Cultural Appropriation vs. Cultural Appreciation (And Sushi!)

AMHERST - On the evening of March 21st, students, faculty, and staff gathered in the basement of Worcester Dining Commons for a night of discussion, learning, and sushi.

The event, put on by the Yuri Kochiyama Cultural Center (YKCC), was titled “Cultural Appropriation vs. Cultural Appreciation,” and looked to inform on the differences between the two phenomena while also teaching about Japanese culture and history and the importance of sushi.

The YKCC invited the chef in charge of sushi at Worcester Dining, Anthony Jung, to speak on Japanese history and culture and teach those present how to make traditional Japanese sushi. Jung worked at both the Berkshire and Hampshire Dining Commons before being promoted to Chef de Cuisine to look over both the Worcester and Franklin Dining Commons in 2014.

Jung began by asking the attendees, “What does everyone know about sushi?” He explained that it began as a way to preserve fish before there was refrigeration. The bacteria worked with the rice and the rice worked with the fish to preserve it, and the term “sushi” actually referred to the rice.
As Jung was explaining all this, a gaggle of students came flooding into the room, as class had just gotten out. The audience doubled in size, and Jung was very pleased to see them all arrive.

He pressed on, talking about how sushi first came to the United States following World War II. The first sushi bar was opened in 1960 in Los Angeles, and the California roll was born. It was at this point that sushi began to become commodified, and the traditional ways were neglected.

Jung lamented this, and stressed the importance of understanding the traditional way. He began his sushi-making presentation by making traditional nigiri-style sushi. Nigiri is made up of an oval-like mound of rice and a cut of fish, usually tuna or salmon, on top with a little bit of wasabi. Jung used yellowfin tuna for his demonstration, and his experienced hands crafted the traditional Japanese dish which he then gave to an audience member.
Jung then moved on to the roll. He demonstrated how to properly make a maki sushi roll, using much of the same ingredients as nigiri. After spreading the rice onto the seaweed, he cut the tuna into small pieces and place them in a line along the rice. Finally, he showed the crowd how to properly roll the sushi using a traditional bamboo mat. “Think of it as an ocean wave crashing onto itself,” Jung said when describing how to roll the sushi.
Chef Jung rolling the maki sushi using a bamboo mat

Jung cuts the roll into the final product

Now that the demonstration was finished, it was time for the attendees to put what they’d learned into action. Stations were set up along both sides of a long table, and people eagerly stepped up and put on plastic gloves, ready to try their skills at sushi-making.
Samantha Lee (second from right) and Lydia Phung (rightmost) cut a piece of yellowfin tuna
Jung roamed among the students, giving tips and helping them with their sushi creations. The rookie sushi chefs gave it their all, making some very quality dishes, which they then got to eat.

Jung was happy to see the students learning an integral part of Japanese culture. “Chefs that work hard and train in these things, we find a lot of value in that,” he said in reference to keeping the traditional methods alive.

Once the sushi-making was finished, everyone was able to try another traditional Japanese dish: miso soup. While they enjoyed their soup, the president of the Japanese Students’ Association, Hana Ohinata, addressed the room to speak about cultural appropriation versus cultural appreciation.

“Appreciation is really learning the history and tradition about the culture and fully appreciating it for what it is, not just the parts you like,” Ohinata said. “Appropriation is where you don’t really learn about the culture and take only the parts you want and use it for personal gain, or just ignore it.”

The message struck a positive chord with the now well-fed audience. As the evening came to a close, Chef Jung thanked Garett Distefano, the Director of Residential Dining, for allowing chefs like himself to do things like this event.
For an album of all of the photos taken at the event, follow this link:  
https://www.flickr.com/photos/155768532@N05/albums/72157689488676970/with/41220921071/

For more information about the Yuri Kochiyama Cultural Center, follow this link:  
https://www.umass.edu/cmass/get-involved/multicultural/ykcc