

## Trend Alert: Fast-casual Poke



Thanks to a trio of trends—food bowls, health-conscious dining, and the mainstreaming of sushi—poke shops are popping up across the mainland.

### WHAT IS IT?

Poke (pronounced poh-kay) is a traditional [Hawaiian dish](#) made from chunks of raw fish, salad mix-ins, and seasonings. It's an unfussy meal served at restaurants, gas stations, surf shacks, grocery stores—you name it. The first poke eateries to hit the continental U.S. were full-service affairs like New York City's Noreetuh. But recently, poke's become a hot [fast-casual](#) concept.

"In major cities, you see a thriving sushi bar on every block, and poke is just a natural evolution of that—but it's more affordable, more portable," says Seth Cohen, co-founder of [Sweetfin Poke](#) in Santa Monica, California.

### WHERE IS IT?

You can find poke across the country, but the biggest concentration is on the West Coast.

Chris Park began experimenting with poke while running a sushi restaurant in San Diego. After it folded, the invasion of poke joints in Los Angeles and Orange County inspired him to open [Poke Go](#) in San Diego. "Initially it was mainly [younger diners](#) who wanted to try something different, but word spread," says Park, who has three new locations set to open this year.

Competition in SoCal is fierce, and Sweetfin Poke is one of the biggest players. Cohen, along with co-founders Alan Nathan and Brett Nestadt, opened their first location in Santa Monica last year, and have plans to open five more.

But poke isn't limited to the Golden State. In Boulder, Colorado, [Motomaki](#) serves tuna, salmon, or Hamachi poke (\$10) alongside its fast-casual sushi offerings. In New York City, [Wisefish Poke](#) is already drawing crowds, and "Top Chef" veteran Lee Anne Wong's [Sweetcatch Poke Bar](#) is slated to open in the city this year.

## HOW'S IT SERVED?

While sushi and [ceviche](#) are known for their crisp, acidic flavors, poke plays more bold and savory. Most poke eateries offer both signature bowls and a mix-and-match option. "Customers who come in for the first time typically want a signature bowl before they jump into building their own," says Cohen.

Sweetfin offers more than 70 million combinations of base, fish, mix-ins, and sauces (\$7.95 to \$12.95). Bases include bamboo rice, kelp noodles, and kale salad, and sauces range from creamy mayos to spicy sriracha ponzu and tangy yuzu kosho. The seemingly endless add-ons include flying fish eggs, pickled shiitake mushrooms, chopped kale, wasabi toasted coconut, macadamia nuts, and crispy-fried garlic (premium add-ons are \$1 each).

Chef Jerome Ito of [Go Fish Poke Bar](#) in San Jose, California, says poke's versatility is part of its appeal. Along with noodles, greens, and white and brown rice, Go Fish customers can choose a base of tortilla chips for their poke (\$10.50 to \$13.50), which turns it into a shareable nacho-like appetizer.

The variety also encourages repeat visits, since customers have many different options to try. "Diners get a lot of bang for their buck from a poke bowl," Ito says. "I don't think this trend is going anywhere anytime soon."

*Have a perfect poke dish? Share it on [Facebook](#).*