

# No more soggy sushi – Japan to teach UK the way of washoku

By Danielle Demetriou in Tokyo

SUSHI may no longer be an exotic treat for the British public, but the fare served up by supermarkets and fast food outlets often leaves Japanese chefs aghast at the artificially bright colours, soggy seaweed and hard rice.

So, fed up with foreigners failing to honour their cuisine, Japan is to protect its reputation with a tough new set of standards for overseas cooks.

The programme will try to guarantee high quality food at Japanese restaurants around the world by giving chefs training in Japan that will lead to a gold, silver or bronze status and then sending them out to spread their skill.

The popularity of Japanese food is soaring in Britain, yet while a number of Michelin-starred establishments in London showcase the cuisine at its best, all too often, the food served up on conveyor belts and supermarkets shelves is a weak imitation of the original fare.

Yuki Gomi, a chef and cookery teacher who runs Yuki's Kitchen in London, found herself facing an "unappetising" supermarket-bought platter of sushi at a house party.

"There was no flavour, and the seaweed was soggy instead of crisp and dry, the rice was cold and hard," she said. "And it didn't look natural as it was so brightly coloured and each piece of sushi was square."

Akemi Yokoyama, a London-based Japanese chef and washoku teacher, said: "Fundamentally, sushi has to be prepared fresh. The problem with the supermarket sushi is the shelf life."

Rick Stein once fell foul of the Japanese after his attempts to prepare the food on his television programme *Food Heroes* led the country's ambassador to tell him that he knew "nothing about sushi". He was invited to Japan to "learn how to prepare it properly".

As a country that is home to the world's highest concentration of Michelin-starred restaurants, Japan takes its food very seriously – in particular washoku, a term used to describe traditional cuisine, ranging from sushi to high-end kaiseki banquets.

Those who sign up for the new certificates will be drilled in more than just how to provide something delicious.

Washoku has edicts on everything from the angle of a chef's hand as it moulds a piece of sushi rice, to the adornment of seasonal sprigs of foliage – all part of a quest for harmony and balance in flavours, colours and presentation.

Japanese officials hope the new certification system will remedy mistakes commonly made by overseas chefs, which typically range from mishandling raw fish and low hygiene standards, to overlooking the discreetly ceremonial way in which the food is presented to customers.

Eriko Sekiya, who is in charge of promoting washoku at the Food Industries

*'The UK is short of qualified Japanese chefs who are able to provide proper training to the local chefs'*

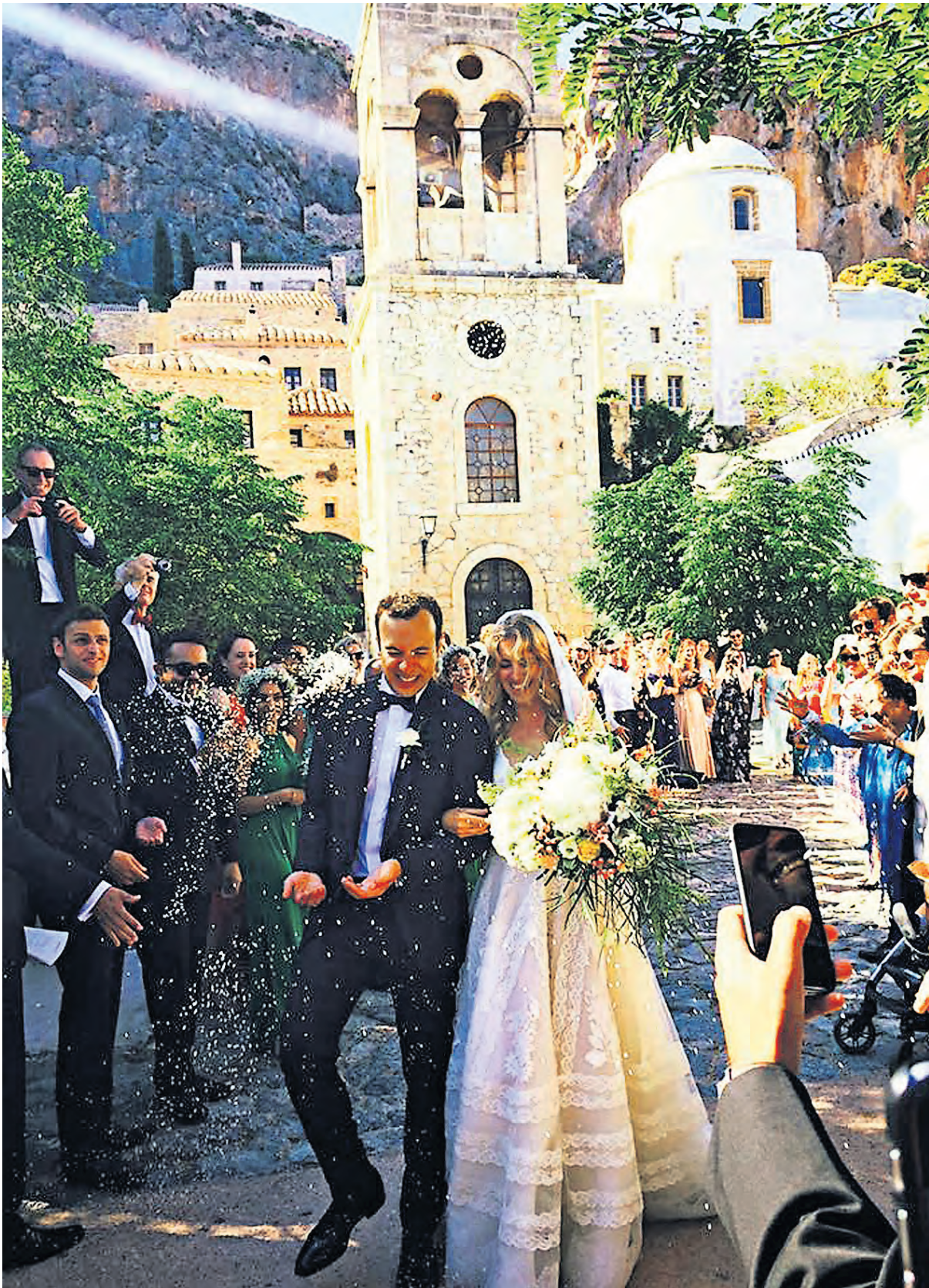
Affairs Bureau, which hopes to introduce the training system this year, said: "One common mistake is touching fish too many times, which causes a rise in its temperature. Another is using cooking tools such as kitchen knives and cutting boards in the wrong way.

"Hospitality towards your customers is another really important aspect of washoku."

News of the certification – which is voluntary – was generally welcomed by restaurateurs and chefs outside Japan, although the extent to which it could be enforced was queried.

Tak Tokumine, founder of the Japan Centre in Piccadilly, London and the noodle chain Shoryu Ramen, highlighted the logistical difficulties of hiring well-trained washoku chefs.

"Due to changes in immigration rules and visa restrictions, it is currently very difficult to sponsor qualified Japanese chefs over to the UK," he said. "Therefore the UK is short of qualified Japanese chefs who are able to provide proper training to the local chefs on Japanese cuisine."



**Honeymoon horror** British newly-weds Charlotte and Edward Beckett are recovering in Nicaragua after the ferry they were on capsized during a storm in the Caribbean, drowning 13 fellow passengers. The Becketts, from London, were among 21 people rescued from rough seas when a giant wave sank the vessel on Saturday. The couple were married in Monemvasia, Greece, last August before guests including the retail expert Mary Portas and were on a delayed honeymoon. The captain of the boat has been arrested.

# Can GM stop blight that risks wiping out bananas?

By Emily Gosden

FROM a single plant grown at Chatsworth in the 1830s, the Cavendish banana has spread to become the ubiquitous variety of banana on our supermarket shelves.

But it is facing extinction from a deadly fungus – and may have to be genetically engineered into a new variant if the fruit is not to be wiped out altogether, experts say.

The majority of bananas consumed in the West are thought to be descended from one plant imported to England from Mauritius in 1830 and grown in the hothouse at Chatsworth House in the Peak District. Chatsworth's gardener was apparently inspired by a depiction of the plant on wallpaper. Mission-

Chatsworth's head gardener was apparently inspired to grow the banana after seeing a depiction of the plant on wallpaper in the house



aries later exported the Cavendish banana to Samoa and the Canary Islands, starting new banana industries.

However, the Cavendish only became the most popular type of banana after the previously dominant Gros Michel, which was said to be tastier, was virtually wiped out by a deadly fungus known as "Panama disease" or "banana wilt" in the Fifties.

Farmers took up growing the Cavendish, which was immune to the fungus. But a new strain of the fungal disease that affects the Cavendish has developed and spread in recent years.

It has already spread across South Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Australia and scientists have said it is inevitable that sooner or later it will reach the Americas where most of the Cavendish crops are grown.

This time, scientists say, there is no immune variant waiting in the wings to replace the Cavendish.

Dr Gert Kema, of the Wageningen University and Research Centre in the Netherlands, told the BBC: "It is necessary that we improve the Cavendish through genetic engineering."

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