

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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JAMES WIERZELEWSKI

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Rotana Hotel Management Corporation,
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Past Executive Chef, Marriott Marquis,
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As a 16-year-old, James Wierzelewski began a two-year internship at the historic Pfister Hotel in Milwaukee. From there, he spent a decade with a hotel restaurant innovator, Hyatt Hotels, working his way up to Executive Chef. During these years, James Wierzelewski opened several new restaurant concepts for the rapidly expanding Park Hyatt brand at locations across the United States. In 1991, James Wierzelewski began working abroad and apprenticing with several renowned chefs, including Chef Roland Durand at the two-star Michelin-rated Le Pré Catelan in Paris and Chef Michel Husser at the two-star Michelin-rated Le Cerf in Alsace, France.

James Wierzelewski has opened seven new hotel restaurants in the past 15 years. He was the Executive Chef at the New York Marriott Marquis, and Harrods, London; and was the Director of Kitchens at Fairmont Singapore and Swissotel, The Stamford. His philosophy is “Dining out is not just about the food or beverage. It’s about hitting all of one’s senses. Customers want an overall dining experience that leaves them with a lasting memory. That’s ‘eater-tainment.’”

Influences

I have always seen travel as part of life's journey and an opportunity to learn.

In the late 1980s, I made my first jump out of the United States. I went from the Hyatt in Waikiki, where we had a couple of different teppan tables and a sushi bar serving some westernized Japanese dishes, to Miyako Restaurant at the Hyatt Regency on the island of Saipan. Saipan, a tiny, beautiful island about 120 miles north of Guam, is a popular vacation spot for Japanese tourists, so we incorporated a lot more traditional Japanese elements into our restaurant philosophy and concepts there. We even had quick-service noodle bars along with full dining, as well as teppan, but there was still a western slant. Unlike the Hyatt in Waikiki, all the chefs in this restaurant were from Japan except me. I was the Executive Chef.

When I stepped into this kitchen, there were 10 or 15 chefs who spoke a language I didn't know. Without a translator, I couldn't speak fluently to any of the chefs in the kitchen. Everything was done through translation. But I could see the chefs understood the differences in menus. I saw a great sense of respect and understanding for Japanese tradition. Each person there played an important role in that kitchen, whether it was preparing hot food or cold food or working at the sushi bar. And among them, they had their own rankings. As a westerner, I tried to see the hierarchy of the kitchen and also understand and respect their principles.

The methods for making the sushi, the sauces, and the most important ingredients in any Japanese restaurant—the cooking of the rice and prep of other side dishes—were rooted in Japanese tradition all

the way. All of the beverages, tableware, and food products for the restaurant were from Japan. In terms of influences, I have always seen travel as part of life's journey and an opportunity to learn. The job in Saipan was no exception.

Cuisine

I believe that food should be simple enough to be understood, yet unique enough to be marketable. Marketable in this case means, "Hmm, that sounds okay! I'll try it."

When I worked in Asia, I committed myself to not being one of those chefs who bastardized traditional cuisine. I'm going to take the time, slow it down, and understand the reasons behind the culture's food. Then when I present a dish, I'm going to do it in a way that is stylish and modern. To summarize my philosophy of cuisine, I believe that food should be simple enough to be understood, yet unique enough to be marketable.

I see uncomplicated layers of flavor as the key to a successful meal. When I think about Japanese cuisine, I think about the successes we had with the guests at the New York Marriott Marquis. When customers can eat through a dish and hit uncomplicated layers of flavor, that's when you know you've won them over. On the other hand, it's no good if the flavors are too overpowering or over-blended or if the menu description leaves the customers confused about what the dish is.

My food style has Asian influences and Asian techniques and principles, but my palate isn't 100% Japanese. I think a Japanese-inspired meal should also represent various cooking methods, from

simmered dishes to grilled dishes to raw food; from marinated food to soups to the pickled items. For me, the ideal is seeing those elements layered in the food. That's very important.

My restaurant concepts have a clear identity so that a server can explain them to the guests in a few sentences. I want them to walk away nodding, "I see it. I hear it. I feel it. I got it!" Restaurants at the Marquis are not ultra modern. At the same time, they are not traditional either. They are somewhere in the middle, so when I want to introduce a new dish to the customers, the challenge is twofold. First, the menu verbiage has to be carefully crafted. How a dish is depicted on the menu is very important, because it creates expectations for the dining experience. Second, the dishes or ingredients have to be recognizable—balanced with a little bit of the unknown, simple enough to be understood, but unique enough to be marketable.

There is more exploration with appetizers, smaller portions, or first courses than with main courses. When the restaurant launches a course or a new dish for the public, I want to make sure that the guests will have a bigger comfort zone in the \$30 entree price point. Then we can be a little bit more avant-garde, a little bit more daring, a little bit more fun in packaging smaller plates for the appetizer menu.

I believe that going out to eat should be an "eater-tainment" experience, not entertainment.

I'll give you an example of a Japanese-inspired appetizer that is simple enough to be understood, yet unique enough to be marketable. I take white miso and combine it with tahini paste, sesame paste, yuzu, and Japanese mayonnaise to make a creamy dressing that has a different flavor than western mayonnaise. Then I grill some asparagus and toss

it with this white miso dressing. Next, I take sesame oil and a little seasoning and put it into the ice cream machine until it freezes. I mound up warm grilled asparagus with the creamy white miso dressing, put little bits of this sesame ice cream off to the side, and then top it off with finely diced onions that have been slowly cooked down in soy sauce so they are caramelized and sweet. It is creamy, oniony asparagus and sesame oil—and a marketable appetizer that is easy to understand, taste, and enjoy.

I think that most Americans don't have the respect for food that the Japanese do, so I focus on the marketability of food and the "hyper-positioning" of my cuisine. By hyper-positioning, I mean food as it relates to a dining experience. I believe that going out to eat should be an "eater-tainment" experience, not entertainment. That means there should be a lot of things working to make that experience memorable, because the memory is the only thing that's going to ensure repeat customers.

I'm the kind of guy whose food radar is always up. I want to know what kinds of Japanese cuisine other than sushi rolls Americans want or might be willing to eat. So when I go into a Japanese restaurant, I watch to see what dishes and from what categories people are ordering. Using this information, I place two or three dishes from each category on the menu. I look at marketing these dishes in a way that makes them acceptable to the western palate by offering them in smaller tastings.

At the Marquis, if the dish didn't sell a certain number of portions, we took it off the menu and tried a new dish. If it did sell, we did it for awhile until we found out that some guy down the street was doing it, too. Most culinary trends don't last long. They come and go. When somebody else does it, I say, "Okay, let's get off of that and move onto something else."

Ingredients

When it comes to ingredients, I want to know their origins and how they were produced. I know how to use my products, so I don't want to be taught what to make with them.

I get a lot more value out of a product if I learn how it was made. The more I understand it, the quicker I will be able to find a use for it. While I do culturally inspired cuisine that's rooted in tradition, I'm also a fan of altering the composition of a dish without substituting traditional ingredients. Fusion to me means that I use yuzu instead of lemon juice because yuzu has a very distinctive flavor. I also believe in using specific brands. The brands for miso differ greatly—some are saltier, some are thinner, some are thicker, lighter, darker. Once I get used to a brand, I want a reliable source where I can always get it.

For example, the concept of the Vix Restaurant at the Hotel Victor in South Beach, Miami was based on what I call “four palates,” one of which was Asian. That was where you'd find my Japanese-inspired dishes. I got most of the Japanese ingredients from a Japan-based vendor in Miami called Mutual Trading. But I didn't know the Japanese names for a lot of ingredients, so I couldn't get on the phone and tell the sales rep exactly what I wanted. Instead, I said, “I'm coming down. We're going to walk up and down the shelves, and I'm going to tell you what I'm looking for.”

In New York, I also found reliable and helpful sources where I could buy traditional Japanese ingredients. What was so great about Japanese vendors like Mutual Trading and some others, too, was that most of the time I could go there, look up and down the shelves, and get the exact same stuff that I once had flown in from Japan. Once the reps knew what I was looking for, they wanted to do business with me.

When the company got in something new, the rep said, “When I saw this, I thought of you. You’re always looking for something different, and here’s what we’ve got.”

What chefs need to do with Japanese food is take four, five, or 10 products—miso, oils, vinegars, rubs, or marinades—and bring them to the customer in a variety of dishes.

Making Japanese ingredients recognizable and approachable is what I recommend that small Japanese food manufacturers do to sell more of their ingredients or products to western chefs. Take soy, for instance. I’m making a dish with soy, but I want to do something different with the ingredient that will leave an impression on the guest. Instead of having bottled soy on the table, I use dehydrated soy salt that a waiter can easily grind onto the guests’ salad, appetizer, or main dish using a cheese grater or spice grinder. A simple and inexpensive item like shaved soy salt can have a memorable impact on customers.

Here are some of the Japanese ingredients that I think we will see more of in the future. The first is miso. There are so many different forms of miso, several of which we use every single day here. I think miso is going to be around forever. And we’ll see more wasabi oil as part of a dressing or on light greens. Just a drop will do! Chefs will sprinkle it over a piece of fish or other dish. Plus, the smoke temperature of this oil is beautiful—it doesn’t burn quickly like a high-grade olive oil does. I can float it on top of a soup if I just want the essence, but it washes out quickly when eaten. Finally, I’ll guarantee you that we will see soy salt used in a lot of restaurants in the next year or two. And mark my words—a waiter will come to the table and grate something over a noodle dish or a salad and when asked, “What is that?” he’ll say, “It’s soy sauce.”

I believe in the philosophy of bringing food out to the table to broaden its acceptance.

To expand their market, Japanese producers and restaurants need to do what the wine industry has done well—have experts talk about their products and educate their customers. I believe in the philosophy of bringing food out to the table to broaden its acceptance. Remember 20 years ago, when you ordered wine by the glass? It was either white or red. Today, at fine restaurants, when you order wine by the glass, the server brings you the glass, tells you a little about the wine, and asks, “Would you like to try it?” You sip, enjoy the moment, and then say, “Oh, that’s great, please pour me a glass!” As a result, wine sales have greatly increased. If Japanese food manufacturers encouraged chefs to use their products in unique and memorable ways like this, their sales would soar.

Training

When American chefs understand the Japanese chef in his station, they’ll see that he’s happy doing the yakitori, the noodles, or the cold station prep, and he’s not trying to become the next sushi bar guy.

Chefs trained in Europe and Asia learn their craft through structured apprenticeships and techniques that have been passed down from

generation to generation. But most chefs trained in the United States who work in big hotels don't learn that way. And there's a different attitude, particularly among the younger western chefs who want everything in a snapshot. They say, "Don't make me look for anything. Don't make me research a dish. Don't make me double-check." As an Executive Chef in a large hotel, I needed pictures, step-by-step bullets, not a lot of verbiage, a conclusion, and, finally, a couple of reminders like, "Make sure you do this or that." It's sad to say this, but if some of my chefs have to turn a page on my recipe, I've lost most of them. At the Marriott Marquis in New York City, I had a 260-man team. People came to work there for a lot of different reasons, but I still needed the end result. That's in my fiber, my culture, and my character. So I expected my staff to give me 110 percent or find another job.

I think young American chefs need to learn from Japanese chefs who have perfected their craft. When they understand the Japanese chef in his station, they'll see that he's happy doing the yakitori, the noodles, or the cold-station prep, and he's not trying to become the next sushi bar guy. Within the Japanese kitchen, there is this culture. Within the culture, there's a respect for process and position, but with rigidity can come some limitations.

For many Japanese chefs working at the Marriott Marquis, the hardest thing for them to understand was that they didn't have to work within the same boundaries as they did in Japan. For some of these guys, that was the first job they'd had in the States. They did what they knew. When they were asked to do something different, it was hard because it wasn't in their comfort zone.

I've found that Japanese chefs are concerned about hierarchy and respect based on age and sex. For example, if I have three traditional Japanese chefs who are five or 10 years apart in age, I might ask the youngest to make me a new dish. He is going to ask the oldest chef,

“Should I do this or not do this?” That’s the hierarchy and respect. The older chef has the experience.

When I’m working on an Asian-inspired dish with Japanese chefs, we approach it from two different angles. Mine is results-oriented, and theirs is process-oriented. They go through a process that involves hierarchy and respect. I say, “I don’t care who makes it. Let’s just get it done.” These differences in perspective make working together a little cloudy.

I think that for Japanese chefs to make it in the States, they need to be willing to step up and lead. They don’t have to reinvent, just lead. They can take a traditional dish and experiment a bit with their presentation and vessels. They need to be a little bit more playful for western clients. I’m not talking about having some beautiful sashimi and sushi on a platter. That’s beautiful and certainly appreciated, but there are a lot of other traditional Japanese vessels—those beautiful gold-inlaid plates, ceramics, and lacquer ware—that can play an important role in making a new or unfamiliar dish more approachable for the western customer.

Tools

I love to see traditional Japanese tools, and I really appreciate and admire chefs who know how to use them.

There’s a right knife for every job in the kitchen. That’s my philosophy. The end result is important to me, including the texture, the look, and the finish. And I need the right tool to get that result. For

example, I often use a bowl that's ribbed inside. When I put an ingredient inside it, it gives me that texture and that grind that I want. When I'm cleaning octopus or fish, I put it in the bowl and rub it lightly, the way I do when I have sand on my feet. That gentle rubbing lightly tenderizes or texturizes the outside of the fish. I also like Japanese ginger graters.

I love to see traditional Japanese tools, and I really appreciate and admire some of the chefs who know how to use them. In America, everybody wants the new, the flashy, and the trendy. In the Japanese culture, the best tools are handcrafted. They have been handed down and do their jobs efficiently.

A Day in the Life

The closer I can get my chefs to the source of the ingredients and to the origin of the cuisine, the more they will walk away with, and the more the restaurant will benefit.

When I was at the Marquis in New York City, I took six of my chefs and cooks to Boston to visit the oyster beds. Why? Because I wanted them to be able to work on the raw bar in the restaurants. I knew that if they had to open oysters and clams all day for a month, they would complain. They would say “Chef, you’ve got to let me do something else. I’m wasting my time opening oysters all day.” But if I asked them, “How do oysters reproduce?” or “If I put five oysters in front of you, can you tell me their species and where they are from?” they’d all say no.

We went out to the beds in flat-bottom boats and started pulling up scallops. The chefs held scallops the size of a pencil eraser. They were

just little specks, and out in the open air, they were bouncing all around in their hands, hundreds of these little scallops. None of those chefs had ever seen anything like that.

Then we reached into the water and got a bigger scallop and some oysters. We were shucking them and slurping them and tasting that salty water right on the boat. I guarantee you that these cooks and chefs gained a new appreciation for and an understanding of shellfish. They learned about different varieties, their characteristics, and what to look for.

The point is, the closer I can get my chefs to the source of the ingredients and to the origin of the cuisine, the more they will walk away with, and the more the restaurant will benefit. I know they have passion, but they don't know what they don't know. They need somebody to show them. That's why, after seeing those little scallops bouncing in their hands and picking the oysters out of the water, their understanding was completely different. As a leader, I put those oysters and scallops into their hands and let them see and taste them. I know that those experiences will stay with them for a very long time.



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