauty in the all-you-can-eat sushi experience is that the more you eat, the cheaper each piece becomes.

But when we finally got the waiter's attention to order our third round, he informed us that we'd been cut off. We had grudgingly accepted all of their ridiculous rules—each order could consist of either

nigiri or maki but not both, and no order could duplicate any item in a previous order. But when we were told that we weren't allowed to have anymore anything, we protested. "But the sign out front says 'all-you-can-eat'," I said. "Yeeeeees?" the waiter responded, almost as if he thought I might be lying. "If we can't order any more sushi, that's not 'all-you-can-eat,'" Gary pled. "Yes is it," the waiter retorted. "That's all you can eat. . . You can't eat anymore."

It was absolutely ridiculous. The situation would have been laughable if we didn't take our all-you-can-eat sushi so seriously. We'd been robbed. We weren't really even hungry anymore by that point, but we had been looking forward to getting stuffed to the gills. Walking out of an all-you-can-eat sushi joint merely pleasantly satisfied is like going to a Nena concert and leaving before they play "99 Luft Balloons."

As we walked back toward Gary's office, he only had to give me one knowing look before I caved. "Alright, let's do it. All-you-can-eat in Bensonhurst," I said. And since neither of us had sated his craving with the preposterous "THAT's all you can eat" incident, we made dinner plans for the very next night.

I met Gary at a place called **Wasabi** in the heart of Bensonhurst. There, beneath the elevated train, amongst the fruit and vegetable stands of 86th Street, I sat down to the first of what would turn out to be countless, blissful all-you-can-eat sushi dinners in Gary's 'hood.



photo: Dave Freedenberg

Because this craze has swept Bensonhurst, all of the negative characteristics that are often associated with all-you-can-eat sushi were neutralized. If you can find all-you-can-eat in Manhattan, the deal is offered just once or at most twice a week. In Bensonhurst, all-you-can-eat is a way of life—all day, every day. People also complain that the quality of all-you-can-eat sushi is often low. But in Bensonhurst, the competition is so fierce; no all-you-can-eat joint would dare try to pass off inferior sushi for fear of getting run out of business. And, unlike in Manhattan, the sushi purveyors down in Bensonhurst encourage their customers to eat to their hearts content. They know full well that they've got people walking through the door to gorge. It's a culture of abundance, and no establishment we've tried strays from that notion.

Nevertheless, there is an unmistakable game of cat and mouse being played out in those sushi restaurants. The customer is, naturally, trying to get the most fish for their money. The establishment is, naturally, trying to fill the customer's belly with things less expensive than sushi grade fish. Thus, soup and salad comes with every meal. Also, certain restaurants put a suspiciously large ball of rice beneath imperceptibly thinner than average cuts of fish. But experienced Bensonhurst eaters like Gary know their way around these obstacles.

Gary was born and raised in that part of Brooklyn, so he taught me a few hustles. Since we always push our bulging guts to the limit, there are invariably at least a few pieces left on our plates once we hit that brick wall. And paying extra would go against every fiber in our beings. Gary points out that leftover soup and salad, unlike pieces of sushi, incur no penalties on the bill. When the waiter has his back turned, cleaning our plates is as easy as dropping a few pieces into the cloudy miso soup and smushing the rest between the soup bowl and the salad plate. By the time the dish-washer is wise to our scam, we're safely paid up and out the door.

But all that deception and trickery can wear on your soul. So the best way to avoid the cat and mouse games is to become a regular. That's exactly what Gary and I did at **Kung Fu**, one of the least expensive all-u-can-eat joints in the neighborhood. There is room for less than 10 tables, and an all-you-can-eat meal runs \$18 per person before tax and tip.

We've eaten there enough times that we don't worry when we leave a few pieces on our plates anymore. Our relationship with the Kung Fu staff is solid enough that they wouldn't ever charge us the leftover piece fine. Even though we usually eat enough to put your average all-you-can-eat sushi place out of business, the owner and sushi chefs at Kung Fu always greet us with broad smiles and gleeful, boisterous welcomes.

We've calculated that the deal at Kung Fu comes out to about fifty cents per piece on an average night of eating, yet the quality of the fish is probably higher than it is at most of the competition a block up on 86th Street. Meals often degenerate into shameless eating competitions. If the Japanese folk hero Takeru "The Tsunami" Kobayashi has conquered the ultimate American food a few blocks south at Nathan's Famous Hot Dogs in Coney Island, we feel as though we are the American champions of sushi right there in Bensonhurst. Gary holds the record for pieces consumed in one evening with an astounding 54. Granted, Gary took about three hours to eat it all, and Kobayashi can down as many hot dogs in just 12 minutes. But Gary's record is more impressive to me because he is an amateur. Takeru, I suspect, does it for the money. We do it for the love of the game.



photo: Dave Freedenberg

Gas prices are rising steadily. And Funayama's all-you-can-eat nights in Manhattan are growing in popularity. Many Manhattanites are reluctant to make the trek out to Bensonhurst. Indeed, Asia City, one of the tastiest (though most expensive at \$20 before tax and tip), went out of business last month.

Still, the all-you-can-eat sushi craze in Bensonhurst is far from over. It is kept afloat by savvy locals, not adventurous Manhattanites. As for me, I no longer think of Bensonhurst as just an Italian neighborhood. It is my personal sushi playground. I know now that I have much to learn from Gary Washingsky. He taught me that Bensonhurst is a place where a man can gorge himself on sushi without worries. As Gary as my witness, I will never go pleasantly satisfied again.

All-You-Can-Eat Sushi:

Funayama-24

Greenwich Ave, Manhattan • 212-989-2500

Wasabi

2375 86th St, Brooklyn • 718-266-3500

Kung Fu

1950A Bath Ave, Brooklyn • 718-265-4488

Other Places Mentioned:

Blue Ribbon Sushi

119 Sullivan St, Manhattan • 212-343-0404

Tomoe

172 Thompson St, Manhattan • 212-777-9346

Yama

38 Carmine St, Manhattan • 212-989-9330

Casa Calamari

1801 Bath Ave, Brooklyn • 718-234-7060

L&B Spumoni Garden

2725 86th St, Brooklyn • 718-372-9258

John's Deli

2033 Stillwell Ave, Brooklyn • 718-372-7481

David Freedenberg is a food writer by day and a yellow cab driver by night. Check out the Famous Fat Dave Five Borough Eating Tours he offers at <http://www.famousfatdave.com> and read his blog, The Hungry Cabbie, at <http://www.famousfatdave.com/blog>.