

## What Is Nyotaimori? We Talked to a Naked-Sushi Specialist About Kanye's Controversial 46th-Birthday Spread

L.A.-based chef Mark Scharaga answers our burning questions about the practice, seen everywhere from samurai-era Japan to 'Sex and the City'

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**N**yotaimori, the practice of serving sushi on a woman's naked body, can be traced back to the Edo period in Japan. Fast forward a few hundred years, past the nude-sushi spotlight in 1993's *Rising Sun* and the iconic 2008 *Sex and the City* scene featuring Kim Cattrall's bare body covered in raw fish, and we arrive at Kanye West's recent birthday party.

This past weekend, West, now legally known as Ye, celebrated his 46th with a notable centerpiece: a sushi buffet, served on naked women's bodies. Some social-media users reacting strongly to photos of the event, calling the display misogynistic or just generally strange. Ye's nine-year-old daughter North was among the celebrity guests, sparking further backlash.

Beyond its polarizing effect, though, what exactly goes into such a display? Mark Scharaga, an L.A.-based chef and owner of Nyotaimori Experience and Soyo Sushi Catering, has been adorning bodies with sushi and sashimi since January 2005. And he takes the craft seriously. We spoke with Scharaga about the logistics behind a nyotaimori experience, from pricing to presentation.

### **Tell us a bit about your business.**

We started back in January, 2005. A friend of mine was having a birthday and she asked me to do sushi for her party and she wanted it to be placed on her. I was not familiar with the practice at the time. And so I did some research and started to find out a little bit more about it. I started doing different birthday parties and it

grew from there.

### **Have you received more requests since this Kanye photo went up?**

You know, we've had about 20 in the past week. Usually, we'll see about 10-ish requests, anywhere between five and 10 is normal, request-wise.

### **Looking back on the *Sex and the City* body-sushi episode, did that give your business a bump, too?**

It did. The bigger issue I had back then was I was still based on the East Coast, and so it was harder for me to travel West Coast, because we started getting inquiries from like HBO wanting us to do food design. We [also] got a request to do a body-sushi scene for *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, and we weren't able to accommodate that. Since we've been out on the West coast, we're able to do TV and things like that.

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### **On an average week, how much demand are you seeing?**

It could be as many as four events in a week to one. Sometimes when you give them the costs, they realize it costs more than going to your grocery store and buying sushi. They've either seen that Kanye thing or on TV, then the interest peaks and people will be extremely interested until they find out the price. It's a little bit more involved than they thought.

### **What's the price?**

I prefer not really to go too much in that detail, but I would say if you wanna take a per-person price, it's around 250 a person.

### **And how many people can like one body feed?**

We're really particular in the way that we present. We try not to make them look like a buffet. We're going for the more elegant aspect of it. There's about 60 pieces at one single time, that's kind of a max amount that can go on a body. If you're doing hors d'oeuvres — one, two or three pieces per person — you could feed 30

people pretty easily. We have different price points: we can go from amuse-bouche to cocktail hour to a full omakase dinner, and then of course the price points adjust with that.

**Could you tell me a bit about what goes into the preparation and presentation?**

There's a lot, and that's what people don't realize. We are very specific on ingredients, we only use top-end quality seafood. We are always looking for premium sourcing. Once we get the final headcount, which is usually due about five days before the event, we'll actually place the fish order. And then we'll shop for all the groceries, like the produce and pieces like that.

And then the day of, there's an eight-hour prep window for us. We get everything properly prepped, including the rice, because we go towards more of a traditional style of preparation on the rice. We're very particular about our style.

**How do you recruit the models?**

We have a lot of [models] approach us about it. We also work with some photographers and see what models they may have that might be interested, and they usually have a better read on it. It's kind of hard when you approach models cold, you usually come off as creepy. Like you're out in the Valley and say, "Oh, you know what, sushi would look really good on you."

**Is there a certain body type that you look for?**

Longer is usually better, just for that layout. Time in the gym is usually helpful. Because, you know, things that you don't want to appear always show up a little bit more when you're laying down, especially in the butt area.

Those are things we look at, but I mean, we've had all different shapes and sizes and it depends on what the people want. We usually ask for preferences. Some have tattoos, some don't; some want fully nude, some don't want nude. It's all over the place.

We also have male models. We've done bachelorette parties and LGBTQ events. We don't really discriminate in who we're using for models. We're focused on, how can we make this like a tattoo but it's made out of sushi instead? What can we do to create a painting on this person, where the person is our canvas?

**What are your health-code and food-safety precautions?**

There's a program called Servsafe that a lot of restaurant people go through. It's an education program on proper food handling techniques, and all of our team is Servsafe certified. We're constantly monitoring the time and temperature of all food, to make sure that we're not serving anything that...could potentially [cause] bacterial infections, parasites, or whatever it might be. We have an outstanding health record with my group.

**Is there any specific guideline, like you don't want someone to eat something that has directly touched skin?**

Yeah. Well, you know, hepatitis is very transmissible through the skin. So we always use what we call bamboo leaves, and we chill the bamboo leaves in ice water before we put them on the body and then we put the sushi on that. There's no direct contact with the skin.

**What's cleanup like after the sushi has been eaten?**

Well, the models themselves, we usually hope that we have a shower at the venue. If not, it's really wiping down as best we can, making sure that you have a good place where we can robe 'em up. They'll have a robe handy and be able to get dressed and everything like that in privacy. We escort them out. And then the rest of the cleanup is just regular food cleanup. We just try to make sure that we leave the place better than we found it.

**Have you had any famous clients?**

We've have had a couple. I'm not gonna say any names, you know, NDAs. They usually keep their events very private.

**What's your clientele like? Is there a specific kind of person who's coming to you?**

There's not. I would say more like doctors and lawyers, there's typically high volume for us in that kind of market segment. We've had families, doing birthday parties with kids there, not young-young kids but in those events we make sure that models are a lot more dressed. We've done Christmas parties. Wives do it for their husbands quite a bit — that's more common than you would think, it's one of our primary market segments.

**Can you tell me about the history of this practice?**

It started basically back in the last era of the samurai. They would come back from battle and the geishas would lie on the table when they would adorn them with food. And that was kind of like a celebratory kind of thing. Then it got picked up by the last prime minister of Japan, and he would host people at the palace, and this would be one way that they would show decadence to foreign dignitaries ... it was a whole practice that would go on. It wasn't, like, a common thing. It's never been mainstream.

Over the years, it's had some dark moments, where the yakuza would kidnap women and make them their sushi plate and then at the end of the dinner they would kill them. And that went on for a while. Then it kind of went to the sex districts of Tokyo and places like that, where you could go and find these experiences. It moved over to the U.S. in the '70s. It was not a very widely practiced thing, but again, it was one of those things where rich Japanese businessmen would use this to show other people how wealthy they were. Then, it started getting a little bit more mainstream in the U.S. and got picked up in a couple movies.

**What's the general response to your business?**

We've been attacked for using female models; some people feel like we're exploiting women. All the women are treated very fairly. And honestly the people at these parties that we've done, the majority of those people have been super mindful of the models and their time. They're very admiring of the situation; they're not abusive in those situations. We don't tolerate that. We're very like, "Hey, we don't want any sexual innuendo." Or, you know, "We want to keep this very appropriate. Don't use your mouth. Don't take away from our art by doing something that makes it less than what it is."

**What kind of instructions do you give your models?**

We don't tell them whether or not they should close their eyes. Some of them do, some of them will actually doze off. But they try not to because they usually like to be awake during the whole process. We do try to tell them what the sushi pieces

are and generally where things are presented, so if somebody asks, they can answer.

We tell them not to get engaged in deep conversation or anything that might make them laugh. Those kinds of things can potentially upset the artwork that we've done.

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**KANYE WEST**

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