

Has the handroll sushi wave finally found its way to Philly?

Restaurants specializing in u-shaped handrolls have proliferated from California to New York, as well as on Instagram feeds. Philly now has two options of its own.

[Kiki Aranita](#) March 20, 2025, 10:57 a.m. ET



The classic Toro hand roll is made at Yuhiro Omakase Sushi in the Fishtown section of Philadelphia on Thursday, Feb. 1, 2024. Heather Khalifa / Staff Photographer

Indulging in a sushi omakase can be a luxury unattainable for most budgets, except for the most special of occasions, with high-end

omakase meals running between \$200 and \$300 in Philly — a bargain [compared to New York](#), but still.

Enter temaki — handroll — restaurants, which only serve those filling, rice-reliant portions of a traditional omakase.

Crunchy nori is hit with a clump of warm rice, shaped like a squared-off hard shell taco, tucked into a tiny building-block-like holder, then placed before you. Stand-alone temaki is not cheap, but it's far more affordable than a typical omakase. Also far speedier.

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Temaki first came to life as street food in Japan's Edo period (1608-1898). Its original conical shape made it easy to hold for someone on the go.

Cone-shaped temaki is alive and well in the U.S., at least in the parts I grew up in: They dominate the refrigerator cases at Hawai'i's okazuya, Japanese delis that serve premade food like bento boxes, fried noodles, and, well, temaki.

In New York, temaki culture has evolved to the point where the New York Times asked last September, with a tinge of exasperation, "[Have we hit peak hand roll yet?](#)"

The Scallop Uni Ikura U-Maki roll is photographed at Yuhiro Omakase Sushi in the Fishtown section of Philadelphia on Thursday, Feb. 1, 2024. [Read more](#) Heather Khalifa / Staff Photographer

Handrolls jump from West to East Coast

"It all started with KazuNori," said food writer [Kat Odell](#), who has covered the trend extensively.

Odell cited the [Sushi Nozawa Group](#), the restaurant group behind Sugarfish and KazuNori, as the singular force that pushed handrolls from the West to the East Coast.

Temaki is now entrenched in its Instagram era, the U-shaped variant showing up more frequently on menus and feeds. Unlike the temaki of my youth, they're constructed moments before eating, so they're at their very best.

I was spoiled while living in Manhattan, as handroll restaurants like KazuNori have locations close to anywhere I might get a temaki hankering: Greenwich Village, Midtown East, NoMad, and Union Square (there are also seven locations in Los Angeles).

For a more elevated experience than KazuNori (where the decor is sparse, and the roll makers emphasize speed over finesse), there are four locations of [New York-born Nami Nori](#), which have proliferated in Instagram feeds with its carefully styled, bubu arare-speckled rolls nestled in branded wood holders. Beyond these two chains, a number of smaller handroll establishments are also spreading, including Kamasu by Kissaki, Douska, and Sushi Saint.

Philly was late to the omakase game — years behind New York, where peak omakase [may also have been reached](#). The handroll wave is largely still a ways out from our turf, but we have some options.

Two temaki specialists so far in Philadelphia

Philly has two temaki choices, to be precise, both of which offer diners laminated, illustrated guides to eating their handrolls. It's sort of like when xiao long bao or soup dumplings were first introduced to Western diners, and tables at Taiwanese megachain Din Tai Fung featured guides to safely consuming the molten balls of broth and meat encased in balloon-like dumpling skins.

The Toro Asian Pear Guac U-Maki roll is photographed at Yuhiro Omakase Sushi in the Fishtown section of Philadelphia on Thursday, Feb. 1, 2024. Read more Heather Khalifa / Staff Photographer

One is [Yuhiro](#), opened in fall 2023 by Sam Lin of Sakana, whose menu is reasonably priced. A classic yellowtail handroll is \$8, while the most expensive “premium u-maki rolls,” like the wagyu, uni, scallop, and ikura roll and the wagyu, foie gras, and truffle roll, are \$25.

All the u-makis are diminutive, three-bite affairs, akin to Nami Nori’s. Yuhiro shines with its wackier-sounding rolls: toro Asian pear guacamole, salmon tomato, and caramel salmon mango — the latter sees the mango dusted with sugar and kissed with a blowtorch for a marvelously crunchy shell, then topped with a glitter dusting of masago (capelin fish roe). Every roll is better than its menu description.

Yuhiro sits on a subdued corner in Fishtown, a far cry from Manhattan’s

boisterous temaki joints. There's the expected austere plywood sushi bar, but I'm handed a dish of wasabi that has been sitting out so long it has turned brown, and a tepid pot of tea tasted like boiled water. There's a tinny speaker doing its best to fill the dining room with the dulcet strains of Katy Perry's greatest hits.

In November 2024, Chubby Nori entered the chat. Situated above Chubby Cattle in Chinatown, a hot pot restaurant, and housing seven spillover booths that serve hot pot in its dining room, you might mistake it for one of those rarefied omakase counters.

Philly has the Chubby Group's only handroll bar so far — most of its locations and forthcoming restaurants are hot pot or shabu shabu-style restaurants — though additional Chubby Nori locations are set to open in Los Angeles and New York in coming weeks.

At Chubby Nori in Chinatown, there's the light plywood paneling, cushy chairs, and walls consisting of shoji screens. Each seat is outfitted with a square platter on top of its raised bar that allow diners to grasp each roll with their fingers moments after they are served.

Chubby Nori doesn't try to stuff you with rolls and shove you out the door while cleaning your portion of the counter with disinfectant the moment you're done eating, like at KazuNori, but the wasabi is green-dyed horseradish, like at most lower-end sushi restaurants. The cooks behind the line wear vinyl gloves and heat up cooked fish for certain rolls with minimal implements: blowtorches and a tiny toaster oven.

U-temaki roll at Yuhiro Sushi. Michael Klein / Staff

An accessible luxury

Compared to New York's higher-end, more precious Nami Nori, and Philly's own Yuhiro, both of which serve rolls that are a mere three bites, Chubby Nori's weigh in at a hefty six to seven bites. Three rolls are plenty for a light meal; five might leave you stuffed.

Chubby Nori attempts to provide an accessible luxury, with rolls containing items like truffle avocado and yellowtail starting at \$5.50 and \$6.50, respectively, and an A5 Miyazaki wagyu roll starting at \$16.50, to which you may add Hokkaido uni for an additional \$7.50 and foie gras with an apple compote for another \$5.50.

Uni, wagyu, foie gras, truffle. These are all the loudest signifiers of

luxury when it comes to food. And you can get them all at Chubby Nori for a bargain, rolled well enough.

Chubby Group is able to offer such pricing because of innovative approaches to reordering their supply chain, said cofounder David Zhao, 30, who started the business in the two gap years he took before going to college at Wharton.

Zhao said Chubby purchases entire cows, and large quantities of fish, cutting out the middlemen that usually shuttle these ingredients from producers to restaurants. Chubby also owns its own frozen logistics trucks, with routes connecting cities that Chubby Group operates in. Chubby Group's first Philadelphia location, situated below Chubby Nori, opened in 2018, in Zhao's second year of college.

Chubby Group is on an opening rampage, with 30 more locations of its concepts, from hot pot to handroll bars, set to open around the country by the end of 2025. Zhao compared the business model to that of Netflix and Amazon, but in Chubby's case, conveying high-quality foods to the masses, with an emphasis on memberships. There are 50,000 paying members of the "Chubby Club," who receive meal discounts.

"The key to the handrolls is that we want our customers to be able to use our loyalty program across the board, while also utilizing our supply chain at all these different concepts," said Zhao, who framed the business plan from a technology-driven perspective. That's why the Chubby Group wants to go beyond hot pot, BBQ, and skewers, and into handrolls.

Philly could probably use the Netflix of handrolls — plus a few more

options — [amid all the recent and upcoming raw bars.](#)