

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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THREE

DAVID BOULEY

Owner/Chef, Bouley, New York City

David Bouley was born and raised near Storrs, Connecticut. From an early age he was strongly influenced by life on his grandparents' farm, drawing upon their French heritage that instilled a love of the land, an appreciation for fresh products, care in preparation, and the inspiration to cook and enjoy healthful meals.

Chef David studied at the Sorbonne and worked with some of Europe's most acclaimed chefs. He returned to New York City, working at Le Cirque, Le Périgord, and La Côte Basque. In 1985, he became chef of Montrachet restaurant and in 1987, he opened his own restaurant, Bouley. He earned a four-star review from *The New York Times* and the James Beard Foundation awards for Best Restaurant and Best Chef.

In 2011, David Bouley opened Brushstroke, a Japanese restaurant owned in collaboration with Yoshiki Tsuji, President of the TSUJI Culinary Institute based in Osaka. The restaurant adheres to the traditions of kaiseki dining and includes Ichimura, an eight-seat sushi bar. His latest project is Bouley Botanical, an event space, learning center, and commissary kitchen.

Influences

As a youngster, I thought, “Cooking is something I want to know more about,” and I connected to it.

When I was seven years old, I tried to pick a peach on my grandmother’s farm in Connecticut. The branch bent down a little bit when I pulled on it, but the peach stayed put. My mother said, “Let’s try that one over there.” She put my hand around a plump peach hanging nearby. I gently lifted it up and let it down. Voilà! It fell into my hand. She said, “This is the peach to eat. The other one is not ripe yet.”

Growing up in a French environment on a farm in Connecticut, I ate extremely well. My mother and grandmother were wonderful cooks. My grandmother raised rabbits, pheasants, ducks, and a few hundred chickens, and she had many acres of fruit trees and grapes. We’d all go out and pick dandelions and other wild greens for salad. They made everything from scratch, so I learned a lot about cooking. Then I started making dishes for my friends. The next thing I knew, I fell in love with cooking. Good cooking can come from within a chef, or it can be inspired by Mother Nature. But one or the other can ignite an entire career of cooking from just one or two experiences.

I'm a student of 1970s cooking and nouvelle cuisine.

I never went to cooking school. As a young cook, I worked for and learned from some of Europe's greatest chefs, including Roger Vergé, Paul Bocuse, Joël Robuchon, Gaston Lenôtre, and Frédy Girardet. Back in New York, I worked at Le Cirque, Le Pèrigord, La Côte Basque, Montrachet, and Roger Vergé's restaurant in San Francisco.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, I saw American and French chefs going back and forth from America and France to Japan. I also saw Japanese chefs go to France to learn French cooking, then go back to Japan and cook French food. But when these American and French chefs came back from Japan, they just changed the vegetables a little bit, and they made tasting menus. They didn't really know how to use Japanese ingredients in their cuisine. When I worked at L'Atelier Saint-Germain de Joël Robuchon in Paris, Joël Robuchon was the first person I met who used soy sauce. He combined soy sauce with butter, ginger and lemon juice.

When I opened Bouley Restaurant in 1987, its menu was based on the seasons, French cooking techniques, and a close relationship with all of the ingredients. That is what I learned from my grandmother and from the chefs I worked for—a natural approach. Bouley was one of the first New York City restaurants to be so closely connected to the ingredients. I went to the farmers' markets to buy ingredients and products for the restaurant. I spent time with the farmers on Sundays and went to their farms.

My relationship with the farmers and the ingredients was similar to that of a Japanese chef. For example, a Japanese chef who worked with a farmer might say, "Maybe cut more branches off so I can have

a stronger taste here.” One farmer I worked closely with was Rick Bishop. Together, we brought artisanal ingredients like the fingerling potato to Bouley and to the farmers’ markets.

I didn't have time to think about anything except jumping out of bed, running to work, going home, and passing out. That was my life.

Bouley was the number one restaurant in New York City for six years. From around 1994 to 1996, we had the first restaurant in a Zagat Guide to achieve a food rating of 29 out of a possible 30. During that time, I was trying to make sure everybody was happy. I didn't have time to think about anything except jumping out of bed, running to work, going home, and passing out. That was my life. I was stressed out. Then, in 1996, the landlord took back my lease, so I decided to close the restaurant.

At that point I was very curious about what else I could do with my life. I was so tired and so burned out that I almost took off my chef's jacket and did something else. Then I got an offer to cook for the royal family in Bangkok because the Queen of Thailand had eaten twice at Bouley. “Of course,” I said, “okay.” After telling another customer about my plans to travel to Asia, he said to me, “You don't have a restaurant, so now you have time. Come to Japan a few weeks early and we will teach you Japanese cooking.” The customer's name was Mr. Yoshiki Tsuji, owner of the TSUJI Culinary Institute in Osaka.

If we want to learn, we have to ask questions.

When I was in Japan, Mr. Tsuji took me to many different Japanese restaurants. At the time, I didn't know that the way I spoke about what I was eating helped Mr. Tsuji decide which restaurant to take me to next. I didn't realize that I was in training until one night when I met with Mr. Tsuji's colleague, Mr. Hata, for dinner, along with several other Japanese chefs who were attending the TSUJI Culinary Institute.

As we ate, I asked Mr. Hata, "Is there vinegar in this?"

Mr. Hata said, "No."

I asked him two more times, "Is there vinegar in this?"

Mr. Hata said, "No, no."

Ten minutes later he finally said, "You're right."

Then I asked, "Mr. Hata, is this young ginger or mature ginger? I think it's young ginger."

Mr. Hata said, "No." Ten minutes later he said, "You're right."

When I saw Mr. Tsuji the next day, he told me, "Mr. Hata said you passed your test." Mr. Hata told him, "I remember only one chef in my whole life who asked as many questions as Mr. Bouley. His name was Paul Bocuse." Paul Bocuse is the father of nouvelle cuisine and was named the Chef of the Century by The Culinary Institute of America. As a result of this visit, I started to understand the Japanese palate. I realized that if I wanted to learn, I had to ask questions.

Cuisine

We make a dish that is a "handshake" between a French chef and a Japanese chef.

It's only now that chefs are starting to understand how to incorporate Japanese techniques and ingredients from Japan into their cuisine without losing their identity. In 2008, I opened the new Bouley. The menu is modern French with Asian influences. This is an example of how we combine two cultures and create a new one. We do a flan here with crabmeat. This dish is a “handshake” between a French chef and a Japanese chef. We have the porcini—wild edible brown mushrooms—and flan. The flan is similar to *chawanmushi*, which is a Japanese egg custard that dates back to the fifteenth century. We purée the porcini and add crabmeat and dashi, but not just dashi. We put a lot of flavors and spices into the broth of the dashi, French style. Then I stick it with *kuzu*. And, of course, we finish it with black truffles.

For authentic Japanese cooking we need artisanal ingredients, produced by artisans, in the hands of artisanal chefs.

In 2001, Mr. Tsuji and I decided to collaborate on Brushstroke, a Japanese restaurant in New York City devoted to kaiseki. Why didn't kaiseki chefs leave Japan to cook in other places? It's because they didn't have artisanal ingredients. That's why Mr. Tsuji and I put a lot of preparation into finding artisanal ingredients for Brushstroke. We met in Kyoto and went to the auction market for special Kyoto vegetables. We spent one entire week with experts from the Department of Agriculture learning about Kyoto vegetables. They taught us all about the evolution of the vegetables there, the soil, and everything else. To have artisanal Japanese ingredients for Brushstroke, we brought seeds from Kyoto so we could grow Osaka

and Kyoto eggplants, five kinds of Japanese root vegetables, and other artisanal products on my small farm and on Rick Bishop's farm in upstate New York.

Mr. Tsuji and I also hired a research team of five agricultural experts led by a famous Japanese professor to travel from British Columbia, Canada to San Diego, California looking for a year-round source of Japanese vegetables. The team spent an entire year visiting the many Asian markets and farms up and down the West Coast, researching and tasting vegetables. So in 2011, after nearly 10 years of research and planning, we opened Brushstroke in New York City with Chef Isao Yamada as the kaiseki master. We wanted Brushstroke to be about Japan's culinary traditions, its integrity, focus, pride, and its artisanal ingredients.

Trust your senses and they will not lie to you.

When my grandmother baked, she could be in the backyard but would know exactly when to go into the kitchen to take the apple pie out of the oven—and it was always perfect. That's because she smelled the sweetness; she smelled the crust; she smelled the caramel. For her it wasn't a calculation. She had no alarm, no timer. She used her senses. But in professional cooking we're five, 10, 20 steps ahead. The intellectual side of our brain takes time to organize 10 steps so that we can bring the food out. If we have to think each time about one thing, we're never going to get anything out. But our hands are moved by our senses.

Every so often I'll teach a cooking class. One class was with a Spanish chef, and the dish was paella. After I finished talking, I asked everyone in the class to come up to the stove and listen to the paella

cooking over an open flame. I took my microphone so everyone could hear the crackling. It was getting crispy. If there was too much humidity at that time, the bubbles would have sounded different. If the heat was too high, it would burn, and we would hear that, too. So cooking by our senses tells our hands what to do. Our motivation is through our senses. This is something that we don't want to take for granted when we go into the kitchen. But most chefs don't say, "Well, today I'm going to really pay attention to my senses." If they did, they'd be better cooks.

When you cook a dish that you're worried about, I suggest that you rely more on your senses. If you've prepared it before, your senses will remember what was right and what was wrong, and this will be the guidance that you need. Your senses can tell you everything you need to know. Stop thinking, because that's going to distract you. Allow the senses to recall what they are supposed to do. Even if you have never made this dish before, you probably have used certain ingredients before. For example, onions. What do they smell like when they are cooking and getting sweet? Remember that. What do they smell like when they are still full of water? They smell bitter; they smell acidic. Trust your senses, and they will not lie to you.

Ingredients

Taste the bouillon first. That's the sign of a good chef.

Every time I open the lid of a bowl, I smell the top, because that's where the fat goes, and that's where the aroma is. When I see fish, dumplings, another dish, and a soup on the table, and the chef first goes right to the fish, I think, "Oh, it's too bad that you don't know. Always taste the bouillon, because this is what you influenced." The other tastes are a natural byproduct of the ingredient. We can influence the flavor of a piece of fish but not as much as we can influence the bouillon. That's our signature on the dish.

It's important to understand what is unique about an ingredient or product. I don't want to steal what Mother Nature put into it. And an ingredient is not always the same, so I can't depend on a calculation in a recipe to prepare it. Take cooking rice, for example. As rice ages, it dries out, so I need to cook it in more water. Where does the recipe tell me that? It doesn't. I look at the packaging date on the box because it tells me how old the rice is. As the rice gets older and drier, I add more water.

Kuzu is a great ingredient. It's a thickening agent that doesn't dilute or overpower taste.

Kuzu is one product that can be integrated into cooking without causing the other ingredients to lose their identity. There are so many different applications of *kuzu*. At Bouley, we use *kuzu* everywhere. It

is a stable thickening agent; it thickens clear. It has no taste. We can use it in pastry. We can make noodles out of it. And we also use kuzu powder. We put sweetbreads or fish in the powder and then we sauté it. It makes an amazing crust. Nothing makes a crust like kuzu. We can also use it in place of roux. Roux is flour and butter. Instead of roux, I use kuzu to thicken any kind of sauce. It has a textural finish that is cleaner and better than cornstarch and arrowroot for thickening. We're making so many things with it. Now, we're even making a kuzu-bread.

In French cooking, when we use a thickening agent like cornstarch, we have to cook it out, which means that we simmer it for a while. In effect, we're removing the starch. If the sauce thickens very quickly, it probably has too much cornstarch in it. The more we heat it, the thicker and more rubbery it gets. Kuzu, on the other hand, is more stable than cornstarch and potato starches. Once kuzu thickens a sauce, the texture doesn't change. Kuzu will thicken liquids like tomato water, but it won't dilute it or overpower the taste.

I learned from Japanese chefs how to kill fish.

Most fish caught commercially in America are thrown live into a box, where they suffocate and die. When the fish lands in the box, its fins are pushed into its stomach. The acid and enzymes from the stomach seep into the fish's flesh or into the other fish around it. That's why a lot of our fish, when we lay them out for preparation, have many problems. All those blemishes and the ruined flesh are due to trauma because the fish wasn't killed the proper way.

I learned from Japanese chefs how to kill fish. They put a knife straight into its spinal cord near the base of its head and kill the fish

instantly. But during a charter fishing trip off the coast of Cape Cod, I learned an even more effective way to sustain the fish's freshness after it is killed. Mr. Kondo of the Japanese Imperial Fisheries Institute taught me the way to do it. After someone on the boat caught a striped bass, Mr. Kondo killed it, but it was still flopping around like the severed legs of a dissected frog in a high school biology class. Mr. Kondo then told the boat captain that he wanted to put the fish in a tub of seawater. When I asked why, he explained that after he kills the fish the proper way, he puts it in the water. The oxygen in the water goes into each incision and pumps the muscle. The muscle still reacts to the oxygen, so the flesh is cleaning itself in the water. He allows the fish to sit for a minimum of two hours in the water after he kills it. This process actually keeps the flesh fresher longer. That's why I paid Cape Cod fishermen 15 cents more a pound to kill the fish on the boat for me in 1993 and 1994.

There is a little-known Japanese technique for giving sushi its crunch.

In our restaurant after the chef kills a fish, he lets it sit in water for a minimum of two hours and then puts the fish on a wood board and throws salt all over it. The water in the fish's flesh will start to seep out because salt extracts moisture. In five, 10, 15, or 20 minutes, there will be a little puddle of water, depending on how fatty the fish is and how long the salt stays on it. Next, the chef rinses the fish quickly in water or in water with a little bit of vinegar. Now he has detoxed the fish further and has improved its texture. The salt creates the crunch that we like in sushi. Without the salt, the flesh would be soft and mealy. That little bit of salt creates the crunch.

Japanese chefs expand and go vertically and deeply into ingredients, whereas in the western world, we expand outward, horizontally.

Not long ago, our incredible sushi chef at Brushstroke taught me one of the finer points about sushi and sashimi. Our sous chef served us some bluefin tuna that looked like the one I had just bought the day before, but he said, “This fish is six days old. Taste it.”

It was amazing, because the color level was the same as the one I had just bought, but the sushi chef had put it through a special drying process: a day in a paper towel; a certain amount of air but not too much air; a little bit of vinegar with a brush; a little salt water; and then a rinse. This pulled the water out of the cells of the fish, raising the level of glucose. I didn’t know that in sushi, drying the fish builds in more flavor. But this isn’t the case with sashimi.

I sometimes wonder: How much more can I learn about food? I feel as if I’ve at least got my master’s degree in cooking. At one time I even thought I had reached the Ph.D. level. But when I discover things I don’t know, like preparing fish Japanese-style, I feel as if I have gone back to the third grade—again. I am always amazed to learn how the Japanese chefs take a product to a higher level.

A Day in the Life

I have been through the grinder many times, but one of my most tortured experiences as a chef didn’t have to do with actual cooking.

I was asked to cook for the king and queen and royal family of Thailand—about three hundred people in Bangkok. And, of course, I had to bring a gift and present it to the king and queen. No big deal, or so I thought.

I arrived in Bangkok three-and-a-half weeks before the royal dinner because I was helping to open a new restaurant in the Plaza Athénée. So for the three-and-a-half weeks prior to the royal family's dinner, I ran the restaurant at Plaza Athénée every night. One night we prepared a banquet for the Red Cross, and the king and queen were there. There must have been 50 billion flowers everywhere. The king and queen walked from the street under a canopy of flowers, and then up a long staircase in the hotel to the banquet room. They were treated like gods.

After that, the thought of giving the king and queen my gift made me a lot more nervous. Then someone from the palace made matters worse when he told me, “The king and queen will be seated on an elevated platform because no one can stand taller than the king and queen. When it's your time to give them your gift, stand up and walk up the steps to the platform. When you are at the top step, get down on your knees right away. Then walk on your knees the last four or five feet to where they are seated and hand them your gift. They will have a gift for you, too.”

“Oh, my God,” I cried. “Do I have to wear my long French apron?”

“Oh yes. You have to wear a long French apron, everything.” They insisted that I wear the apron and my chef's uniform because of all the photographs. They said, “Don't worry. You can do it.”

How was I going to walk on my knees in a long French apron? I figured out that I needed to move my knees a little at a time, so I practiced for five nights in my hotel room. Every day that week I ran the kitchen upstairs in the restaurant and cooked for banquets. And every night I had nightmares that I fell flat on my face, that my apron ripped off, that I couldn't walk on my knees to the king and queen. I got more and more nervous! How was I going to do this? I practiced, practiced, practiced. I put my apron on and moved on my knees. And every night I didn't sleep, and I got more and more tired.

Finally the night came, and I wasn't thinking about the food or anything else. Then it was time for me to go out there and deliver my gift to the king and queen. There were people everywhere. Ambassadors from all the countries in Asia, including Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Even Vice President Dan Quayle was there, representing the United States. The king and queen sat on an elevated platform. I thought, "Oh, my God, first I've got to get up there, then onto my knees!" I walked up the stairs. Just as I was on the top step and ready to kneel, everybody stood up—including the king and queen! So, I just walked over to them and gave them my gift—an exquisite handmade glass apple from a famous artist in upstate New York.

After the dinner, I went back to the hotel and got drunk. I finally got to relax. I was so exhausted that I passed out and slept for 12 hours. That was probably one of the most stressful situations I've ever been in, and it had nothing to do with cooking the food, but everything to do with presentation.



Did you enjoy this mini memoir? If so please email us your opinion at don@dongabor.com.

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