

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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Table of Contents

Preface by Saori Kawano

Introduction: The Japanese Chef's Way of Thinking **xvi**

by Toshio Suzuki

- 1. Elizabeth Andoh** **2**
Author, culinary educator, leading English-language expert on Japanese cuisine, and resident of Japan for more than four decades explains how she first learned about *washoku* cuisine from the woman who would become her mother-in-law.
- 2. Michael Anthony** **16**
Executive Chef at Gramercy Tavern, New York City, and winner of the James Beard Foundation's Best Chef in New York City, 2012, talks about his career path from a small Japanese restaurant in Tokyo to Paris and then to Gramercy Tavern.
- 3. David Bouley** **32**
Executive Owner/Chef of Bouley and Brushstroke, New York City, shares how he and Japanese agricultural experts from Kyoto brought artisanal ingredients to his *kaiseki*-inspired New York City restaurants.
- 4. Wylie Dufresne** **46**
Founder of wd~50 and Owner/Chef of Alder in New York City, describes how he and his team use Japanese ingredients in non-traditional Japanese ways.
- 5. Ben Flatt** **60**
Owner/Chef of Flatt's, a Japanese guesthouse and restaurant on the Noto Peninsula, recalls his culinary journey from Sydney, Australia to Noto and reveals the secrets of traditional Noto cuisine he learned from his Japanese in-laws.

- 6. Eddy Leroux** **74**
Chef de Cuisine at Daniel, New York City, recounts his career path and how he uses Japanese ingredients in the French kitchen.
- 7. Nobu Matsuhisa** **86**
Owner/Chef of Nobu, and other restaurants worldwide, shares his story of what inspired him to become a restaurateur.
- 8. David Myers** **96**
Owner/Chef of restaurants in Southern California and Las Vegas recounts how his first interest in Japan came while working with a Japanese chef at Charlie Trotter's in Chicago and how this experience led to his minimalist approach to dish preparation and menu development.
- 9. Nils Norén** **108**
VP of Restaurant Operations for the Samuelsson Group and past VP at The French Culinary Institute says that his early discovery of Japanese food introduced him to the mindset that continues to influence his cooking and restaurant operations.
- 10. Ben Pollinger** **122**
Executive Chef at Oceana, New York City, describes the cooking experiences that took him through various restaurants—both good and bad—to a five-star New York City venue and the challenges he faced along the way.
- 11. Eric Ripert** **136**
Chef, Co-owner of Le Bernardin explains his career path and how Japanese ingredients and cooking inspire and influence his French cuisine.
- 12. Toni Robertson** **152**
Executive Chef, Mandarin Oriental Hotel, Singapore, explains how cooking potluck dinners while working in

an Air Force emergency room led her to managing restaurant and food services at one of New York and Singapore's top hotels.

- 13. Michael Romano** **172**
Chef, Co-owner of Union Square Cafe and past director of culinary services for the Union Square Hospitality Group discloses how his fascination with Japanese cuisine began in a spotless kitchen in Tokyo during an international food competition.
- 14. Marcus Samuelsson** **186**
Owner/Chef of the Red Rooster and past Executive Chef of Aquavit recalls how the Japanese chefs he met throughout his career influenced him in adapting Asian cuisine and ingredients.
- 15. Suvir Saran** **196**
Chef/past-owner of Dévi, New York City, and Consultant describes his first visit to Japan, the new dishes he had the opportunity to enjoy, and the ways they influenced his style of Indian cooking.
- 16. Yosuke Suga** **208**
Past Executive Chef, L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon at the Four Seasons Hotel, New York City, describes how he landed a coveted cook's job in Joël Robuchon's Paris test kitchen.
- 17. Noriyuki Sugie** **220**
Past Executive Chef, Asiate, Mandarin Oriental, New York, explains similarities between French and Japanese cuisine and recounts what he learned from masters, such as Chef Yutaka Ishinabe (the "Iron Chef") and Charlie Trotter.
- 18. Toshio Suzuki** **232**

Owner/Chef of Sushi Zen, New York City, tells about his philosophical approach to cooking and the challenges he faced when opening his restaurant in New York City.

19. Shinichiro Takagi **242**

Owner/Chef of Zeniya in Kanazawa Japan describes his career path from working at Kitcho, where he learned the highest culinary skills from Master Chef Tokuoka, to running one of Kanazawa's most popular restaurants.

20. James Wierzelewski **256**

Past Executive Chef at the New York Marriott Marquis, Harrods in London, and other hotel restaurants describes his philosophy of "eater-tainment" and his quest for unusual Japanese ingredients and cooking methods, which he successfully employs in large venues.

21. Barry Wine **268**

Owner/Chef of The Quilted Giraffe shares how he combined Japanese and American food ingredients, exquisite Japanese dishware, and a tasting menu concept to create unforgettable New York dining experiences in the 1980s.

22. Lee Anne Wong **284**

Independent chef, consultant, and producer of *Top Chef* reveals the challenges of her diverse career, from coordinating French Culinary Institute cooking events to reaching the semi-finals on *Top Chef*.

Glossary of Japanese Ingredients and Terms **300**

Selected Cookbooks of Participating Chefs	305
Index	308
About the Authors	317
Additional Resources	319



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LEE ANNE WONG

C h e f / C o n s u l t a n t

Lee Anne Wong is an American chef, and was one of the last four contestants on the first season of Bravo's *Top Chef*. She was the culinary producer for the show's next six seasons, where her duties included sourcing and styling the ingredients, and determining the creative challenge, budget, equipment restrictions, and time limits.

After graduating from The French Culinary Institute and working at Aquavit and Jean-Georges Vongerichten's Restaurant 66, she became the Executive Chef of Event Operations at FCI, a position she held while participating in the *Top Chef* competition. She has appeared on many food television programs including *Food Crawl with Lee Anne Wong*, and Food Network's *Chopped* and *Iron Chef America*, among others. She was also the chef-consultant for the film *No Reservations* (2007), and participates in many fund-raising events.

In December 2013, she moved to Honolulu to open Koko Head Cafe, which opened its doors in March 2014. Her first cookbook, *Dumplings All Day Wong*, was published in 2014.

Influences

Working at Aquavit was when I first started taking a serious interest in Japanese food and ingredients.

When I was 12 years old, my family visited the Philippines for my cousin's wedding. My uncle Tony took my brother and me to a sushi restaurant somewhere in Quezon City. It was my first time eating sushi, and my uncle dared me to eat the entire ball of wasabi. He put me up to a \$100 bet, and of course, being a kid, I wanted to impress my older brother. So I popped the whole thing in my mouth and swallowed it with water. I didn't chew it. My uncle ended up forking over \$100. I had a very bad stomach ache the next few days. And that was my first introduction to sushi, but also the last for a while, because there wasn't much sushi in upstate New York.

I started cooking when I was 20 or so. I was taking classes three nights a week at The French Culinary Institute in New York City and bartending to pay the rent. The first month at FCI felt right, so I contacted career services and asked for a list of local restaurants to contact. Aquavit, a Scandinavian restaurant, was listed under "A," so I called and asked if the restaurant was looking for interns or part-timers. I knew that Aquavit was a famous restaurant and had seen its owner, Marcus Samuelsson, on TV. What amazed me was that after I called, Marcus personally called me back! That surprised me! When I talked to Marcus on the phone, I said I wanted real restaurant experience—fine dining experience. He invited me to come in.

Career Path

I did whatever they asked me to do that first day, and they asked me if I wanted to come back the next day. Of course, I said yes!

On my first day at Aquavit, I met John Kingsley, the sous chef; and Nils Norén, the Chef de Cuisine. Kingsley asked me to turn a case of artichokes, which, thankfully, I had learned in culinary school the week before. So I went through the case of artichokes with my little paring knife. My hands were on fire and quite sore by the end of it. It was a test. I showed them how I did the first case, and then Kingsley said, “Yep, do the rest.”

Aquavit was a Scandinavian restaurant, but we used all kinds of Asian ingredients. We used yuzu from Japan. We had different kinds of sesame oil, different types of soy sauce from China and Japan, curries, lemongrass, limes—ingredients that I had never experienced.

Japanese food is a feast for the eyes.

In terms of Japanese sushi, my first epiphany was at the restaurant Ichimura. It was a tiny place on Second Avenue and 53rd Street in New York City. I didn't speak any Japanese, so I sat at the bar and ordered the “omakase”—chef's choice. It cost about \$100 and was the first traditional omakase I'd ever had. I started with my appetizers, and then I had the sashimi dish, clear soup, and vegetables. Then I had the cold fish dish, the hot fish dish, and so forth. From where I sat, I could see everything—fake plastic bamboo things and everything wrapped up in plastic wrap.

The fish in front of the chef was in a box on a tray. When he lifted the lid, I could see that everything in there was perfect. I had never tasted fish so good because the chef flew in his fish daily from the Tsukiji fish market in Tokyo, and from Norway. It was the freshest sashimi, and also the best sashimi, I had ever eaten. At that time, spending \$100 on dinner seemed frivolous, particularly since I was a line cook making only 11 bucks an hour. It was an expensive meal, but it set a standard for me. I would never again enjoy cheap sushi.

I remember after that first day at Aquavit, I begged Marcus to let me keep working the line, but he put me in pastry, and I didn't want to work in pastry. I didn't want to be pigeonholed because I was a girl, and the only other girl in the kitchen at the time was in pastry. I told him, "I don't want to do pastry!" Then Marcus asked me, "Where do you want to be?" I told him garde manger. He said, "Careful what you ask for."

Garde manger is—no joke—the toughest station at Aquavit. I didn't realize it at the time, and I spent a year in that position. During my time at Aquavit, Marcus and Nils asked me to write menus and then sat down with me and reviewed my ideas, which they didn't do with everybody. Eventually, they gave me a position managing in the cafe kitchen. I put the weekly specials on the menu, which is a huge opportunity for a line cook.

I spent almost three years at Aquavit and came out being a good line cook.

I learned a lot from Marcus and Nils, but I wanted to see if being a private chef was better, so I went to a special employment agency that placed culinary staff with wealthy families. It became very clear after

a short time that this kind of work was not for me, so I then went to the career services department at The French Culinary Institute. The director told me that Jean-Georges Vongerichten was opening a Chinese restaurant in Tribeca and he needed a cook, so I said, “All right.”

Taking that job was a step back. I had been a big dog at Aquavit. I was there for almost three years and knew every station, how to do everything, and how to run a crew. As the day cook at Jean-Georges’ new restaurant, I was put on the hardest station with a female partner who ended up becoming my archenemy. Everyone was climbing over each other’s back to get the sous chef position—I’m not into that. I would show up at six in the morning, and sometimes I would be there until 10 at night rolling scallion pancakes. I was there a couple months and realized that I needed to get out of there. I wasn’t making much money—maybe \$11 an hour. I quit the day we got reviewed. It was really tough, but it was the best decision I ever made.

Working at the FCI changed my culinary career. Hands down and no regrets.

I went back to FCI again and asked if they had anything freelance for me. They were between executive chefs in the amphitheater, so I came in and assisted a new chef, who ended up getting married and pregnant two weeks after she took on the position. The FCI liked my work, so they offered me the job. It was a big decision for me—I was about 27. I wondered if stepping away from the restaurant kitchen to work at a culinary school was the right decision. It ended up being the best decision I ever made.

Being the Executive Chef of Events at the amphitheater enabled me to work with every guest chef that came to the school. One of my responsibilities was to coordinate a chef demonstration program, so I got to work with every guest chef who visited. I set up demonstrations, ordered the food, tested the recipe, coordinated guest chefs' car service, and made sure they had everything they needed. I also got to work with the FCI deans, including Alice Waters, Jacques Pépin, Jacques Torres, and one of my favorite mentors, André Soltner, on a regular basis. I learned so much just standing next to these culinary legends and talking with them.

I worked with anywhere from 5 to 12 guest chefs every month—sometimes even more. I had to learn how the guest chefs wanted things done. I asked questions like, “What is your thought process behind this?” I learned their recipes and techniques. It was a great time for me to be a sponge, because each day was different and I was learning something new from different people. While I was doing that, I created menus at events and for our private clients. I planned all of the food for graduations and wine classes with Andrea Immer-Robinson. No menu was the same, and I never did anything twice. And that's the way I work now.

There has been a shift within America's culinary industry, and that shift is moving more towards the locavore philosophy—a purity of ingredients. And who has been doing this kind of cooking for centuries? Japan.

I spent six years in that position at The French Culinary Institute building up the amphitheater. It was during that time that I discovered the restaurant Ichimura, which became my favorite Japanese

restaurant in New York. I met Chef Tadashi Ono and Owner/Chef Eiji Ichimura, who gave a demonstration about sushi and Japanese cuisine—the first of many demonstrations of Japanese cooking at the FCI. The demonstration was so traditional and so amazing—the students at the school had never seen anything like that before.

Japanese cuisine wasn't at the forefront of cuisine back then. It wasn't as modernized and popular as it is now. In fact, the culinary world hadn't paid much attention to Japanese cuisine, because for the past several decades the focus had been "Spain-Spain-Spain" or "France-Italy-Europe." But recently, there has been a shift within America's culinary industry, and that shift is moving more towards the locavore philosophy—a purity of ingredients. And who has been doing this kind of cooking for centuries? Japan.

That's why we invited the Japanese TSUJI Culinary Institute, along with 10 top chefs in Japan, to come to FCI for a conference to focus on Japanese cooking techniques and ingredients. It was wonderful to be able to learn about Japanese cuisine in an educational forum in New York City.

People think that the Top Chef shows are scripted—they're not.

While I was at the FCI, I became one of the first contestants on *Top Chef*. It was interesting, because there was no TV show like it. It was fun and weird being thrown into a house with the other contestant chefs. I had lived alone for many years. Then, suddenly, I was living in a house with 11 other crazy adults and kids, but it was a very positive experience. There's a lot of work that goes into the show, and the challenges are real. The time limits to cook are real, too. My training at the FCI helped me get through the series. I knew I could

learn something from everybody in the room, so I kept an eye on what everybody was doing. I tried to present myself in the best fashion and represent the FCI without losing my own identity.

It's very rare that you get the opportunity as a chef to cook your food and then have the best criticism thrown back in your face on a regular basis. When food connoisseurs like Tom Colicchio gave me direct feedback about what was right and what was wrong, I sat there and nodded. He knew a lot more about food than I did, which is why he was successful in business and why I was sitting on the other side of the table.

I was on *Top Chef* the first season. I made some lifelong friends and learned a lot. Then I became the culinary producer and traveled with the show for four years. When I wasn't working on the show, I was at the FCI. It was very strange for me because people at the FCI thought that I was on vacation, when in reality I was working 60 days straight for 16 to 20 hours a day. It was crazy. I would come back from shooting the show and go back to the FCI feeling tired as a dog and physically burnt out.

I finally had to make a decision to quit my position at the FCI. I left in January 2009 because I was going on the road with the show for another five months. While filming the show, I lived in other cities for months at a time—Miami, Aspen, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Hawaii, Las Vegas, New Orleans, and Puerto Rico. We would stay for a couple weeks or a month at a time and experience their local foods.

It was great to see the world that way, but after a few years, there were times when I was bored and unhappy. We had just finished a series, and we were doing a spin off, *Just Desserts*. I had turned into this machine cranking out shows, and that was something I didn't want to be a part of anymore. I made a decision to come back to New York. I don't regret my time with *Top Chef* for a second. It was an

amazing opportunity to connect with the industry in a different way. But now I am committed to living in New York.

Cuisine

I've cooked it all because I love it all so much, but I especially love Japanese food, and that's why I'm leaning more toward Japanese cuisine.

People often ask, “What types of cuisine do you specialize in?” As a chef, I’m in the process of branding myself. I’m trying to figure out my identity. And I want that identity to include Japanese ingredients and technique. I’m familiar with all types of European, African, and Indian cuisines, and all different kinds of Asian food. I trained in classical French cooking. I worked at a Scandinavian restaurant. I opened a Chinese restaurant. I worked in the Caribbean for a month. I’ve cooked it all because I love it all so much, but I especially love Japanese food, and that’s why I’m leaning more toward Japanese cuisine.

Not long ago, I was down in South Beach for an event called Access House, a managers’ party. It was only for chefs. The industry was invited, but no press or media were allowed in. Everyone came to relax in a safe, very exclusive haven. I had the honor of cooking there one of three nights. The first night, I did my version of the marriage of Japanese and French cuisine.

For my burger, I dredged fresh shiitake mushrooms and stewed them and seasoned them with soy, mirin, and sugar, slicing them into the mixture. I then cooked down some red onions and caramelized them. Then I deglazed them with red wine, saké, and miso and folded that in. So it was a red onion red wine miso jam.

Next I made Parmesan fricos, or what they call “cheese crisps” in America. I made my fricos with real Parmesan cheese and *tougarashi*, or chili pepper, blended with flour and a bit of water. I baked them on a sheet tray so they would be super crisp and thin wafer crackers. The burger was all about umami, so I used salt and pepper, the soy and sweetened shiitake mushroom mixture, the red onion miso jam, and some mayonnaise with shiso. I won best burger for the night, and it was rated best burger for the weekend at Access House.

Despite the many Japanese restaurants I have visited, and as much as I love the food, I didn't know anything until I set foot in Japan.

The most eye-opening experience in Japan for me was seeing the entire food culture and how different it is from American or western food culture. Everywhere you look in Japan—left or right—you see food. It's ingrained in Japan's culture, its history, and its heritage. Everything about Japan's food is connected with nature and seasonality, and the chefs take great care in how they handle their food, including the way it is grown and transported. Even the way the food is displayed plays into the chef's idea of hospitality. *Irasshaimase* means “welcome,” and I feel that spirit exists everywhere in Japan and easily translates to its food. Japanese chefs aren't so different from any other chef in the world. The disciplines are pretty much the same, but I am inspired by their training and the way they think about food.

Food is seasonal in Japan. Certain types of fish and vegetables are on a menu during the winter but not during the summer, not only because of the lack of availability, but also because chefs in Japan have a commitment to using the same seasonal ingredients. The perfect examples of this were the dishes for the many kaiseki meals I had when I was there in the summer. Every kaiseki menu was exactly the same, no matter where I was in Japan. The finest chefs in Japan were all doing the same dishes. They were all making the mountain vegetables, the clear soups, and the *ankake*, or thickened sauce.

I didn't really understand it at the time, but now I can understand why the Japanese chefs do this. I was so in awe of everything they did, but it took a while for me to realize why. At one point I thought I might be getting sick of kaiseki. But I told myself, "Lee Anne, you don't know when you're going to be in Japan and have this experience again. You have to love it."

Ingredients

Chef Takagi told me to touch the skin of the squid, which was still alive. Its skin was blue! He explained, "That's how you know the squid is fresh—by touching it, whether it's alive or not."

While I was in Kanazawa, Japan, Chef Shinichiro Takagi from Zeniya Restaurant gave me fish-buying and butchering lessons. He took me to the Oumicho Fish Market and talked about how he buys fish and what he looks for. There are hundreds of fishmongers there, but Chef Takagi introduced me to a guy who, he said, had the freshest fish. Chef told me to touch the skin of the squid, which was still alive.

Its skin was blue! He explained, “That’s how you know the squid is fresh—by touching it, whether it’s alive or not.”

Now when I go to a fish market in New York, or wherever I am, I know what to look for. I know the basic rules. But I still want to learn more from a Japanese chef on a deeper level. To achieve a true understanding of the Japanese philosophy, I would need to literally stand side-by-side with a Japanese master the way I did at culinary school and hang out with him, talk with him in the kitchen, and get to know his story. Until I understand what it takes to become a master, I’ll never fully understand everything that’s going on and how to perfect my craft.

I’d love to train with a master chef like Yoshihiro Murata, the author of *Kaiseki: The Exquisite Cuisine of Kyoto’s Kikunoi Restaurant*, as well as with that 19-year-old kid who’s putting out that banging bowl of pork ramen at Ippudo Restaurant in Kanazawa. Young or old, these chefs are masters because they can take a few ingredients and enhance them by highlighting their best attributes. It’s not just a bowl of ramen—it’s the best bowl of ramen on earth! Whatever that kid did with the pork bones and that little extra pork fat on top, I want to learn that technique from him.

Training

People used to say, “Go to cooking school to stay out of trouble and to stay out of jail.” Now it’s a glamorous thing.

Culinary school is necessary, but there are certain misconceptions that come with it. It takes a couple of months to adjust the attitude of a

young chef out of culinary school. I was a smart ass. I thought I knew everything. It took me a year or two to learn respect for my fellow cooks and respect for my job. Young chefs are going to learn almost everything they need to know at their first job. I think they come out of culinary school with a lot of bravado and think that they are ready to take on the culinary world, but they don't realize that they are going to spend the first couple years on the line, sweating it out in line or as a prep cook.

There's no easy way to the top. Becoming a professional chef is not about TV. Young people see *Top Chef* and watch Food Network. They think, "Oh that's great. I want to be famous and be on TV." But that's not the reality of it. It's not enough to think, "I cook for myself every day, so maybe I'll go to culinary school and be on *Top Chef*." People with this attitude would come to open casting calls for *Top Chef* and say, "I watch Food Network and cook every day. I read *Bon Appétit*. And that's why I want to be a chef."

That's not going to be enough.

Being a professional chef is about discipline and a willingness to work and learn until the day you die. There's always somebody out there who can teach you something new. For me, it is Japanese cuisine. I'm so delighted to have discovered an entire culture that I can dedicate the rest of my life to finding out about. This is not something I can learn in the next year or in five or even 10 years. It's going to take a lifetime to learn and immerse myself in Japanese cuisine.

Tools

My knife skills increased dramatically once I learned how to work with a petty knife.

I remember my first Japanese knife. I started using Japanese steel over 15 years ago and I still have it. It is beat as hell, but I still love it. It's my most important tool. It's an extension of your arm. Since then, my collection has grown exponentially. I honestly haven't bought German steel since then. German knives are metal poured into a mold, but in Japan, knife makers are still hand-forging steel. When I was in Sakai City and met the famous knife maker, Mr. Doi, I was amazed to learn that this old man in his 80s has been standing in front of a fire for more than 60 years of his life, hammering steel as part of a three-man "orchestra" that creates the most spectacular knives in Japan. These men are so sweet and so humble about what they do, but they are so serious that they can do it blindfolded. It is their craftsmanship and the heritage of knife making that make these knives so special.

What is it about a Japanese knife that's different for me? I'm a female, I'm Asian, and I've got tiny hands. I trained with a giant German chef's knife that was almost the size of my forearm. It was awkward. During my first two years at Aquavit, our sous chef tried to teach me really good knife skills, so I invested in my first Japanese steel. At the time, a Japanese knife was like a Rolls Royce, but I wanted to make sure my knives were on point. My Japanese knife was sharper, thinner, and lighter than the German knives.

For the most part, the petty knife is my every-day knife. I have big slicers, chef's knives, and others, too, but I opt for a petty knife over the bigger knives because it's small and my hands are small. I can do fine work with it. I can bone things with it. The petty knife was a revelation when I discovered it. My knife skills increased dramatically once I learned how to work with a smaller knife.

A Day in the Life

Everybody who worked at Aquavit did everything in their power to see if I would quit.

When I first started cooking at Aquavit, I wanted to learn how to cook, but there was a point where it was unbearable for me. I was getting yelled at every single day by the executive and sous chefs. One day when I messed up really badly, the executive chef really let me have it. I kept asking him how to fix it, but he kept at me. Finally I said, "Can I talk to you for a second?" I told him, "I like working here. I want to work here, and I want to learn. I'm not learning anything when you talk to me this way. I'm sorry I messed up, and I will always admit it when I mess up. But unless you tell me how to fix it, you're not doing your job, and I'm no good to you anyway."

We never had a problem after that. We came to an understanding, and he never yelled at me like that, ever again. It was such a big thing for me because I've worked in a lot of kitchens. I see the way chefs treat their cooks. I want to be in an environment where my chefs are willing to stop and talk it out with me and help me understand why something doesn't work, not yell at me. Fortunately, the executive

chef gave me that opportunity. And I think it's important to create a bond with your first mentor. He was that mentor to me. He taught me a lot. I'd lie down in front of a bus for that guy—as long as he doesn't yell at me!

Years later he admitted to me that they yelled at me every day just to see if I would quit. It was really mean, but I really wanted to cook. And now I can say to him, "Aren't you glad I didn't?"



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

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