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Red Sox pitcher Hideki Okajima (left) and auction winner Graig Fantuzzi of Boston (right) get a sushi-making lesson from chef Youji Iwakura at Basho Japanese Brasserie.

For Sox pitcher, sushi is a hit

By Lisa Zwiern
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Hideki Okajima, out of uniform, looks on intently as chef Youji Iwakura demonstrates how to spread sushi rice on a sheet of nori, the paper-thin dried seaweed, then sprinkle it with toasted sesame seeds, flip it over, add crab stick, julienned cucumber, and slices of avocado to turn out a California roll.

The Red Sox pitcher and his wife, Yuka, will take their turns practicing what they learn. The two are at Basho Japanese Brasserie, in the Fenway, not just for good sushi, but for a good cause. "Sushi lesson and dinner with the Okajimas" was auctioned off at a May fundraiser for Good Sports, a Boston-based organization whose goal is to increase participation of disadvantaged kids in sports and fitness activities. "It's increasingly expensive for kids to play sports, with user fees at schools and [recreational] leagues, and equipment is a big part of that cost," says Good Sports CEO Melissa Harper, whose organization distributes equipment and apparel to children who need it.

The lucky bidders for this particular evening are Graig and Jacqueline Fantuzzi of Boston. The Okajimas and their children, son Yuki, 6, and daughter Yume, 4, meet the Fantuzzis and 4-year-old Owen on a night when the lefty reliever is off.

Basho owner Jack Huang ushers the families and inter-

preter Gyoku Matsubara Block to the sushi bar, where chef Iwakura takes over. He explains every step in Japanese while demonstrating how to make California and tuna rolls and nigiri (hand-pressed sushi rice) with butterflied boiled shrimp.

According to Yuka Okajima, who grew up in Tokyo, sushi is not a home-style dish. Some cooks make it for special occasions, such as the spring celebration of Setsubun in early February, but real sushi is for sushi chefs who have access to the highest-quality fish. And, she adds, they know which fish to serve and in what order.

Yuka and Jacqueline Fantuzzi (whose mother is Japanese) take their turn first. Both women, hands clad in plastic gloves, make impressive California rolls, using the bamboo mat as an aid and pressing down with a firm grip to square off the roll. Chef Iwakura teaches them to dip the point of the large chef's knife in water and let the water drip down the cutting edge before slicing the rolls. This helps make a clean cut.

Next they assemble tuna rolls, placing diced fresh tuna on rice and rolling it with the seaweed wrapper on the outside. As Yuka cuts her roll, Hideki teases her. "Don't cut the gloves. When we eat, we don't want to taste the plastic." She looks proudly at her rolls. "Look, the tuna is right in the middle." But Hideki notices that one piece is shorter than the others. "You can eat the small one," he says.

When the pitcher is in town,

the Okajimas eat mostly at home. Yuka cooks healthful meals with vegetables, fish, chicken, and pork; they don't eat much beef. Sometimes they go out for sushi to O Ya, but "the restaurant is small and it makes it hard to bring the kids," he says. With their children in tow, the family usually heads to Oga's in Natick.

The men don black chef's caps to take their lesson. The pitcher laughs easily and often at himself. Yuka says that Hideki has made sushi once before, about a year ago, but he handles the ingredients like a professional. When it's time to cut the rolls, he hesitates and defers to the chef. Yuka explains that "he's scared to use a knife," for fear of hurting his hands. "He doesn't use any scissors or knives at home," she says.

Graig Fantuzzi, a portfolio manager at Harvard Management Co., appears happy just to be there. He's a big baseball fan; he played in college at Washington and Lee University in Virginia and his father was a minor league player. Both he and Jacqueline grew up in New Jersey and moved to Boston three years ago, so they consider themselves Yankees and Red Sox fans.

There are big smiles all around when the lesson is finished and the dishes are on display. When the chef is asked who did the best, he smiles. "They all did," he says diplomatically.

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