

**CHEF'S  
CHOICE**

22 Culinary Masters Tell How

**JAPANESE  
FOOD  
CULTURE**

Influenced Their Careers  
and Cuisine

**Saori Kawano  
Don Gabor**

Excerpted from *Chef's Choice: 22 Culinary Masters Tell How Japanese Food Culture Influenced Their Careers and Cuisine* by Saori Kawano and Don Gabor  
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## BARRY WINE

Restaurant Consultant, Past Owner/Chef,  
The Quilted Giraffe, New York City

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Envisioning an American restaurant that would be equal to the best restaurants of Europe, Barry Wine taught himself to cook and opened The Quilted Giraffe in New York City in 1979. The restaurant's success served as the first blow to the prevailing belief that only French cuisine should be served at fine restaurants. *The New York Times* hailed The Quilted Giraffe as "perhaps the most extravagant and innovative restaurant in America." Private farming of vegetables, fine dining take-out, and loyalty to in-season ingredients were early innovations. Barry Wine is often credited with initiating tasting dinners, the use of artistic dishware, and the blending of Asian flavors, preparation, and presentation techniques.

Barry Wine's extensive study and expression of Japanese culinary techniques seeded his celebrity in Asia. The restaurant sold its lease and closed in 1992. Since then, Barry Wine has planned and built a highly acclaimed executive dining club for Sony and has also consulted on hospitality matters for owners of iconic office buildings.

## Influences

*I guess Nouvelle Cuisine was what we were doing, but our tasting menus for Nouvelle Cuisine looked Japanese.*

**T**he Quilted Giraffe started in New Paltz, New York in 1975 as a really simple restaurant. At that point, I was a working lawyer, and I had never been to Japan. My wife, Susan, had an art gallery, clothing store, and toy store—separate little businesses in one tiny store. In order to get more business, we said, “Let’s have a restaurant, and we’ll get ladies to come for lunch and go shopping.” The name came about when, coincidentally, somebody came into the art gallery and said, “I want to do an exhibition of my quilts,” and the quilts had pictures of giraffes on them. So we bought all of the quilted giraffes and hung them on the walls. It was kind of simple. I mean, not sophisticated. It looked like a children’s nursery.

The Quilted Giraffe didn’t have any Japanese influences until after 1983, several years after we moved to New York. Before that, I had been to France and saw this thing called a “tasting menu”—degustation is what they call it. A tasting menu is many courses served in small portions. That was one of the things that The Quilted Giraffe pioneered. We were probably the first restaurant to serve a tasting menu in America. Not even the French restaurants here were doing it.

A tasting menu is very difficult to do. In a typical meal, the customer gets two or three courses. With a tasting menu, you’re giving them 10 courses, so you’re cooking a lot of food! Timing is very important, and with respect to timing, the smaller the ingredients are cut up, the faster they cook. At The Quilted Giraffe, I was doing that to make multiple courses, but the dishes started looking Japanese because of the way the ingredients were cut. I was always interested in dishware, and I liked the way Japanese food was presented in magazines. I guess Nouvelle Cuisine was what we were doing, but our tasting menus for Nouvelle Cuisine looked Japanese.

In 1983, there were many Japanese in New York, buying real estate, eating and drinking wine, and wanting to learn about everything American. Many were guests at The Quilted Giraffe. One

day a Japanese customer said to me, “Your food looks Japanese. Why don’t you go to Japan, and I’ll introduce you to some people. You’ll get to see some Japanese restaurants.” So that’s how the Japanese influence at The Quilted Giraffe came about.

*I was lucky, because my first day in Japan I met Mr. Shizuo Tsuji, founder of the TSUJI Culinary Institute.*

Tsuji-san took me to Kitcho, the most famous kaiseki restaurant in Japan. The food, the service—everything at Kitcho—became the standard for The Quilted Giraffe. That day I also met the son of Akio Morita, who was co-founder of Sony Corporation and whose family had a miso business in Nagoya. It wasn’t until later, maybe in 1986 or 1987 that I met Mr. Sumihara and his “extended family,” who 272 · BARRY WINE ed Tenrikyo. They were probably the NORIEVIKI SUGIE ones who taught me the most about Japanese culture. I became very close with them. I visited them many times when I was in Japan and incorporated what I learned at The Quilted Giraffe.

On one occasion, Mr. Sumihara arranged for his daughter, who was extremely interested in food and cooking, to come to New York and do a 10-course kaiseki dinner party for about eight of the most important people that he knew. She brought her own dishes for the dinner, and when it came time to go back to Japan, she left me all of these very beautiful, beautiful dishes! So that was one of the things that got me started using Japanese dishware. Soon after that, I started going on trips to Japan to buy dishware.

## Cuisine

*We thought having a coffee was part of dinner, and we didn’t want guests to try to save \$2.00 and not get coffee.*

In 1975 in New Paltz, a complete dinner at The Quilted Giraffe was \$9, and you could buy Château Lafite by the glass. We had a special wine night on Thursdays, and we'd sell glasses of wine for \$3.50. After we moved to New York in 1979, the price on the first menu, I think, was \$22.50. We always served a complete prix fixe dinner—never à la carte. I didn't believe in it. I wanted everyone to have the real experience. We didn't want them not to have an appetizer even if they thought they wanted to be cheap. We even included coffee in our dinners, whereas in most French restaurants with prix fixe dinners, coffee was an à la carte extra. We thought having a coffee was part of dinner, and we didn't want guests to try to save \$2 and not get coffee.

Once we were in New York, we were busy, and customers would all say it was very good. At the beginning, critics didn't say it was very good. Food critic Mimi Sheraton first gave it one star in *The New York Times*, and Seymour Britchky called it "poor." But the customers always really, really liked what we were doing, so we raised our prices every six months or so and went from \$22.50 to \$27.50 to \$35 to \$45 for a kaiseki dinner. I'd come back from a trip to Japan and say, "When we open next week, let's be \$55 this time." We were almost testing how high we could go, and by the end, a kaiseki dinner was \$135. In 1991 or 1992, that was really a lot of money. Finally, by 2000, the other restaurants got up to that price, but I was there in 1992. That was a lot at the time, but there was no resistance.

*The Quilted Giraffe started to have a reputation with the Japanese that it was the place to eat because it was fusion—in a nice way.*

The Japanese could bring the Americans there and say, "Look what we do." And Americans could bring the Japanese and say, "Look what we do." It was a good setting for business. I never left the restaurant. I was there for almost virtually every meal and touched every plate when it was going out. So I could serve and I could invent at the moment. The Quilted Giraffe was fun and sexy in the way that no

other restaurants were, and by and large, very few restaurants are today.

*Our signature dish, the Beggar's Purse, and truffles were two  
restaurant very sexy and profitable.*

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The Beggar's Purse had two benefits. One was financial. It was very expensive. Beggar's Purse was essentially \$50 a bite added onto a prix fixe menu that was already \$75, so that made for a \$125 dinner. But I gave you more value, because I gave you more caviar for your \$50 than any other restaurant in the city. And I did that with the truffles as well. The other benefit—the other half of all of this—was sex appeal. The Beggar's Purse was a mini crepe filled with cold caviar and crème fraiche, covered with warm melted butter and sitting on a beautiful, three-tier or a five-tier candelabra that a waiter carried into the dining room. You had to put your hands behind your back and eat it without a napkin in just one bite.

In the later days we used handcuffs, but at the beginning it was just no hands. Then we took a picture at the very moment that you were eating your Beggar's Purse. When you saw the camera, if you were out with your girlfriend or your wife, you'd say, "You've got to have caviar! You've got to have caviar! What do you mean? You don't want to do caviar?" This was just the opposite of what you'd say in another restaurant: "You want caviar? It's \$50!" But in this case, because of the sexiness of it, everybody wanted everybody else to have it.

With the fresh truffles, I'd say, "Tell me when to stop." Of course, nobody ever took too much, but I wasn't counting the slices. And everyone knew that the best way to eat a truffle was off the top of a wife or a girlfriend's hand! And all of this was going on because people were having fun—it was a performance. We got four stars.

*My goal was to blend constant change with consistency.*

The menu constantly changed. If you ordered a kaiseki dinner from me, I never served you the same meal or the same dishes twice. By consistency, I mean that each meal at The Quilted Giraffe was always four stars. That I learned from Kitcho. Even if a guest said, “I had this or that last week, and I want the same meal,” I wouldn’t give him or her the same meal and would create some other dish. If one person was having a kaiseki dinner and somebody else at another table ordered a kaiseki dinner, each got a totally different dinner with totally different dishware. That’s very difficult. Communication in the kitchen was very important.

Today, when you order the chef’s choice tasting menu and you look around the room, everybody’s eating the same dinner. That’s the chef’s special, but it’s not very exciting. That’s not creating a dinner just for you. I would make it a point to do something for you. For example, if a Japanese customer told me he came from Kyushu, then I would give him dishes from Kyushu. If another customer were wearing a red dress, I would give her only dishes that went with her dress.

## Training

*In those days, there were no professional management classes for restaurant owners, and there were few professionally trained non-French chefs or cooks.*

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NORIEVIKI SUGIE

The only well-trained cooks had been in French restaurants, but they were trained to cook for the shelf. They weren’t trained to innovate. They were trained that Dover sole had to come with a boiled potato cut a certain way with parsley on top. We were breaking away from the French model. Nobody had any idea what I was talking about or what I was trying to do. I had 14 cooks working in the kitchen, but nobody knew what we were trying to do. Today, a chef who has worked for Daniel and then goes to work for Jean-Georges has been taught the new non-French manner of running a restaurant, of cooking in a restaurant. But back in the early 1990s, it was totally groundbreaking.

In the French restaurants, there was no management in the dining room. There was the French maitre d', who was a glorified waiter who got tips. Right? Isn't that what you did? You would slip him \$25 for your table or \$20 when you left. So a maitre d' by definition isn't a manager. At that time, nobody was trained to be a manager. Today, when you go to Daniel or Jean-Georges or any restaurant, you'll see four or five managers on the floor who have been trained by the restaurant to carry out the restaurant's vision. Like the cooks, they have worked for somebody else and have learned what it means to be a manager, not a tipped employee. In the beginning, all restaurant employees were tipped employees. I changed that, too, at The Quilted Giraffe. I eliminated tips and just added an 18 percent service charge to the bill.

## Ingredients

*At one time, believe it or not, in New York restaurants there was no fresh foie gras, and there was no arugula.*

Foie gras came in a can from France. It wasn't until 1981 or 1982 that we were able to get fresh foie gras. The same thing is true of arugula and fresh raspberries. When we were in the Japanese mode, people were beginning to import fresh fish from Kagoshima, the capital city of Kagoshima Prefecture at the southwestern tip of the Kyūshū island of Japan. Do you know the word for direct shipment by air from Japan? "Expensive"! It leaves Kagoshima yesterday and it gets to us today. But nobody, not even the sushi restaurants in New York, did that.

Today, you go to a sushi bar and they say, "Oh, we have fresh fish from Japan. It's very expensive." Well, I was bringing fish in then. I remember a fish called *ishidai*, meaning "rock" or "stone." There were also the *sawagani* crabs. They are small crabs, about as big as the first joint of your thumb, usually grilled and served whole. We'd put the live sawagani into a martini glass, and then I would tell the guests, "Only men from Osaka are brave enough to eat it while it is still alive!"

You have to bite it before it bites you!” We called it a “popcorn-y crab.” So we were doing those kinds of things. This was just totally unheard of in America at the time.

*I was having fun and so were my customers, but they were also learning about Japanese food.*

You couldn’t bring wasabi into the United States until very recently. Wasabi was always a big issue. So when we came back from Japan, we hid it in our suitcases. It is exactly the same story with saké. There was no fancy saké in 1989, 1990, or even 1992. There were the big bottles of the cheap saké, but no small brewery stuff. I used to go to Japan and bring back a suitcase of 10 bottles of fancy saké. Then in 1989, I brought out of it. I’d say, “Oh, I’m giving you the real stuff.” We were the first ones selling premium saké.

On the fifteenth anniversary of The Quilted Giraffe in 1990, my friend, Mr. Sumihara, decided to give us a good present. He sent 15 barrels of taru saké by air freight. True taru saké is fresh and unpasteurized, so he had to deliver it quickly because it would otherwise spoil. And he made a special label with the Statue of Liberty that said, “New York, the Statue of Liberty, The Quilted Giraffe and Kikusui,” which is a brand of delicious saké.

So we had 15 barrels of taru saké—you know how big a barrel is! It’s like a keg where you have to take a hammer and break the top. These 15 barrels wouldn’t last more than a month. Because it was fresh, we had to drink it, and it wasn’t refrigerated. During that time, I was always inviting people to come drink saké. Sometimes at the end of the night, if there was a little bit left in the barrel, I would take the barrel up to a Japanese restaurant and bring them fresh saké. That was special.

One of the first non-fish Japanese ingredients that came from Japan was Kobe beef. It actually came from Matsuzaka, a region in Japan most famous for kinds of beef with a high fat-to-meat ratio. That was one of the ingredients that we had, before today’s American kind of Kobe beef. In those days we had real Kobe beef. And we bought *fugu*, the Japanese blowfish famous for its potential toxicity, from a man at Restaurant Nippon. He was very famous. We were his only non-

Japanese customer. The fugu was frozen and already cut, so there was no risk. I bought a license from him to sell it. We even used the dried fugu fish tail. When you put it in saké—it's called "hirezake"—it burns and gives the saké a distinct taste.

*At that time, we were all learning about Japanese cuisine.*

I wasn't intentionally studying Japanese cuisine during that time. But I learned. One time a Japanese customer called me to the table and said, "Oh, this is perfect. This is the mountain. This is the river and the earth." It was mashed potatoes with a little sauce. Then I learned the fish had to be swimming upstream. A fish can never be placed downward on the plate. The fish always goes up, with the head to the right. An American chef working in the kitchen would say, "Put the fish to the left." It would never occur to him to face it the other way. What did we know about presenting food the Japanese way? A dish would be upside down, but it was on a pretty plate. It looked good this way, and it looked good that way. But to the Japanese, it had to be "this side up." So I learned that, and so did the people who worked for me. I don't think any of them had ever been to Japan.

*I was good at cooking, but it wasn't a dream of cooking. It was a dream of having a great restaurant.*

I learned to cook on the job at The Quilted Giraffe, but nobody taught me what I had to know about creating the dishes. I invented it. These were all new concepts that were invented at The Quilted Giraffe. I learned as it was happening. This is where service came into it, and it was one reason why the prices at The Quilted Giraffe got to be what they were.

I decided that the customer wanted and could afford a flawless dinner. In order to do that, I didn't want to have bussers. I had only wait staff, because that gave the guests a better meal. I could teach the wait staff what I wanted, and I expected a higher level of performance

from them. I was paying the wait staff more per hour than I would pay a busser. In order to justify that and be able to do it, the price of dinner had to be higher in my restaurant than it was at other four-star restaurants. Ours was \$75 and theirs were \$58.

A lot of this has more to do with economics than is clear on the surface. Every restaurant owner thinks he or she can tell the wait staff exactly what to do. One restaurateur I know has the most beautiful complicated employee manual that lists what every person is supposed to do during a shift. Each thing has to be checked off. Somebody has to go to the bathroom every 15 minutes and sign his name showing that he was there. A lot of things like that.

*I wanted it to be the \$75 meal, because I wanted it to be as good as Kitcho in Japan. I wanted that kind of standard.*

Of course I showed the wait staff exactly how I wanted things done, but I'm talking more philosophically. I policed and "beat the horse" to make sure that the customer got his \$75 worth. At \$58, the customer's expectation was not as high as at \$75. So I was always walking a tightrope. Could I give them the \$75 meal? Everything was feeding that. I wanted it to be the \$75 meal, because I wanted it to be as good as Kitcho in Japan. I wanted that kind of standard. If you think of the French maitre d' who insults you—that was the French experience. Some people went to those restaurants for that experience. But I was going to give customers a different experience. And my experience cost \$75 to produce.

What does it cost to serve you this dinner? I used a crystal glass that cost \$22—that was Hoya at the time—and every night the wait staff broke six glasses, because that's what happens in a restaurant. At other high-end restaurants they are breaking \$8 glasses and I was breaking \$22 glasses, but I wanted to use \$22 glasses because I wanted customers to feel the difference. I was more focused on the customer experience than making a larger profit on that \$75.

I didn't send a waiter to the table to say, "How is everything? How's your fish?" That was always happening at other restaurants, but at The Quilted Giraffe, the waiter would say, "We hope you're enjoying your dinner." Of course, the fish was always good. There

was just no question that the fish was good. It couldn't not be good—what we were buying, the care we were giving it, treating the ingredients before we served it, cooking it, bringing it to the table fast so it wasn't cold. You couldn't get cold food at The Quilted Giraffe because it was out of the pan, onto the plate, and, "Hurry up and take it to the table!"

*You'd go to a French restaurant and the dining room stunk! It smelled like Sterno.*

Before the 1980s the only French restaurants were French and only French. Of course, there was just the maitre d' who looked down his nose at you. The menu, which maybe you could read—maybe you couldn't. But what went with French cooking was cooking that I called "for the shelf." The cooks put it in a copper pan and put it on the shelf. The waiter comes with a little trolley—the guéridon—and says, "Give me that copper casserole." Then he takes it in the dining room and, for effect, flambées it—that is, plays with it—and then lets it sit on the shelf of Sterno. This is not so long ago. No fresh raspberries. No arugula. But Sterno in the dining room!

One of the first things that The Quilted Giraffe changed was how fast food was served. Food came out of the kitchen already on the plate as opposed to it sitting on the shelf. That was unheard of in a fancy restaurant. The Quilted Giraffe's style was out of the frying pan, onto the plate, to the table—and it was fast! I was always yelling, "I'm getting mad! Where's the waiter? Take it! Take it! Don't look at it. Carry it away. Get it to the table now!"

Pacing was an extremely important part of our restaurant service. The Quilted Giraffe believed that there should be 10 minutes between courses. You got your appetizer 10 minutes after you ordered, and then another course every 10 minutes. If you were having a kaiseki dinner, a multi-course dinner, or a tasting dinner, then we allowed seven or eight minutes between courses. We had digital clocks in the kitchen—today you see them but at the time they were new, so the cook would know how long he or she had.

We were serving only 100 people. The Japanese always ordered the tasting menu. They'd sit down and say, "Bring me the tasting menu." Or they would tell a guest, "Oh, you've got to have the tasting menu." We used to call it "American Kaiseki." That was the phrase.

*Asian food is a trend. It's well underway, and it's not going to stop.*

Over the next five years, you'll have American sushi chefs. Today, there are almost no ingredients in Japan that aren't here, too. And there are almost no preparations that aren't here. There might be some super sophisticated ones that require knife skills, such as the *hamo*, or the pike eel, with 120 cuts. When you eat *hamo* in Japan, you're impressed that this fish has a lot of bones and that the chef can make exactly 120 cuts in each fish. In Japan, customers say, "Oh, isn't he a great chef? Look how good his knife skills are!" Do you get that in New York? No. But is it important? No. We're not interested in the chef's skill when we go to a restaurant. We're interested in our experience as a customer. That's a big difference.

Japanese people who come here to open their restaurants have the skill, but they don't understand the way that the American customer enjoys food. And vice versa. I think an American restaurant that goes to Japan makes a mistake by trying to be too Japanese. An American restaurant, doing American food—this is what the Japanese find interesting. If American restaurants go to Japan, they should be American. Japanese restaurants here need to understand that for Americans, eating is an experience. It's not to congratulate the chef on his or her skills. Of course, some American chefs who open restaurants think they are going to be congratulated for their skills. Those are the restaurants that fail, too. Showing off in a restaurant doesn't matter. The most important thing to know is what the customer wants.

Today, people say, "I can remember what I ate when I went to The Quilted Giraffe, and it was the best meal I ever had." This relationship with the customers kept it at the top for a long period of time. Plus, it was a nice thing to be the best. Maybe you remember Sparks Restaurant, the steakhouse. The owner was named Pat Cetta—he died

a long time ago. But he taught me something. When somebody tells you, “This is the best meal I’ve had,” the right thing to say is, “Well, somebody has to be the best, and we’re glad that you think it’s us.”

## A Day in the Life

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NORIEVIKI SUGIE

for world understanding?”

I was doing a Japanese cultural festival in New York and invited one of Japan’s most famous chefs and restaurateurs, Kiyomi Mikuni, to do Japanese food. I thought, “Isn’t this wonderful for world understanding?” Meanwhile, he’d made a side deal with an American woman who was on camera speaking Japanese on Nippon TV, to film him while he was here for the festival.

Chef Mikuni brought a camera crew with the plan that they were going to film him, and the whole thing was to be set to music from Rocky! This was an hour show they were filming. The theme was: “The Japanese chef challenges the American chef to a fight.” The goal was to find out who had the better food. Since I thought we were doing something else, I couldn’t understand why he was acting as if he were training for a fight. The crew filmed him running in Central Park. Then they filmed him standing at the stove in the kitchen shadow boxing, and then getting a bloody nose. He invited me and some people from the Four Seasons to be on the show. A bunch of the French chefs came, too, and there we were—on camera for Japanese television. It was silly, but Kiyomi Mikuni brought a lot of new Japanese ingredients to New York. The life of a chef in New York.



Did you enjoy this mini memoir? If so please email us your opinion at [don@dongabor.com](mailto:don@dongabor.com).

The retail price for *Chef’s Choice* is \$19.95.

[Korin's discounted price is \\$15! Click Here](#)