

## Rare Rewards

25 April 2008

The rewards of travel are many.

Some are small and some are big.

And some rewards, the rarest rewards, are both at the same time.

One evening we were sitting at Mi Chico, a restaurant in the small Chilean Patagonia seaport village of Coleta Tortel, admiring the view when Carlos walked up with a blue plastic crate. He put it on top of the restaurant's porch railing, opened the door, and said something in Spanish I couldn't understand to Roxany, the cook and manager.

Whatever he said brought a broad smile to her face and to that of Manuel, one of their friends, sitting at the table next to us. She dropped what she was doing, Manuel jumped up from his seat and they hurried outside to admire the blue crate.

Being of a curious mind, I slowly stood up and sauntered over to the front window to get a better look.

The three of them were gathered around the crate, chatting happily, admiring its contents, blocking it from my view. Whatever was in it was apparently special, unusual and worthy of celebration.

Finally they shifted position and I could see between them. What I saw in that blue crate, perched upon the railing, was almost beyond my comprehension. My mind, at first, refused to believe I was seeing it, right there, so close, only a few meters away from my very eyes.

I turned from the window, bursting with joy. Running towards the door I spouted to Steph, "It's uni! It's an entire crate of fresh uni!"

I bolted through the door and spilled out onto the deck, smiling broadly.



Photo by Stephanie Hackney

Carlos breaking open the first uni



Photo by Stephanie Hackney

My first look at fresh uni

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The three of them looked at me, noted my excitement and parted. They revealed before me, close enough to touch, an entire crate of uni, direct from the fishing boat, its contents still dripping sea water. Roxany, noting my awe, said something and ducked back into the restaurant.

Previously, my only experience with live uni was at aquariums, and then it was only a few. This was, by far, the most uni I had seen in my lifetime. I stood back from it and took it all in.

What a sight it was, a crateful of treasure as precious as any booty a seagoing pirate ever plundered.

But this treasure was not as durable as a ruby or a bar of silver, this treasure would only last for a few days before it melted away. This treasure was one of the world's most cherished and short lived, this treasure was fresh uni.

The only uni I'd ever tasted was at least a few days old and already making its way down the path of deterioration and spoilage. The only place I'd tasted it any fresher than that was in a sushi bar at the Tokyo fish market where it comes off the boats, is packaged, sold and across the street in the sushi bar on the same morning. What I had in Tokyo was fresh, no doubt, but nothing like this.

This uni had been plucked by a diver only a few hours before. It was wet, live, and glistening with Pacific Ocean water. I was exultant, but had no idea what to do next. I'd never seen how the meat of uni was accessed and removed.

At that very moment Roxany reappeared brandishing two large knives. She gave one to each of the guys, wisely measuring me up as much too inexperienced to trust with a deadly weapon next to a crate of treasure balanced precariously on the railing.

Carlos didn't waste any time demonstrating how it was done. He used the back, blunt side of the knife blade to crack the uni in half, tapping a circle around it like he was opening a hard boiled egg. He put down the knife, grabbed the top half and opened up the prize.

Inside were five pieces of the most precious seafood in my world, uni.

I didn't see any forks or spoons around so I expected what came next. He took his fingers, scooped out a piece and downed it. A beautiful, glowing smile spread across his face.

He held out the uni to me and I pulled out a piece.



Photo by Stephanie Hackney

Preparing for my first taste of fresh uni



Photo by Stephanie Hackney

The last photo of the old, pre-fresh-uni, me

I literally quivered in anticipation. This was the freshest uni of my lifetime. I wondered what it would taste like. Would it taste different from the uni I'd sampled in sushi bars all around the world?

I fingered up a piece and put it in my mouth.

The taste was nothing like what I'd ever experienced before. I knew instantly that what I had in the past, even at the fish market in Tokyo, was nothing like what I was experiencing now. Every piece of uni I'd ever eaten in my life, and I'd eaten hundreds, was something completely apart from this.

Always before there were variations in taste and freshness, some good, some bad, some not even edible. But, no matter what variation, there was always a distinctive uni flavor, strong or mild, depending on how fresh it was.

That uni flavor, and its texture, is what bifurcates the planet's people into two distinct groups, those who love uni and those who loathe it. There is no middle ground with uni.

And there was no middle ground for me at that moment either. I found uni nirvana. I discovered what uni actually tastes like - sea air.

Fresh from the ocean uni doesn't taste like the uni you get in the city or even in beach towns. Fresh uni from the ocean tastes like you are eating the fresh, clean air on the open ocean. It has the slightly salty taste of ocean water and little else but an extremely light, tissue paper delicate, gentle as a blown kiss, flavor of uni.

It was heavenly.

A few weeks later we were in another seaport shopping at the fresh fish market. As I walked past the tables of salmon and unidentifiable southern ocean fish something caught my eye.

There, in front of a fish stall, was a crate of uni. On top were three open uni in front of a two liter bottle of freshly harvested uni meat. I was agog. I was staggered. I'd never seen that much uni meat in one place before.

I walked past, twitching, not trusting myself so close to so much potential pleasure.

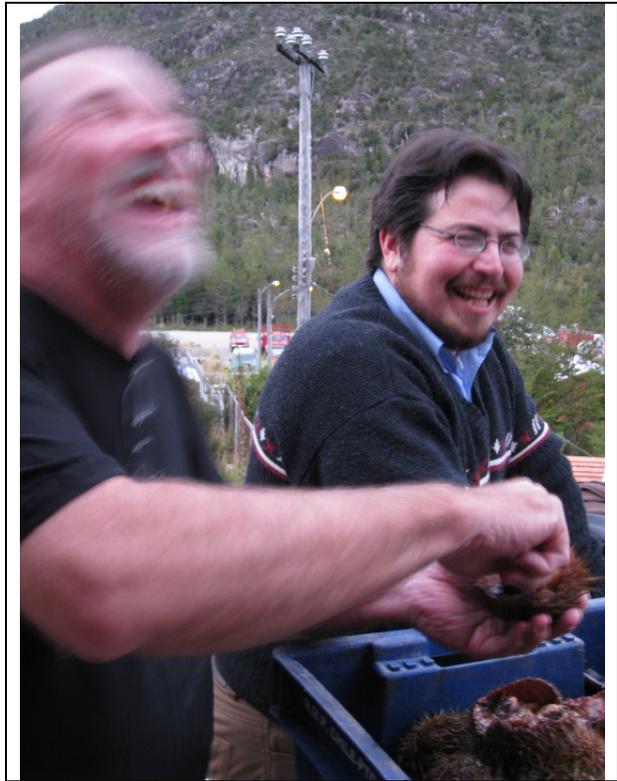


Photo by Stephanie Hackney

No photo could better capture my first taste



Photo by Stephanie Hackney

Plotting to hide the crate of uni under my shirt

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But later I returned and bought a smaller bottle, just to try it out. I had half the bottle that night and the second half the following day.

The bottled uni was good. The first half was as good as any sushi bar uni I've had anywhere in the world. By the second day it was beginning to slide, but it was still as good as the uni I've paid top dollar for in cities around the world.

Typically, uni is one of the most expensive items on a sushi bar's menu, topped only by toro, the fatty part of the tuna, another of my favorites. I typically pay \$6 to \$8 (U.S.) for two pieces of uni at a neighborhood sushi bar, more to much more at city and high end sushi bars. Because it's so expensive, I usually only get one order of two pieces as a special treat.

In Coleta Tortel, where I first tasted fresh uni, the price at the boat was 12 uni for \$1 (US). With five per uni that would have yielded 60 pieces. I have no idea how many pieces were in the bottle I bought at the fish market, but I'd guess at least 50, probably closer to 70. The bottle of uni cost us \$10 (US) or about what one order of two pieces of uni meat costs in a sushi bar.

If you are on my side of the line bifurcating the world's population by uni, those are very good numbers. But, the numbers mean very little when compared to the taste sensation of truly fresh uni. Tasting that fresh uni was one of my life's best culinary moments, ranking with any of the world's nicest restaurants or best-kept-secret neighborhood eateries I've enjoyed.

The taste of fresh uni was a reward of travel. It was a small reward in size but a huge reward in life experience.

It was a small and big reward at the same time, the rarest of all rewards.



Fresh uni at the fish market



My bowl of uni for dinner



My bottle of uni

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Uni is the Japanese name for sea urchin.

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Unless otherwise noted, all photos by Douglas Hackney.

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Photo by Jorge Valdes

Douglas and Stephanie Hackney are on a two to three year global overland expedition.  
You can learn more about their travels at: <http://www.hackneys.com/travel/index.htm>