



**CHEF'S CHOICE**

22 Culinary Masters Tell How

**JAPANESE FOOD CULTURE**

Influenced Their Careers and Cuisine

Saori Kawano  
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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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## SHINICHIRO TAKAGI

Owner/Chef, Zeniya, Kanazawa, Japan

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Born in Kanazawa, Shinichiro Takagi completed his bachelor's degree in commercial science at Nihon University. After serving his apprenticeship at Japan's top kaiseki restaurant, Kyoto Kitcho, he returned to Kanazawa to run Zeniya, an eatery opened by his father. Takagi prepared a special dinner for an event in the U.S. co-hosted by the Consulate General of Japan and the Ishikawa Prefectural government to promote Ishikawa's refined Kaga cuisine. Takagi has been a guest chef at hotels and events in Japan and abroad, including the U.S., Germany, and Hong Kong.

In 2009, Shinichiro Takagi was appointed Chairman of The Real Japan Ishikawa Project Committee. Takagi has been a guest chef at many international cooking venues, including The Napa Valley Reserve, The Hong Kong International Film Festival, the Hotel Blauer Bock in Munich, the Consulate General of Japan, and as a member of Japan's team for Worlds of Flavor at The Culinary Institute of America. Takagi is dedicated to spreading Ishikawa's traditional culinary culture

abroad, believing that Japanese cuisine is, in essence, an aggregate of regional dishes.

## Influences

*From an early age, my parents took my brother and me to many kinds of restaurants, mostly in Kanazawa and the Ishikawa Prefecture, but sometimes in Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto, too.*

One day when I was eight or nine years old, I asked my father, “Can you make sashimi?” He said, “You know I am a chef, so why do you ask me that?” I had never seen him make sashimi, so I wondered if he could make it. At that time, my father had several chefs working in his restaurant so that he didn’t have to do all of the cooking by himself. He said, “Okay, I will show you. Let’s go to the restaurant.”

On the way to the restaurant, we picked up a small, live fluke. When we got to the restaurant, he killed it and prepared sashimi for me. It took about 30 minutes, and it was beautiful! Then he said, “Why don’t you taste it?”

After I took a bite, my father asked me, “Did it taste good?” I couldn’t say yes because it didn’t taste good. I told him, “It’s too fresh. The texture is good, but its taste is not so good. It’s not cold enough for sashimi.” My father just laughed. That was the first time I tasted sashimi prepared by my father. In fact, I think he prepared meals for me only two or three times.

From an early age, my parents took my brother and me to many kinds of restaurants, mostly in Kanazawa and the Ishikawa Prefecture, but sometimes in Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto, too. We didn’t really talk

too much about the food, but even though I was only 13 or 14 years old, we shared wine or saké during dinner. I think he thought I was too young to learn actual cooking techniques or about the presentation of this cuisine, but he tried to teach me how to appreciate the meal and enjoy the restaurant.

*For a kid in high school, it was almost impossible to understand how one plate, even if it was 200 years old, could cost more than 100,000 yen!*

When I was in junior high and high school, I worked four or five nights a week in the restaurant, from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., washing dishes. My father used very old dishes and tableware, so I had to be very careful with them. Sometimes he asked me, “Do you know how old this plate is?” I said I didn’t know. “It’s more than 200 years old. And do you know how much these kinds of plates and tableware cost?” I had no idea. But for a kid in high school, it was almost impossible to understand how one plate, even if it was 200 years old, could cost more than 100,000 yen!

Serving food on antique tableware, even in the best kaiseki restaurants, was rare in Japan. But my father’s hobby was collecting antique dishes. He believed that the dish was a kind of canvas for the meal. He was very serious about his tableware collections and how cuisine looked when it was served to his guests. He said, “I try to prepare great meals, and they need to be served on beautiful dishes.”

*Going to the U.S. as a high-school exchange student was one of the greatest experiences in my life.*

In 1986, when I was just 16 years old, I spent one year as a foreign exchange student in upstate New York. I learned to speak English and experienced an entirely different food culture. After I came back to Japan, I finished high school and moved to Tokyo to go to college, but I hadn't thought about being a chef. I wasn't particularly interested in cooking, but I loved to eat foods from all over the world.

I'd go to French restaurants, Italian restaurants, and Chinese restaurants as often as possible. Since I was a college student, I didn't have much money, but I always went to the best restaurants I could afford. That was my hobby.

## Career Path

*I thought that maybe this was an opportunity to decide which way I should go regarding my career, so I said, "Okay, why not?" It was at that moment that I decided I wanted to be a chef.*

Unfortunately, in 1991, when I was a freshman in college, my father suddenly passed away. That's when my mother took over the restaurant. Then, in 1993, when I was a senior in college, one of my father's best friends, Mr. Yamashio, came to visit me from Hong Kong. When I was driving him back to the airport, he asked me, "Are you going to take over the restaurant?"

I didn't say yes, I didn't say no. I just mumbled, "Hmm." But to my surprise, my father's friend interpreted my response as a yes. He called me a couple of days later from Hong Kong and told me that he had arranged for me to have a job interview at Arashiyama Kitcho, Japan's

most famous kaiseki restaurant. I was shocked because Arashiyama Kitcho didn't interview inexperienced people like me for an apprenticeship, but Mr. Yamashio was one of their best customers. He owned one of the most prestigious banks in Hong Kong, so he easily arranged an interview. I thought that maybe this was an opportunity to decide which way I should go regarding my career, so I said, "Okay, why not?" It was at that moment that I decided I wanted to be a chef.

*Mr. Tokuoka told me that at 24 years of age, I was too old. It was too late for me to become a chef.*

I had the interview with the President of Kitcho, Mr. Tokuoka, and his son, Kunio-san. But President Tokuoka told me "no" for two reasons: first, he said that he didn't take chefs from other restaurants because those chefs always went back to their own restaurants. And second, he told me that Kitcho didn't take amateurs who graduated from college and didn't have any cooking skills. Mr. Tokuoka also told me that at 24 years of age, I was too old. It was too late for me to become a chef. That response made me almost give up getting into Kitcho.

After the interview, I telephoned Mr. Yamashio in Hong Kong and told him that the interview didn't go so well and asked what I could do. He suggested that I ask some other important Kitcho customers for their help. I knew I couldn't ask them, but maybe my mother would. She called Mr. Murai, the chairman of Asahi Beer, Mr. Takanashi, the past chairman of Kikkoman, and finally, Mr. Toda, one of the most famous antiques dealers in Japan, and asked them to recommend me for a job at Kitcho. They all answered, "Why not?" Here is how they did it.

First, Mr. Murai, Mr. Takanashi, and Mr. Toda made separate reservations on different days at Kitcho so they could each talk privately

to Mr. Tokuoka. It was Mr. Tokuoka's custom after dinner to go into the private dining rooms to ask the guests how they liked their meal. Of course, Mr. Murai, said, "We had a great, great time. Oh, by the way, why don't you help Shinichiro Takagi-san?" When Kitcho first opened, I think Asahi Beer was one of its biggest sponsors. For Mr. Tokuoka, there was no way he could say no, so he said he'd think about it.

A couple of days later, Mr. Takanashi visited Arashiyama Kitcho and had dinner. After he praised Mr. Tokuoka's meal, Mr. Takanashi said, "I know a young guy from Kanazawa. Please help train him." Mr. Tokuoka asked, "Is this about Takagi-san?" A few days after that, Mr. Toda dined at Kitcho and afterwards asked Mr. Tokuoka, "Why don't you hire this guy from another Japanese restaurant?" Mr. Tokuoka said, "Are you talking about Takagi-san, too?" Well, after that, it was done. I got a job working at Arashiyama Kitcho.

*Mr. Tokuoka told me that the best way to learn how to cook is by watching.*

Working at Kitcho was very tough, because it was a busy restaurant and the days were long. Six days a week I woke up around 5 a.m., took a train and arrived at the restaurant just before 6 a.m., worked until about 1 a.m., took the train back to where I lived for a few hours of sleep, and then went back again to the restaurant.

At first I didn't prepare dashi or anything like that. That came later. In the beginning, the order chef taught me how to position the knives and pots so that everything was ready for the chefs when they returned to the restaurant with their ingredients from the market. After I distributed the ingredients to the hot station, the cold station, and other prep areas, I started with very basic preparations, such as washing and

cutting vegetables. I didn't have a position at a particular station. When the restaurant opened for lunch or dinner, I worked to support whichever station needed me. Sometimes I worked for the chef preparing vegetables, and sometimes I worked for the chef making sashimi or other main dishes. I did all of the basic kitchen duties, and of course, I constantly washed and cleaned things.

When I started working at Kitcho, Mr. Tokuoka told me, "You don't have to learn how to cook Kitcho's cuisine. You can learn here what you cannot learn at your family's restaurant." But at that time—and I'm not really sure why—I wanted to learn how to cook kaiseki cuisine. Mr. Tokuoka told me that the best way to learn how to cook is by watching, because it's very easy to forget if the order chef just tells you how to do something. Besides, Kitcho was too busy for the chefs to stop what they were doing to teach me. I learned through watching so I would never forget.

When a few of the order chefs who had worked there for a year or so left suddenly, I had to do a lot of the basic jobs by myself. After 10 months, because my arrangement was to work at Kitcho for two or three years, Mr. Tokuoka gave me the opportunity to go to the market with him. This was very special, because usually an apprentice had to spend several years working exclusively in the kitchen before doing that.

After that, I went with Mr. Tokuoka to the market every day for about two hours. We went to the fish shop, the seafood shop, and a couple of produce shops. He showed me how to choose fish, vegetables, fruits, and other ingredients. If I asked him, "Why did you choose that one?" he might explain but not always. Sometimes he asked me, "Which one do you like?" This was like a test. After I chose something, he often said, "Oh? You have to learn a lot more." But he always gave me a chance to think for myself. That was his way of making his point and his way of teaching me.

*I had been at Kitcho for two years. It was a hard job but a great experience and helped prepare me for an even bigger challenge—running Zeniya.*

When I took over running Zeniya, there was an older executive chef who had worked there since my father's time. One day he asked if he could quit because he wanted to open his own restaurant in Kanazawa, and I couldn't say no. This was a real shock, because I was too inexperienced to be an executive chef. So I went to Osaka to see an old friend of my father with the hope that he could help me find a replacement executive chef. He introduced me to the executive chef at a large Osaka restaurant. Over dinner, the chef and I talked about Zeniya and the position. I had hoped that he would introduce me to a great chef who would want to take the job. But then he asked, "How old are you? Why don't you do it yourself?"

I said I was 29 but didn't have even close to the 10 years' experience it took to be considered for the position as an executive chef. The chef said, "Go back to Kanazawa right now. Starting tomorrow morning, go to the market and pick up the fish and vegetables, and make the menu by yourself."

I was so disappointed. On the two-and-a-half hour train ride back to Kanazawa, I couldn't figure out any other options, so I did what he told me to do. The next morning I went to the market, bought ingredients, and wrote my first menu as Zeniya's executive chef. I was scared. I wondered if I could do it. That kind of thinking lasted a couple years, but it never stopped me from going to the market every morning.

## Ingredients

*I go to the market each morning without a menu in mind and look for the highest quality ingredients available. Different days, different hours, and even different weather affect what I buy, so I create a different menu every day.*

I have no set daily menu at my restaurant. Whatever ingredients I choose for that day change the entire menu—even those items I prepare in advance, like pastry.

And, of course, I have to think of our guests. Some guests come from Kanazawa. Some guests come from Tokyo, other regions of Japan, or from countries in Asia. Some guests come from New York City or Europe. Everyone wants to enjoy Kanazawa's famous crabs, squid, and other local ingredients. So I prepare the local fish, seafood, and vegetables to match the tastes and expectations of my guests—and maybe surprise them, too, with unique meals that showcase our region's wonderful local ingredients.

## Training

*Young chefs applying for a job should say, "I don't know anything, but I'd like to work at Zeniya because I want to learn."*

Over the years, most of the new chefs who have worked at Zeniya went to the TSUJI Culinary Institute or other culinary schools in other countries. Some of them were from the Ishikawa Prefecture, but most

came from cities like Tokyo or Yokohama. When I interview young chefs for a position, I always ask, “Why do you want to work at Zeniya?” Some say their teacher in culinary school recommended Zeniya. Some say that they saw a picture of Zeniya’s cuisine in a magazine and they thought it was beautiful. Others don’t know why. (“Thank you very much. Good-bye.”)

What is most important during the interview is the person’s attitude. I always watch young chefs’ faces to get a sense of their attitude about food, cooking, and work. Recent graduates from culinary school know little about the restaurant business, so they need to communicate a passion and a desire to learn. Young chefs applying for a job should say, “I don’t know anything, but I’d like to work at Zeniya because I want to learn.” That is the attitude I look for. I don’t need to hear how knowledgeable they are—only how passionate they are.

If a chef’s attitude is wrong, even if they are experienced, I won’t hire them. For example, when I asked one chef why he wanted to work at Zeniya, he tried to impress me with all his knowledge about our cuisine by explaining why this ingredient matched with that saké, and so on. Of course, if I’m looking to hire an executive chef or sous chef, I will ask about his prior jobs, technique, and those kinds of things, but even an experienced chef needs to show that he works well with others. I’ve found that chefs like that guy who tried to show how smart he was can be very difficult to work with. I told him that I didn’t think Zeniya was right for him and suggested that he look for a job in another restaurant.

*I always think about how I can make each person into the best chef possible.*

I don't care if a chef is Japanese or from somewhere else. I have many chefs working at Zeniya who are from other countries. For example, last year I had a young female chef from Germany, plus young chefs from Italy, Israel, New York, Korea, and Singapore. I don't know how they found out about Zeniya, but they chose to work with us over many other Japanese restaurants. That is reason enough for me.

As the owner-chef, I feel that I have a responsibility to make them into good chefs. Yes, I am paying them to work for me, but I think of it as an honor to have them as part of our team. That's why I always think about how I can make each person into the best chef possible.

Some new cooks want to be an executive chef in a big restaurant or a big hotel. Others want to be the owner-chef of a small restaurant or take over their family's restaurant. Some don't know or haven't yet decided on the kind of restaurant that will make them happy. Of course, it is impossible for me to know what will make them happy, but I can introduce them to a good restaurant and good cooking techniques. I also hope that when they leave Zeniya, they take with them good memories and knowledge of the particular things that they wanted to learn. It is not easy to learn Japanese cuisine—or any cuisine—in a short time, but if they feel that they have found what they came for, that's enough for me.

## Cuisine

*The most important skill of a chef is to never stop thinking about how to make the guests happy.*

There are many ways to please restaurant guests. One way, of course, is to prepare the best meals. But this is not all. The smiling faces of the wait staff make guests feel welcome and comfortable. A beautiful wine heightens the taste and enjoyment of the food. To understand what makes guests love a restaurant, I need to identify the things that please me when I go to a restaurant. Without understanding these elements, it is impossible for me to create a completely fulfilling experience from the moment the guests enter Zeniya to the time they leave and we wave good-bye to them outside the restaurant. I want our guests to feel happy that they dined here so they will come back again. That's our goal.

*To give food demonstrations overseas always makes me so excited.*

There are many chefs and other people outside Japan who are interested in Japanese cuisine, especially our traditional kaiseki cuisine. And so it has become my duty and honor to not only explain the traditions of kaiseki internationally to non-Japanese audiences, but also to demonstrate how to prepare and present it. Many Japanese chefs cook abroad, and some of them think, "This is a foreign country. This is the United States. This is Hong Kong. This is Shanghai. I have to do something special for foreign people." But most of the international chefs, dignitaries, and Japanese food lovers who attend my cooking demonstrations want to see and taste examples of Japan's traditional kaiseki cuisine. Preparing menus for international restaurants is a challenge.

*I needed to understand the restaurant customer's expectations, mood, dining experience—everything—and then I came up with a personalized menu.*

## **A Day in the Life**

*Opening a restaurant in Seoul, South Korea was a big challenge for me and my team.*

Before I created the menu, I stayed there for several weeks. I needed to understand the restaurant customer's expectations, mood, dining experience—everything—and then I came up with a personalized menu. I had to develop my basic menu and try to adjust it to Koreans' tastes, but that didn't mean that I was going to use chili pepper or kimchee.

Fortunately, one of the chefs I sent to Seoul to be the executive chef had worked beside me at Zeniya for seven years, so he knew I was always changing the menu for the guests, and he knew what I wanted to do at the new restaurant. Also, we had three Korean chefs work at Zeniya to learn how we do things in the kitchen before they went to work in the restaurant in Seoul. They spoke Japanese very well and understood how Japanese people think. It was easy for me to communicate what I wanted them to do when they moved back to work in Korea.



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