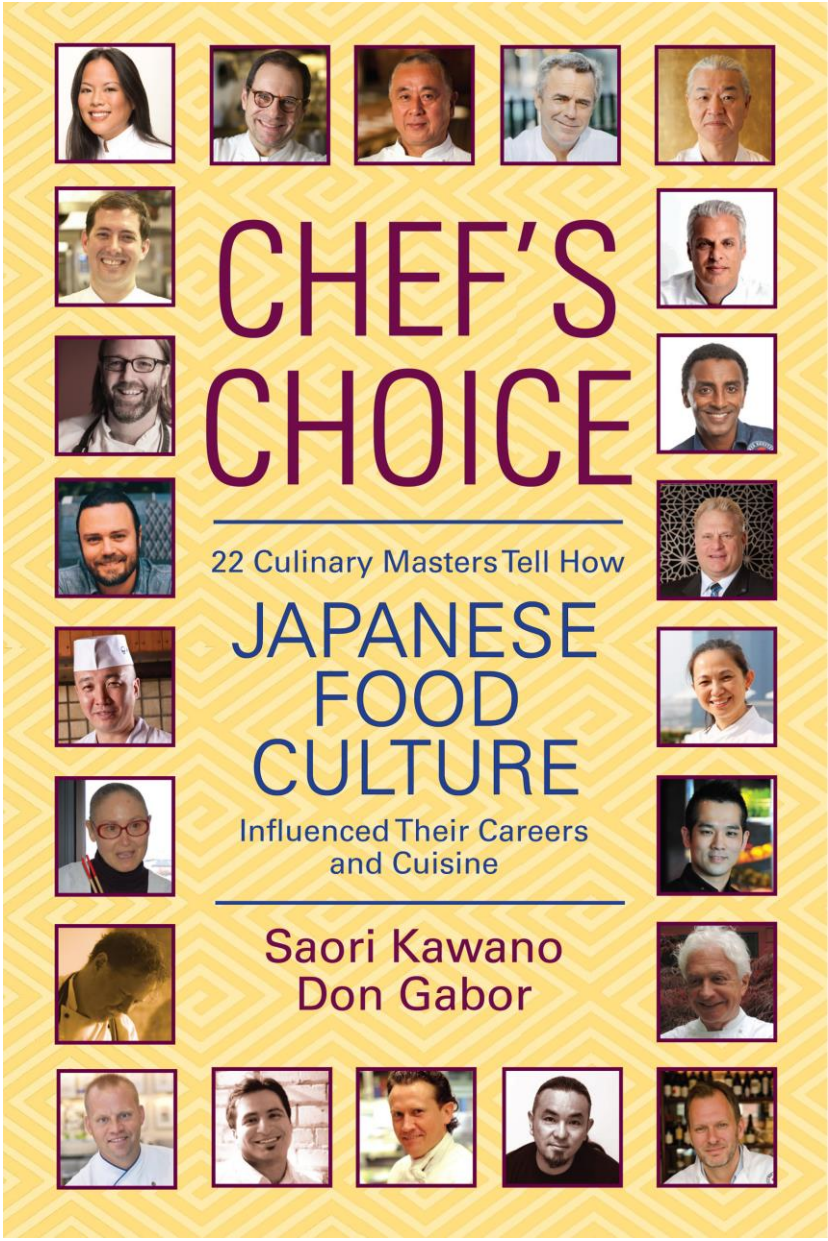

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THIRTEEN

MICHAEL ROMANO

Chef/Partner, Union Square Hospitality Group,
Chief of Culinary Development

Michael Romano joined Union Square Cafe in 1988, preparing his unique style of American cuisine with an Italian soul, and a short year later *The New York Times* elevated the USC to three stars. In 1993, Michael Romano became Danny Meyer's partner. Under his leadership, USC has been ranked Most Popular in New York City's *Zagat* Survey for a record seven years. USC also received the James Beard Award for Outstanding Restaurant of the Year in 1997.

Michael Romano has co-authored two cookbooks with Danny Meyer, *The Union Square Cafe Cookbook* and *Second Helpings from Union Square Cafe*. In 2013, he published a third book, *Family Table*, in collaboration with Karen Stabiner. Michael Romano was named The James Beard Foundation's Best Chef in New York City in 2001. In 2000, he was inducted into the James Beard Foundation's Who's Who of Food & Beverage in America. Romano opened the Union Square Tokyo in 2007 and Hudson Yards Catering in 2011. He left his post of USHG's Director of Culinary Development in 2013. Michael remains actively involved with USHG's culinary role in Union Square Tokyo, and divide his time between New York and Japan for other projects, including several charity organizations.

Influences

I still have my notes from that meal at Kitcho, which was a complete immersion in Japanese culture, the likes of which I had never before experienced in my life.

I remember precisely the first time I really discovered Japanese food—and it was not in New York City. From 1981 to 1983, I was working in Switzerland for Max Kehl at his restaurant, Chez Max, and I was his chef de cuisine. In 1982, I accompanied Chef Kehl on a trip to Tokyo for a weeklong international cooking competition sponsored by Nestlé involving chefs from 15 restaurants from all over the world—China, France, Italy. America was there in the form of Paul Prudhomme. Max and I were representing Switzerland. This was long before the *Iron Chef* television shows ever came about.

We cooked every day for one week. Every day we were taken by bus from our hotel in downtown Tokyo to the TSUJI Culinary Institute in south Tokyo. Everything we needed was already set up, and we worked on our dishes. Each team had to prepare three dishes: an appetizer, a main course, and a dessert. As we finished our dishes, we were judged by an international panel of judges, one of whom was Craig Claiborne. When the judging was over, everything was packed up and taken back to the hotel, which was in the midst of its grand opening. It all culminated in a live two-hour television broadcast from the hotel, which featured the final cooking competition and all kinds of entertainment. There were singers, and there was a sumo wrestler there as well. We were there being judged, and we had set up tables to display our food.

I was quite busy but still managed to get out for different dining experiences. In the evening, after cooking all day for the show, Max took me to dine with him in several places, one of which was Kitcho, one of Japan's most exclusive traditional restaurants. I still have my notes from that meal, which was a complete immersion in Japanese culture, the likes of which I had never before experienced in my life.

During that week, I asked the Japanese guide I was assigned to take me to simple places where people ate every day. But the experience at Kitcho was so astounding that I can still remember all of the dishes we ate. We were in our own private room, and I was so impressed with the food, the décor, and the hospitality. I loved the fact that the plateware was selected because of the way it matched the seasonal foods being served. This was dining taken to a level of precision and refinement that I'd never before experienced.

And the service! When the kimono-clad server entered the room, she somehow glided from her standing position at the doorway to being seated at the edge of our table, but I never actually saw her sit down! There was only a gradual descent, an utterly graceful movement from door to table.

Once there, I expected her to begin clearing our plates, but instead she simply rested a moment, as if to allow the air she had displaced in the room to settle and for all to be perfectly still and calm. Then, slowly and precisely, she began to gather the items from the table. There was never a sound of the dishes touching. It was so elegant and graceful.

On that first trip to Japan, I also saw how disciplined the cooks were, and how precisely and energetically they carried out the chef's

orders. I think the Japanese have a great sense of working with the master and learning and focusing. Everybody was very strongly motivated by what the chef said. The cooks worked quickly and precisely without being cajoled. What the chef said was what they did.

There's a discipline that Japanese chefs have in the way they work, always with an eye toward cleanliness and organization.

Watch sushi chefs. They're constantly wiping down their counter, constantly wiping their blade. And every Japanese restaurant cook does it that way. The chefs are always very aware. They've been taught good work habits and skills. Watch a Japanese cook work with a knife. How many American chefs can pick up a carrot and turn it into a long, paper-thin strip? It seems that just about every Japanese chef can do that. The restaurants and kitchens in Japan function crisply, and things get done in such an orderly fashion. And the attention to cleanliness is amazing!

During the Tokyo competition, teams from 15 competing countries piled into the kitchen to put the finishing touches on their dishes—appetizers, entrées, and desserts, which were to be on display during the live television broadcast of the competition's finale. Chaos ensued as the teams labored to get everything done while working in the limited space assigned to each station. Things were a complete mess. Chefs and assistants were feverishly trying to make the opening deadline. Finally, we all went out for the show. When we returned, the kitchen was immaculate! Everything had been restored to order, and it was as if we had never been there! Very impressive.

Cuisine

I find endless delight and pleasure in Japanese food. First and foremost, because of the way it conveys wonderful, deep flavors with such lightness.

In Japanese cuisine there is great respect for ingredients, which allows them to really shine through. The simplest foods, such as sushi, offer an incredibly pleasurable experience. My cooking philosophy is that food should be basically simple, seasonal, and fresh, and it should delight people. I am a chef who enjoys creating good food to bring joy to others, rather than inventing dishes for the sake of creativity itself. I'm not saying every cuisine has to be authentic and tradition-bound. There's room for creativity and coming up with something new or different. That's why I like incorporating Japanese ingredients into my cuisine. But in general, I don't go in for crazy combinations of things. I don't like novelty or newness for its own sake. I'm not out to wow somebody by the sheer oddity of my food combinations. That's not what appeals to me.

The elements of a dish should flow from one another and should complement each other. For example, our filet mignon of tuna has been on the menu at the Union Square Cafe since 1985. At some point I thought that I needed to change the garnish for the tuna dish and give it an update. What flavors would complement this dish? I had a miso-based sauce that went over the tuna and pickled ginger as a garnish, along with an Asian-flavored vegetable stir-fry. So wasabi came to mind as something that would add punch to it.

It occurred to me that the vehicle for the wasabi could be another of our signature dishes, mashed potatoes. I had made a horseradish

mashed potato that I served with a braised short rib, which was not that far away from the kind of flavor I imagined. I wanted something that was at the same time rich and creamy, soothing and easy to eat, but that also had a little bit of heat and punch. The wasabi goes with those flavors. That's done with sushi all the time. So it was a natural step to try it. The whole combination worked quite well, and the customers loved it. That's why it has been on the menu at the Union Square Cafe for a long time.

I was always pushing and trying new things and adding to the repertoire, especially with Japanese ingredients.

When I was Executive Chef at the Union Square Cafe, I had to locate the point between traditional cuisine and a culinary trend. If ultimately trendy, cutting-edge cuisine was "out here," then I was more in the middle. That meant I was going to have a base of dishes that I could rely on, that I knew were going to be well-executed year in and year out and, and which would always be great. Of course, I introduced some new dishes, too. I was always pushing and trying new things and adding to the repertoire, especially with Japanese ingredients. That way my customers got a balance between established repertoire that rotated in and out seasonally and new dishes that entered the menu. I loved it when guests said, "Come on. Bring back the porcini gnocchi! Where's the salmon with corn and balsamic beurre blanc?"

Chefs make a decision, or should make a decision, about what they want to call "their cuisine," or what they want it to be. Not every dish has to be authentic, but if I am going to do a spaghetti marinara, I

want the guests to know that I am going to do a traditional one. So people know that when they come to Union Square Cafe, they're going to get spaghetti marinara, and it's going to be a really good version of it. I am not going to call it spaghetti marinara and then have Brussels sprouts in it. If I want to change it, fine, but I let people know somehow that this is my take on it. And if I set my mind to do that, I want to do it in the best way it has ever been done. I want to do it really, really well, with the ingredients the way they should be.

I see the culinary trend leaning to more Asian food.

It would be great if the Japanese government, perhaps at the prefecture-level, got organized in the way that is happening in Spain, and started promoting their products and cuisine. I think that would be big! Lacking that kind of unified expression from the Japanese government, it's going to fall to chefs, culinary educators, and travelers who go there to encourage diners to embrace Japanese cuisine.

Now the focus is French and Italian and Spanish. Well, how about adding Japanese to the mix? I would love to see that! I do see more people getting excited about what's going on in Japan. Japanese chefs are starting to come to the U.S. to teach knife and cooking skills. We need more of these kinds of chef exchanges. But people in the U.S. are still more familiar with Chinese food than with Japanese, so the initiative to increase this awareness of authentic Japanese cuisine and ingredients has to come from somewhere.

Another culinary trend I see, aside from Japanese cuisine, ingredients, and knives, is tableware. When I went to Kitcho the first time, I saw an amazing array of different shapes, sizes, and colors.

They matched the dish to the color of the food inside it to create a harmonious effect. In Japan, there is a more intimate relationship between the plateware and the tableware than in the West. But now the trend in the U.S. is to use smaller and more colorful plates. That's another way the Japanese have influenced western cuisine.

Ingredients

When it comes to buying ingredients, which is crucial to any chef, there are differences between products produced and grown here, and those native to Japan.

Playing with different ingredients that require me to use my "sense memory" is a fun challenge. When I'm tasting new ingredients they often trigger, "Wow, this would be good with that." And then I try it. Sometimes it works and other times it doesn't! But experimenting can definitely lead to some fun stuff and interesting tastes.

A Japanese ingredient I use is shoyu, or soy sauce. Soy sauce is full of umami. It's like meat essence without being meat. And it shows up in odd places.

For example, I use it in Italian pasta when I make fresh *tagliarini* with black truffles. To make the truffle butter, I combine the black truffles with unsalted butter and Parmigiano. Then I drizzle in a dash of soy sauce. It adds seasoning and roundness. It's not the kind of

thing you will identify out of the dish, but the dish is definitely better with it than without it. I'll bet they're not doing that in Italy! When I made this dish at the Union Square Tokyo, the chef and cooks didn't say, "What? Are you crazy?" No, they understood. "Yes, of course," they said, "put a little shoyu in it."

But I don't want to play around with an ingredient and introduce it to our guests until I'm pretty sure that it is going to be good. I make the dish and get somebody else to taste it with me. Chefs can get subjectively involved in their dishes and may be a little blinded by their enthusiasm. I might fall in love with the idea, but I'm not really thinking straight. So it's good to have somebody else's palate and opinion. In general, I don't go in for crazy.

Miso paste is another one of my favorite Japanese ingredients. It has an infinite variety of colors, textures, and tastes. Some miso are a very light color, some are chunky style, and some are smooth. Miso is such a rich base. It is a good foundation for other dishes and ingredients. Miso paste has a lot of potential as a replacement for the basic stocks in our kitchens. It can provide the umami dimension to food. It's what chefs use in Japan. I've been eating and using miso paste for a long time at home, and I think it's a great ingredient, really wonderful.

I frequently travel to Japan to oversee Union Square Tokyo. One of the things I most enjoy about my time there is the quality of the basic ingredients, especially the fish. I notice that when I go to my favorite sushi restaurants in Japan, the chefs are always saying, "I got this *uni* from here or this miso from there."

There's a tremendous sense of regionalism in all Japanese ingredients. Hopefully, professional chefs, students, and serious amateur cooks here in the U.S. will appreciate that and buy the best and most authentic ingredients they can find. Sure, you can pick up

the cheapest soy sauce on the grocery shelf, but with a little extra effort, it's not that hard to find better ones.

Training

There's something beautiful about repeating the dish, even if you had nothing to do with the creation of it.

We don't need every cook coming out of culinary school thinking entrepreneurially. That's almost a bad thing. Discipline in our kitchen at the Union Square Cafe is a benign and sometimes not-so-benign dictatorship, where the executive chef is the master. What we look for in cooks are deeply ingrained skills. That is what is needed at first. I don't want some maverick in our kitchen who's thinking, "I'm going to do it this way." We want somebody who's going to say to the executive chef, "Yes, Chef, tell me how to do it and I'll do it that way. A hundred times, I'll still do it that way."

If you've got the spark and talent and you want to be an entrepreneur, you do that later, once you've got the basic skills. We don't need that entrepreneur's spirit unless it translates into perfectionism. When I was Executive Chef, I liked to hear a cook say, "I'm going to get damn good at this by focusing and learning my craft." But we didn't need somebody who was already thinking of six other ways he or she could do it when I said, "Do it this way."

When you're coming up as a line cook, you can take in everything for yourself. You learn from your chef, learn from the restaurant, learn from the successes, learn from the mistakes, and soak it all up. It's all

for you. In return you give your hard work, and you get paid for it. But when you step up to become the leader of a restaurant—the sous chef or the executive chef—you have to turn around and give back. When you say, "Okay, I'm in charge now," you've got to have something to give back to all those people looking up to you as the leader. If you don't have the life experience, the smarts, or the maturity to guide them and give them something worthwhile, you're not going to last very long.

You may even be a good cook with ideas and creativity. But do you have the stability to turn that into a sound business, or are you just going to be hopping around every eight months to the newest restaurant that's opening?

The Japanese have a different attitude in approaching their craft. I respect and admire the ideals they embody. They believe that in the span of a person's life, it takes a long time to develop deep and mature skills. The Japanese get very, very good at a chosen craft. But they work at it for years.

Tools

Owning the finest Japanese knives is like owning a Ferrari. They require great skill and demand more from the user, but they provide a much more high-performance experience.

In the 1980s, very few non-Japanese cooks were using traditional Japanese knives. Most chefs in the U.S. had their Sabatiers, Henckels, or Wüsthofs. To make an automotive analogy, using these high-quality French and German knives is like driving a Mercedes-Benz. They're solid, reliable, a great investment, and not inexpensive. But owning the finest Japanese knives is like owning a Ferrari. They require greater skill and demand more of the user, but they provide a much more high-performance experience. They reward the user who takes time to master them with great pleasure and high performance.

When I bought my first traditional, carbon-steel Japanese knives in Tokyo in 1982—I still have them to this day, by the way—I had no idea how to use them because I didn't realize how task-specific they are and that the blade is one-sided. I just thought they were the most beautiful and serious tools I had ever seen. And they were much sharper than anything I'd ever experienced. I went back to the shop where I bought them and got a quick lesson on sharpening them because I wanted to keep them that way.

Today you can go into a typical U.S. restaurant kitchen or catering company and see more and more Misono, Suisin, Nenox, Masanobu, or other brands of western-style Japanese knives. For example, I was on a job with our catering company, Union Square Events, and one of the young prep cooks—he seemed to be new and was probably just part-time—asked me to show him how I wanted something cut, so I

said, "Okay, let me see your knife." And he handed me a gorgeous, expensive Misono. That was a good sign!

Many American culinary teachers and schools encourage students to buy western-style Japanese knives, but there definitely is not the same emphasis on knife handling and knife skills here as in Japan. Students and professional cooks don't really need traditional Japanese knives unless they're going to be doing tasks specific to Japanese cuisine, like cutting fish for sashimi. In my case, I'm so crazy about all of the knives that I have to have both kinds. Traditional Japanese knives were developed from a specific task. For example, someone long ago said something like, "We're going to eat eel. This fish has these particular characteristics, so we'll need a knife that has this shape to accomplish the task."

When I first bought a traditional Japanese deba, I tried using it as we would use a chef's knife. But it didn't work because it's not meant for that. I was trying to push it through a carrot, and it was not working because the blade is too thick for that. Later I learned that it's for filleting fish.

On the other hand, if someone takes a traditional Japanese knife and finds another use for it in a different cuisine, I don't have any problem with that. I think it's fine if it's efficient, but there's no sense at all in using a tool that makes the work more difficult.

A Day in the Life

What we do in this business is very special, because the end product—delicious and well-cooked food—actually becomes who you are.

My job focus now is on a broader spectrum of tasks that touch all of our restaurants and businesses. I may be cooking at our catering facilities or restaurant kitchens with executive chefs or helping develop new recipes for our much-loved, modern-day hamburger stand, Shake Shack, or designing kitchens for our food outlets, like the one at the New York Mets stadium, Citi Field. And of course, I'm traveling to Tokyo to cook at Union Square Tokyo, where I am the Executive Chef and consult on seasonal menu changes.

Through it all, I continue to be motivated by this wonderful business that I entered nearly forty years ago. It's a delight to watch people enjoying a well-prepared meal served in a wonderful environment of hospitality and conviviality by people who genuinely enjoy bringing these pleasures to our guests. What we do in this business is very special, because the end product—delicious and well-cooked food—actually becomes who we are in a very intimate way. It's a great responsibility we carry and a great privilege and pleasure to be able to do it.

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