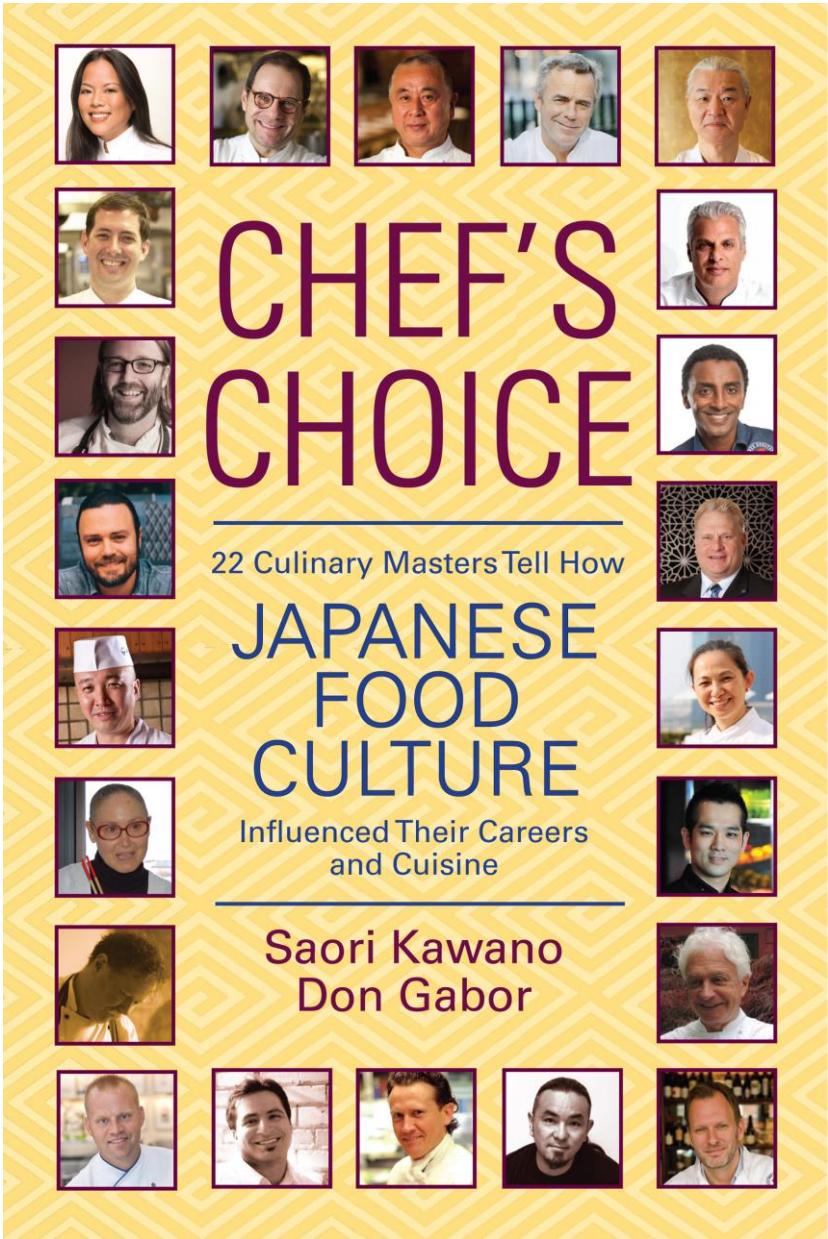

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BEN POLLINGER

Executive Chef, Oceana, New York City

Executive Chef Ben Pollinger leads New York City's Oceana with a distinctive style of cooking that artfully blends the finest seafood with the best ingredients from a global pantry. His creations express a dedication to seasonal products and classic technique with a vast array of flavor profiles. In addition to maintaining Oceana's Michelin star–rating since 2006, Ben Pollinger has received many outstanding reviews including a three-star review from former *New York Time*s critic Frank Bruni. He was named a rising star chef by *Esquire* and he has appeared on programs such as *Today*, *The Martha Stewart Show*, and *ABC News*' "Chef's Table." He has also been featured in *Food & Wine*, *Bon Appétit*, and other food publications.

Ben Pollinger donates his time to various charitable organizations including City Harvest, The New York Harbor School, Autism Speaks, and the James Beard Foundation. He also serves on the Program Advisory Committee at the International Culinary Center and is an advisor to the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute.

Influences

Every chef I worked for influenced me to different degrees. Some places were good for what they offered, and some were not. But I learned something wherever I was.

I cooked for five years before I went to cooking school. And not all of the places I worked were excellent restaurants like Oceana. I had been exposed to so many kitchens and restaurants by the time I got to cooking school that I didn't really need to worry so much about the basics. However, I was a clean slate going into it. Because I already had a decent set of basic skills, I was able to focus more on the bigger picture. I wasn't struggling with the basic knife work, so I had more time to focus on technique. And I did.

Chef Christian Delouvrier was a huge influence on me, particularly in terms of my precision. When I began cooking with him, my cooking skills were more mechanical. I could move around in the kitchen quickly. I could multi-task and focus, but I had never been called upon to do precise work. At Christian's restaurant, Les Célébrités, the goal was not about volume, and the level of precision was excruciating.

We're talking about fine, fine knife work. Vegetables had to be cut and prepared in a certain precise way. Meats had to be cooked and prepared to his exact specifications. Sauces were made to a particular consistency and taste. The dishes were small but had a high degree of sophistication and were always consistent.

There's an old term in the kitchen called "production cuts," which means that the cuts can be a little sloppy. Christian was the first guy to take that concept away from me.

The challenge was to balance precision with speed. Les Célébrités was a busy restaurant with relatively few cooks and grueling shift work, with long hours in a hot kitchen. I had to learn how to push myself and stay mentally focused while cooking.

I worked with Christian twice in my career. First, I worked at the restaurant Les Célébrités, where he cooked contemporary modern French food, and then at Lespinasse, which returned to a more classical-style restaurant with a rustic touch.

I have seen two different styles in his evolution as a chef, but in both it was all about precision. From him I learned about rustic French county cooking, reflective of the southwest of France from where he came, as well as modern French cooking.

I also had the good fortune to work at La Côte Basque under Jean-Jacques Rachou. La Côte Basque was a classical French restaurant, one of the last of what has become a dying breed. There are only a handful of restaurants in that style still open, so I feel fortunate that I had that experience to work there when it was in its prime and had a major influence on the dining industry.

My next big influence was Alain Ducasse, at his restaurant Louis XV in Monte Carlo. At Louis XV, I learned a tremendous amount about the cuisine of the Riviera, southern France, and northern Italy. That region of the Mediterranean has greatly shaped my cooking. It is in tune with Japanese concepts of purity of flavor and simplicity. The focus is more on ingredients and less on sauces that weigh food down or mask the flavor. There is less reliance on dairy products and a greater focus on vegetables and seafood—a healthier balance of foods. The preparations and approach are philosophically similar to Japanese cuisine.

Next I went to work with Floyd Cardoz at Tabla, a restaurant in New York City owned by the Union Square Hospitality Group that prepared New Indian Cuisine. From Floyd, I learned about influences that were based on a particular region. When I cooked with him, there was a need to learn the origins of ingredients. I remember one humbling experience. There was a spice that I had found in a spice market, and it wasn't necessarily Indian. Floyd asked, "What can you tell me about this spice?" I said, "Not really much, other than how it tastes." Then he pushed me to know more. "But what can you tell me about it? Where did it come from?" Now I don't use any ingredient without understanding its context, because that knowledge helps me make a better dish.

At Tabla, I was able to experiment with my own food, even though I was working under Floyd's umbrella. I accepted that, much like an artist's apprentice in a master's studio, I was working in Floyd's style, but I still had the opportunity to come up with my own dishes. I wanted customers to sit there at the end of their meal, and if they happened to have one of my dishes say, "Floyd is a great chef and that was a great dish!" That was the goal, and accepting that meant I was on the right track as a chef.

Career

Leadership and management are two different things.

I got an awakening at Union Square Cafe in terms of understanding how the goals of the restaurant and the kitchen related to my personal goals and the goals of the executive chef. I learned the value of relationships between people, how to manage others, how to delegate and hold people accountable, and also how to instill trust in me. At that time, the Executive Chef, Michael Romano, was the driving culinary force. From him, I learned that leadership and management, which are often used interchangeably, are really two different things. Management is more task-oriented. Leading people is another story. One of the important things I learned about leadership is the need to inspire other people. Can you inspire them to want to do the job? Can you inspire them to create their own level of expectations?

In my case, Michael inspired me by giving me an opportunity to manage and lead his kitchen. This was a great responsibility. This was my first executive position, and I made plenty of mistakes, but Michael showed me an extraordinary level of patience, understanding, kindness, compassion, and tolerance. He had been through many of the same things that I went through, so he was able to say, "Okay, but now we want to do something a little different. Here is how we grow." He taught me through example.

I learned about hospitality as it related to taking care of those who worked for me. I learned to inspire others to do their jobs to a level of excellence while balancing support, respect, and accountability. Michael treated everyone who worked for him with a level of personal

respect that most other chefs did not and still don't extend. It took me time to grasp this concept, including the ability to work with the restaurant owners and management and in an executive capacity with the supporting team.

I also learned a lot about food from Michael. He taught me a lot about technical aspects that I use to this day. I don't think I ever really expressed to him the degree to which he influenced me. He left a lasting impression. I'm a better cook, for sure, but I know that I am also a better leader. Michael Romano is a very inspiring and passionate chef.

Breaking out as a chef in a high caliber restaurant was a huge challenge.

I worked for 16 years in a lot of kitchens, so it was a long time before I became an executive chef. I had many job offers as a chef in small, casual restaurants. They were good businesses, but that wasn't what I wanted to do. I wanted to break out and become a chef in a restaurant of a particular caliber. My years of practice, training, and teaching allowed me to do that at Oceana.

Taking over Oceana as Executive Chef was the greatest professional challenge I've ever had. For several months, I had to write out everything for the cooks and staff. I had some people who were with me, but no one knew me or knew my work. It took time to build up that knowledge, so I had to be there every morning. It took time to teach the staff how I wanted things checked in, how to make the preparations and make the sauces, how to do the ordering. I had to be there at night to tell them how to close down the place and clean the kitchen. I had to be there in the middle of the process, too.

Oceana always had a global, seasonally driven menu with Asian and Mediterranean influences. So it was very natural for me to come in and do that style of cooking, although I made my own menu. I was comfortable creating complex dishes at Oceana. I felt as a chef that I had reached my goal of managing and cooking at a first-class restaurant.

Another challenge came two-and-a-half years later, when we moved the restaurant's location and changed its concept. Oceana went from being a very formal restaurant with 100 seats to an upscale, yet approachable, restaurant and bar that was double in size.

In the old Oceana, the kitchen was small, and I was in the center so that I could see everything going out. Dishes were brought to me before they went to guests. I had that kind of control.

In the new, larger environment, I physically couldn't be everywhere at the same time. As a result, I had to have more trust in my team. It required more skill in developing a team in the kitchen. I needed to spend more time and attention training and therefore had to

trust the executive sous chefs, the sous chefs, and the cooks. The transition from closing the old Oceana to opening the new Oceana in midtown Manhattan took only three weeks.

Our lunch clientele are business people, and on the weekends people from the suburbs come for special occasions. As a chef I have my own style, and there is a place on the menu for my creative influence, but there also needs to be a place on the menu that gives the guests what they want or expect. I realize, fully accept, and am at peace with that fact. Not everyone comes to the restaurant viewing the chef or the food as the focal point. It might be the location, the nice decor, pleasant ambiance, or the great service that draws them here. It could be any number of things that the restaurant is as a whole, but it's not only about the chef and the food.

Ingredients

One of the hallmarks of Japanese cuisine is its focus on the simplicity of the main ingredient—directing it, seasoning it, or garnishing it with one other element that has complexity.

I see the evolution of Japanese restaurants as a reflection of the way people can eat every day. At a time when upscale western restaurants have become focused on the indulgent aspect of eating, Japanese cuisine has given western chefs a reality check. Asian influence, in terms of food and cooking, is derived from the true flavors of ingredients and translates these into modern restaurant cuisine. This philosophy from Japanese cuisine affects my cooking and the way that I express my cuisine on the plate.

The prominence of Japanese ingredients is growing, because they are more available and are frequently highlighted on food shows, in newspapers, and in food magazines. For example, one of my favorite Japanese ingredients, the herb *shiso*, no longer simply comes in a plastic package with 10 leaves tied together with a rubber band. That was a good product, but now there are local farmers in the New York metropolitan area who grow two, three, and four different varieties of shiso.

Twenty years ago, when I used Japanese ingredients, I had soy sauce, wasabi, rice, and raw fish. That was about it.

Now the number of other Japanese ingredients has increased many times over. In 2010, when I cooked a special dinner at Oceana for The Gohan Society, I used many ingredients and products from the Ishikawa Prefecture in Japan. The ingredients were soy products, wheat products, rice products, and barley products. I used roasted barley in the husk to make barley tea and added *amazake*—a sweet rice saké with no alcohol—to some other ingredients when I poached fish.

We were not trying to arbitrarily combine ingredients that didn't necessarily make sense together as a dish. Rather, we were focusing on them in different combinations. The miso became two different sauces on a plate. One miso sauce on the plate was in a little bit larger quantity, more like a traditional western sauce. The other miso sauce was an accent. It had a saltier taste and a stronger flavor.

Cuisine

I want to avoid palate fatigue.

Some dishes are great, but after three, four, or five bites, they need different elements to wake up the palate and keep it stimulated. For example, if one part of the dish focuses on an acidic ingredient, then I might include a sweet ingredient to lower the acidity. Or if I have a mellow sauce that loses its novelty after a couple of bites, I include an intense ingredient. This sharpens the palate again and refreshes it. The challenge is not to replicate the flavors. It's okay to include the same ingredient prepared in a different way or in a different course.

When coming up with a new dish, I might explain to my sous chefs what I am looking for, what I am thinking about, and tell them, "I'll work on this part—you try the other part." Sometimes I delegate different parts of the dish and then bring it all together to see the results. That's one way I experiment. Sometimes I might do it all by myself. Once I get some results, I experiment some more. Then I will cook the dish with my sous chefs present. I'll teach them, tell them what I am doing, and talk out the process and the key points. Sometimes I include the cooks at that point, but usually it's just the kitchen management. Then I'll have one of my sous chefs or the executive sous chef cook the dish so I can tell him or her when they've got it right. Next, we teach the cooks how to do it. At all points, we all are ensuring and guaranteeing the caliber and quality of the food going out.

Training

I want to hire cooks who aspire to be chefs.

When I interview a cook, I'm looking for someone who wants to develop from the ground up and grow in this profession. I want people who have goals that are similar to mine or to those I had at that point in my career. Ideally, I want someone who is passionate about cooking and who wants to be a chef. The people who become better cooks down the road often have more questions about style and philosophy, about the process of cooking and what we do here. I'm not impressed if the person's first questions are, "What are the hours? What's the pay?" I admit those are valid questions, but working in this style of restaurant is a vocation, not a job. People don't go into it for the pay. I'm sorry, but the pay is lousy and the hours stink. I want to hire people who, when we are in the thick of it, will extend themselves.

I hire people who care about more than food—they want to take care of other people. That's why I impress upon my sous chefs a sense of responsibility to the people who choose to work with us. If people are willing to work long hours for me at low pay with a lot of uncertainty, it's because they like what I do with food and they feel that I can make them better cooks. That's one of my goals—I make all my cooks better cooks.

Tools

One of the most transformative experiences for me in my cooking career was learning the proper way to sharpen a knife.

I first learned about Japanese knives when I worked for Christian Delouvrier. There was a dish that called for finely diced bell peppers. I had my knife and was going at it, but the cuts were too big and uneven, and because my knife wasn't sharp enough, I was crushing the peppers and making them mushy. I just couldn't get it right. Then one of the sous chefs told me that even if my knife was sharp, it wasn't going to do the job properly. It wasn't a good knife.

The sous chef told me, "Your western-style knife wasn't made for fine cutting. You need to go out and buy a Japanese knife." He told me that a Japanese knife was not going to be cheap and that I needed to invest the money because it was a valuable tool—something I would have for my entire career. The chef explained that Japanese knives are made in a manner that allows chefs to do fine work.

I eventually bought several Japanese knives, all of which have influenced the way I cook. They allow for finer, more precise work and make smaller and cleaner cuts than a European-style knife. With Japanese knives, I can also do fine cutting work with herbs, ginger, garlic, and other ingredients that are the supporting elements of a dish. Instead of mashing them on a cutting board, which causes them to lose the juices, I can cut them precisely so they remain dry. When the juice hasn't been beaten out of them and the herbs are cut cleanly through the cell structure, they release more flavor into the dish.

Japanese knives are also the best knives for cutting fish, because the same principle that applies to cutting herbs applies to cutting fish. The first time I heard that, I said, "Come on!" However, now I better understand the physical nature of fish—the skeleton, muscles, and fat

structure. I know that if I cut the fish incorrectly, I will bruise the flesh and destroy some of its flavor.

Another great thing about Japanese knives is how long they stay sharp, and that is due to the hardness of their steel, how they are made, and how they are sharpened. I was trained in the French and German method of knife sharpening using an oil stone, but I never felt my knives were sharp enough. I never felt I accomplished it the right way using that method. Once I met Mr. Chiharu Sugai at Korin Japanese Trading and saw his knife-sharpening video, *The Chef's Edge*, all of that changed. I watched his traditional method of sharpening Japanese knives again and again, and he also came to our restaurant and gave all of our chefs a knife-sharpening demonstration. One of the most transformative experiences for me in my cooking career was learning the proper way to sharpen a knife.

A Day in the Life

When I took over the old Oceana from the previous chef, most of the staff of 25 had left.

There were two sous chefs, six cooks, and me at Oceana. For several months, I'd worked from 7 a.m. to midnight six days a week. I'd get home at about 1 a.m., shower, go to bed, wake up at 5:30 a.m., dress, and go back to work. Even though everyone was pretty tired, I agreed to teach a cooking class for 20 of our customers at the restaurant on a Saturday morning in December.

After working another late Friday night, we came in the next morning before 7 a.m. to set up the cooking class, taught the class and

served lunch, and finished at about 2 p.m. The people loved the class and the lunch, but we were going into dinner service two hours behind—plus it was a record night with 220 reservations! This meant a full two turns of the restaurant, so we had to do the whole thing at least twice and then some.

Then, in the middle of service, we had a big problem with one of the cooks not performing to the best of his ability. His sous chef told him, "This isn't right! That isn't right!" The third time this happened, the cook finally threw his hands down, took off his apron, and said, "I'm done. I can't do this. I'm not going to work here and take this anymore," and he walked out.

Since there was nothing else I could do, I walked up behind the line and started cooking. I said, "It'll be fine. Let's do it. We don't need this guy." This had been an 18-hour day and a 106-hour week. We were already beat going into this dinner service, and we were two hours behind. At the same time, this challenge had a positive outcome for me and my team. It built a stronger bond and a sense of unity among the team members. We were able to pull it off. Coming from behind and getting ready for dinner was a confidence booster. So that cook walking out on us turned into a good thing. The whole experience helped me earn my staff's trust and respect, which I had been doing gradually over two months. And it earned them my loyalty, respect, and gratitude. We didn't realize it, but at the end of service we had set the restaurant's record, and we got through it. It was a perfect night.

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