

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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TWO

MICHAEL ANTHONY

Executive Chef/Partner, Gramercy Tavern,
New York City

Michael Anthony began cooking professionally in Tokyo where he quickly grew to love the Japanese connection to the changing seasons. Following his time in Japan, Chef Michael moved to France to hone his culinary skills at a number of renowned restaurants. He joined Gramercy Tavern in New York City as the Executive Chef in 2006, and under his leadership the restaurant has earned a number of accolades including a three-star *New York Times* review in 2007 and the James Beard Award for Outstanding Restaurant in 2008. In June 2011, he was named Executive Chef/Partner of Gramercy Tavern. In 2012, Michael Anthony won the James Beard Award for Best Chef in New York City. He is also the author of *The Gramercy Tavern Cookbook*, published by Clarkson Potter in 2013.

Influences

I wanted to experience firsthand what it felt like to work in a Japanese kitchen and try to learn some basics of cooking.

In my family, we celebrated our Italian-American origins, which were humble, during family events that revolved around the dinner table. My grandmother took a lot of pride in her cooking, and we all bragged about it. We ate from the garden, and we realized how wonderful the food was. But it was truly not a very deep gastronomic event—it was fresh and simply prepared. These meals sparked my interest in food. However, I was convinced that going into the restaurant business would crush all of my parents' dreams and hopes for me, so instead I graduated from Indiana University with a degree in French and business, and also a minor in Japanese.

It was only years later in the early 1990s—when I was about 24 and living in Japan—that I decided to pursue the idea of becoming a chef. I made contact with the food critic for the *Harold Tribune* who had been living in Tokyo and told him that I wanted to meet a Japanese chef. He suggested that I contact Shizuyo Shima, an owner chef who ran a restaurant in the Roppongi district in Tokyo. At that time an independent restaurant in Tokyo run by a female chef-owner was not very common. Shima's restaurant had only 18 seats and no counter. She was alone in the kitchen and had one server. It was a very personal style of cooking. She had attended Japanese cooking school, but her professional experience was focused around French training. Her food was a melding of Japanese and French cuisine.

I knew enough Japanese to introduce myself, tell her that I knew some basics of cooking, that I could be useful in the kitchen, and that I

wouldn't be a nuisance. My only request was that I wanted to experience firsthand what it felt like to work in her kitchen and to learn some basics of cooking. She wanted to know if I was for real. "I don't want you to waste my time. You can come for one day if you want to watch, but if you really want to learn about cooking, I want to know that you are serious."

Shizuyo Shima had worked for Jean Delaveyne, a famous chef who ran a three-star Michelin restaurant in Paris. He was very old school and had a very archaic way of running a kitchen. He was known for being extremely hard on his chefs, so she learned to be tough, too.

My experience working in Shima's kitchen was a turbulent time for me.

That job tested every notion that I held. "Was this really what I want to do? Had I been honest with this chef? Did I want to learn this business? Was I willing to do whatever it took to answer her questions?" It couldn't have been a more difficult or revealing experience for me. Working with Shizuyo Shima, I finally learned how exciting, how fascinating, and how hard it was to have two people in a small kitchen and make it work so the business thrived and people were impressed. I learned all of those things in that first year.

Career Path

Shima taught me how to think logically and organize my kitchen.

Step one had to be completed in a clean and well-organized way so that I could get to step two. Step two needed to be organized and completed in a clean and logical way so that I could get to step three. That's how I learned to work my way through a recipe, through the prep, through the day, and through to the end result. Every step took the same kind of logical thinking. At the same time, I had to understand step 10 very clearly before I could even begin step one. It was not natural for me, so for me it was work.

Working with Shizuyo Shima was more than a life-altering experience. It was a real exploration in every sense of the word. I always look back on my experience and try to recognize the business value of it and also understand the ego that's involved in having someone watch what you do. She advised me to go to France and attend cooking school, so in 1992 I moved to Paris and enrolled in the culinary school at Le Ferrandi.

My lifeline in the Paris restaurant kitchens where I worked was knowing enough Japanese to communicate with the Japanese chefs.

I moved to Paris to attend cooking school at Le Ferrandi and progressed in my career, advancing from restaurant to restaurant. Working in Paris, I knew for sure that I was in over my head at some of the jobs that I held. I think that is the key to any great learning experience—where you just struggle to barely keep your head above

water. All through the 1990s, I saw a huge wave of Japanese chefs moving to France and staying there for two or three years. They often did not get paid any wages and lived together in one apartment. They became a wonderful subculture of the restaurant industry in Paris. My lifeline initially in a couple of the Paris restaurant kitchens that I worked was knowing enough Japanese to communicate with the Japanese chefs. So even if the French chefs were furious at me and ready to kick me out, they would say, "Go tell them that I need this." As far as lifelines go, I was hanging by a thread.

Sometimes on my days off I was invited to my Japanese coworkers' apartment, where we would bring wine for everyone to taste. We barely had enough money to buy a bottle, even though some chefs in this group were working in the very best restaurants in Paris. They would put posters on the wall and break out all their books on wine, and we would taste 10 to 12 wines together. I didn't grasp every nuance of the explanations in Japanese, but I did gain access to drinking great French wine. I certainly didn't have enough money to do that in a restaurant. In fact, I barely had enough money to drink an espresso before I went to work. We got yelled at if we got near the coffee because we were not allowed to drink the espresso in the restaurant or even touch the coffee. So I pieced together pocket change to get an espresso before working an 18-hour day.

After working in some of the best kitchens in Paris I was ready to move on in my career, so I went to New York City to work at Daniel restaurant as a line cook and March restaurant as a sous chef. The next summer, I went back to France to work for Chef Michel Guérard at Le Prés d'Eugénie, and then to upstate New York in 2002 to become the Executive Chef of Blue Hill at Stone Barns. Four years later, I moved to New York City to become the Executive Chef of Gramercy Tavern.

Cuisine

*Every chef is yearning for attention and seeking approval.
A great chef has something to prove.*

What makes our cooking at Gramercy Tavern so special is the personal connection, the improvisation, and the impulsiveness of it. It's an enormous decision to use our resources in that way and to do it without losing our focus. That's not a normal thing for a restaurant of our size. It requires communication, solidarity, and a strong sense of organization. I can work between the two—improvisation and order—as long as they don't collide. I recognize that our chefs need spontaneity and regimentation in order to progress and develop our personal style of cooking. I say "our" because it's not just mine. We have come to Gramercy Tavern to learn about cooking and loosely connect a group of American chefs—not American by nationality, but American by working as chefs in the United States. I think we are all contributing to an interesting progression of "American cooking."

In terms of cooking, both French and Japanese cultures are very committed to form. This is the way you do things, and you don't deviate because if you do you're only asking for trouble. As long as you stick to the agreed-upon form, you will succeed in creating something of quality. When developing a personal style of cooking, we have to break a lot of classic cooking rules that we learned along the way.

At Gramercy Tavern, we are not sacrificing the discipline and persistence that it takes to challenge ourselves to analyze our work. Is it of quality or not? Is it sensible or not? Along the way it's breaking that form. When I say breaking rules, I also mean finding solutions.

You don't have to love a dish or have it agree with your palette to find it interesting. This is what assures me that in terms of food, we are on a steep learning curve—one that I would like to cultivate for my own personal development at Gramercy Tavern. I hope that collectively, we can find a sensible way to pursue this.

In Japan, I learned to create meals that are unique to a particular place. Our dishes here should taste unique because they use ingredients that are grown here and are seasonal. For example, a meal in New York in March should taste, look, and feel much different than a meal in early June. A memory of a meal is related exactly to the climate and culture around us.

Uniqueness of time and place is the essence of almost every fine dining experience that I know of in traditional Japanese cooking and other forms of serious cooking. That's the connection.

Our attention has gone beyond the food. Our dishes are now connected with the soil, and we are celebrating all sorts of stories of urban farming, home gardens, the revival of small agriculture in the northeast, our heritage, and heirloom vegetables. However, this is more than a trend—it's a defining moment in our culture. Now more than ever, chefs, educators, restaurateurs and other culinary professionals need to stand up to voice our opinions about our love for and interest in foods of all sorts—especially traditional foods, foods that have inherent flavor, foods grown with care, foods grown on small farms, food products that represent unique and authentic flavors. If we don't stand up now, as food professionals and enthusiastic

diners, we may not have the opportunity to enjoy those flavors in the future. For me, this philosophy is what defines what we do at Gramercy Tavern.

Ingredients

We use Japanese ingredients because they taste intriguing.

We use kombu, dried bonito flakes, and shiro dashi, a seasoning agent that's not even that common in Japan. We use certain seasoned fish roe as a textural and aesthetic component. The one menu item that was clearly inspired by Japanese cooking techniques and ingredients is *tsukemono*, or pickles. At first, we offered simple vinegar pickles. Now, we make a dozen different kinds of new pickles using fermented rice bran, or *nukazuke*, in our own fermentation system.

The idea of natural fermentation, the aroma and the earthiness, piques the curiosity of most customers, but the flavor of the *nukazuke* pickles is foreign to the American palette. In some cases, without understanding the context, a whiff of the pickles sends the signal, "Something's wrong here!" However, when guests get accustomed to the aroma and then taste the fermented turnips, radishes, sunchokes (also known as "Jerusalem artichokes"), and parsnips, most diners like what they taste. There is pungency but also a surprising crispness in the texture and crunch.

In the end, we are extending the life of our seasonal ingredients by preserving them through natural methods of fermentation. I'd like to think that this is not just me trying to promote the product. The crispy

crunch, the interesting graininess of the rice bran, and the inexplicable pungency achieved through natural fermentation all create an irresistible pull to these pickles. It's very hard to stop eating them, even if your palette is initially put off by them.

We prepare our dishes with the mentality that everything counts and that not one thing is more important than the other. Doing so presents a unified value from top to bottom.

Gramercy Tavern has two distinct operations that work simultaneously—it's a dual concept. There is the Tavern in the front room. It has an a la carte menu and is a great expression of seasonal ingredients that are mostly cooked over an open wood fire. We have a sense of casualness with the “no reservation” policy. There is a feeling of, “I can come and go as I please.” It's a spontaneous experience, and not a long drawn out, or expensive meal.

The experience in the main dining room, without adding any pretensions, is set up for a more refined meal. As in the Tavern, the main dining room is an expression of seasonal ingredients that are always evolving. But in the main dining room they are introduced in the format of two tasting menus. One is the vegetable tasting menu—not necessarily a vegetarian menu, but one that celebrates vegetables. The other is a seasonal menu. Additionally, there is a collection of dishes that are in a prix-fixe format, with one price for an appetizer, entrée, and dessert in a simple, personable form.

In all these different dishes, vegetables play a very inspired role. Unassuming sunchoke appear harmoniously scattered as if they sailed out of the sky and hit the plate just right. We use sunchoke from farmers' root cellars in the early spring because we want to support the farmers all year long.

We can't ignore the farmers and only buy from them in July and August, when their gardens and farms are exploding. If we don't support them through the cold rainy months, they may not be able to stay in business. So the sunchoke are on the menu.

It makes sense to have good relationships with our growers and to share those stories with our guests, so that they can appreciate the love and the passion that go into bringing our food to the table every day. One of our major goals at Gramercy Tavern is to send folks out saying, "Now I understand a little bit more about your dedication to local ingredients. I learned something about those ingredients."

Training

Internal working relationships are the most important aspect of a restaurant or any business.

At Gramercy Tavern, we extend a sense of high priority to our colleagues so that we place each other in a winning position. The essence of owner Danny Meyer's approach is "Enlightened Hospitality." That is not just a catch phrase. He firmly believes that

people work better together when they are self-aware. A large part of my job is to manage how our talented people progress in their careers and how they add interesting ideas to our story.

While generally in the restaurant business, “The guest is king,” our number-one tenet is to take care of each other. Look at the track record of Gramercy Tavern. There is a rich story that is still evolving—and it is a wonderful context in which to work. We have attracted the attention of myriad cooks from around the world. We currently have chefs from Tokyo, Kyoto, Copenhagen, London, Paris, and the United States. Channeling all of these different perspectives on food is what makes our kitchen successful.

One of the things that I shattered when I arrived at Gramercy Tavern was the classic hierarchy. Now cooks work their way through our kitchen by bringing natural curiosity and dynamic ideas to the job.

When I started at Gramercy Tavern, it was set up in a very traditional European way. There was a starting point, or boot camp, and you had to prove that you had what it took to work at Gramercy Tavern. If you were good enough, you could make your way into the main kitchen and work through the stations to appetizers, and so on—the roast guys being the most important. All of that was great because it gave line cooks a very clear path: “I know what’s in front of me, and I know what I have to do to get there.” I tore that process apart because I wanted to give an equal amount of importance to every station in our kitchen.

The moment that a chef puts his or her knife into the radish, turnip or sunchoke, it’s as serious and as important as preparing any

expensive fish or meat. The technical precision a chef uses when slicing vegetables, fish or meat and then putting them on the plate is the essence of what we do. I encourage cooks to approach every day with a sense of curiosity and to push themselves to think critically about the food they work with.

There are so many variables in the food, so there's no way that I can ask them to replicate a recipe that's on a piece of paper.

I ask them to communicate the changes that they see, taste the food or the dish with attention, and think about the whole operation. The goals for my cooks at Gramercy Tavern are to think critically about food, to communicate their observations, and to leave their station better than they found it.

Gramercy Tavern's kitchen is modeled after a European-style organization. It has a central stove, a beautiful, large, powerful piece of fire that combines heavy sections where pots and pans are cooking and large surfaces that are very warm but not at cooking temperatures where hot food is plated. Cooks face each other so that they can see and hear each other and communicate. Fish dishes that are prepared on one side of the stove are cooked and timed perfectly to be done at the same time as the meat dishes and cold dishes. They are facing the one chef who is orchestrating it all—that is what defines the French kitchen and Gramercy Tavern's kitchen.

You can't imagine how many people come our way and ask whether they can work or study in my kitchen.

Now more than ever, chefs are coming out of a variety of culinary schools in the U.S. The schools are sophisticated and have improved at professional as well as technical levels in preparing people of all ages to work as cooks. We deal with probably five culinary schools on a regular basis in New York City and another five culinary schools around the country. The average age of New York cooking school graduates is much older than European or Asian counterparts. We have cooks right out of culinary school with little to no experience, as well as those who have worked in restaurants for many years.

Regarding male versus female cooks, I'd say on average about 20 percent to 25 percent are women, but when it comes to hiring, whether a candidate is male or female is not a consideration. I see a growing number of women in the restaurant industry and a growing number of female chefs who are reaching the highest level—not just as owners of businesses who are in charge of their own kitchens, but those who are reaching the point where they are nationally recognized. I see that as an encouraging trend.

On a management level, over the last few years I have made it my goal to communicate the restaurant's numbers to the managers in our monthly meetings and have them take a more active role in making business decisions. I had never done that in the past. Now when we talk about labor costs and food costs, they understand the actions that we take in the restaurant and contribute advice. They are responsible for making decisions on certain aspects of how we run the restaurant.

Tools

Knives are the primary tools chefs use to express what they want to accomplish with the ingredients.

In the past, most chefs in the U.S. and Europe used German or French knives. However, today if you peek into kitchens throughout the industry, you will find that most chefs use western-style Japanese knives or a traditional Japanese knife. German and French knives are still visible in the kitchen, but every top chef I know owns at least one Japanese knife. Japanese knives are certainly my favorite.

The Japanese knife-making tradition is one of the most specific in the world in terms of each knife's function. By understanding different kinds of Japanese knives and knowing how to use them, we are able to be more precise and more delicate. We use one knife for filleting fish and breaking bones, another for portioning fish, and another for making precision cuts for vegetables. It's not just for novelty or for great looks that the fish roaster at Gramercy Tavern uses a deba for certain boning tasks and a hybrid Japanese western knife for cutting pickles. Today using Japanese knives has become part of the fabric of the cooking at Gramercy Tavern. Thanks to The Gohan Society's knife demonstrations, we are benefitting from a deeper understanding of the history of Japanese knives, as well as how they are made, maintained, and sharpened.

We also use other tools in our kitchen that are inspired by Japanese chefs. For example, we have two special Japanese cutting boards that are set out during service, and two cutting boards that are set out during prep time for performing very specific jobs. Formerly, we used spoons and spatulas to create and plate food in delicate ways. Now we are learning how to prepare and plate food using long metal chopsticks. I have always admired the precision of Japanese chefs

when they plate their dishes, and I know that it takes much practice. Not many non-Japanese chefs know how to do it, but we are learning and have taken some important steps forward.

Serving the First Lady, Michelle Obama, was one of the most moving moments in my career.

Not long after the 2008 presidential election, First Lady Michelle Obama came to Gramercy Tavern for lunch. She wanted something very specific, something that was carefully handled, not too heavy, vibrant and alive, and with ingredients that revealed their origins. I had a chance to speak with her a few times during lunch. She wasn't there to hear the history of every food on the plate, but she expressed an interest in and a commitment to sharing with people how exciting it is to serve those kinds of foods. I couldn't have felt more proud that someone like her chose to eat at my restaurant.

A Day in the Life

No job in the kitchen is beyond the responsibility of the chef.

There is not a day that goes by that I don't think about my experiences at Bistro Shima in Tokyo's Roppongi district. I learned all the fundamentals that help me do my job well today. I was made to understand that learning every task—no matter how humble—is essential. Even the Friday night cleaning regime of standing in the grease pit in the middle of the kitchen taught me a lesson. It was a rude awakening but it has kept me grounded ever since.

Leaving the restaurant late on Friday nights, I faced an hour-and-a-half commute on a crowded train to Koshigaya because I did not have the money to live in Tokyo. Usually there were no empty seats. All the way home, I asked myself, "Are you serious about this job?" I guess I was, because I did that for an entire year.

What I learned from that experience is that there is no job in the kitchen beyond the responsibility of the chef. At any moment in the day, I know how my cooks and staff are feeling and what's happening in the restaurant. I understand the operation from every angle. Recently I recognized that for the sake of a better restaurant and for the team, I had to learn to delegate many jobs but not retreat too far from any one of them. But the truth is, I don't miss cleaning the grease pit.



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

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