

# A plant-based approach to sustainable seafood

SB smartbrief.com/original/2017/09/plant-based-approach-sustainable-seafood

9/10/2017



As consumers increasingly seek out [plant-based](#) foods in an effort to improve their health and support sustainable practices, restaurants and food brands are innovating to transform plant ingredients into main dish material. Sixty-five percent of consumers are interested in sustainable options that include alternative proteins when dining out, according to the Hartman Group.

Alternatives for dairy products and meat abound, and improved formulations that deliver textures and flavors that are closer to the real thing are making these options more popular with consumers. While most companies producing plant-based alternatives to animal protein are focused on red meat and milk alternatives, a San Francisco-based company turned its attention to the ocean to create a seafood alternative.

[Ocean Hugger Foods](#) got its start when chef James Corwell visited a Tokyo fish market and saw giant warehouses full of tuna. The vast amount of fish for sale inspired him to create a plant-based version of tuna to help alleviate some of the demand that's causing the world's oceans to be overfished. Corwell spent more than four years developing Ahimi, the world's first plant-based substitute for raw tuna.

Ahimi made a splash this year at events including the [National Restaurant Association Show](#) and the [Menus of Change](#) conference at the Culinary Institute of America. The tomato-based tuna alternative is now available for use in foodservice nationwide, either in strips or small pieces.

Ahimi's most common use is in sushi bars, and the brand has a distribution deal with Wismettac Asian Foods, one of the country's largest Asian foods distributors, Ocean Hugger CEO David Benzaquen said. "In addition to being used to make plant-based sushi or poke bowls, we have been intrigued to hear that restaurants are using our product with tuna as an 'extender'... the same way one might use soy in ground beef," he said.

The sushi bars of Whole Foods stores in New York City and Los Angeles will begin offering Ahimi next month, Benzaquen said. "We are also available online through meal delivery company Veestro, and at a number of colleges, universities and corporate cafeterias -- including some of the country's largest tech giants," he said.

Next year, Ocean Hugger will release two additional fish facsimiles developed by Corwell. An eggplant-based eel product called Unami and carrot-based salmon called Sakimi will enter the market in the first half of 2018.

### Unami eggplant-based eel

Benzaquen said the process used to create these two new products is the same as the one used to make Ahimi. The most challenging part of the process is erasing the taste of the base ingredient and creating a texture and flavor that mimic that of a particular fish, he said.

“The Ahimi (tomato-based tuna) and Sakimi (carrot-based salmon) have some similarities in their textures, though the tuna tends to be fattier, while the salmon tends to be silkier, he said. “The Unami (eggplant-based eel) is a different beast, as unagi is not served raw for sushi, and it tends to have a more slippery texture than other fish. For that reason, the texture of eggplant is more appropriate.”

While both new products are fully developed, Benzaquen said scaling them to commercialization will take time. In keeping with its commitment to health and sustainability, the company sources only natural, non-GMO ingredients, including its soy sauce. This fall, Ocean Hugger will announce the formation of its new Advisory Board, Benzaquen said, which includes scientists and environmentalists who will help the company measure and define its impact.



---

If you enjoyed this article, [join SmartBrief's email list](#) for more stories about the food and beverage industry. We offer 20 newsletters covering the industry from restaurants to food manufacturing.