

Persimmon-Leaf Sushi (Kaki no Ha Zushi)

At first glance, Kawakami's traditional persimmon-leaf sushi is not recognizable as sushi. It comes in packs of neat green rectangles, each one a morsel of fish and rice wrapped snugly in a persimmon leaf. This pressed *oshi* sushi combines the flavors of lightly salted fish and vinegared rice with the slight astringency of its leafy wrapping. The preparation dates back centuries and reveals some of the innovative ways villagers preserved food in the days before refrigeration.

Fish are a staple of Japanese food culture, but Nara Prefecture is far from the coast. Saltwater fish, such as salmon and mackerel, had to be brought from either the Wakayama or Mie sides of the Kii Peninsula, and the journey through rugged mountains took far longer than fresh fish could last. Thus the search began for a way to preserve the fish longer than could be achieved by simply salting it or adding vinegar to the accompanying rice. The solution was to wrap each pressed piece of sushi in a fresh

persimmon leaf, allowing the polyphenols of the leaf to act as a natural preservative.

Today, eight shops in Kawakami produce persimmon-leaf sushi. Each store has its own preparation method (the duration of salting, amount of vinegar, and strength of pressing), creating a range of flavors from strong and salty to light and sweet. The sushi is most commonly made with mackerel, but salmon and other fish are also available. A piece of persimmon-leaf sushi will last unrefrigerated for about three days, but it is best eaten after a single day, when the flavors have had a chance to blend.

Several producers sell directly from their shops, and multiple varieties can also be found at roadside markets, such as Kawakami Gateway and Michi

no Eki Sugi no Yu Kawakami. These stores sell variety packs of sushi from different shops, making it easy to compare the different flavors.