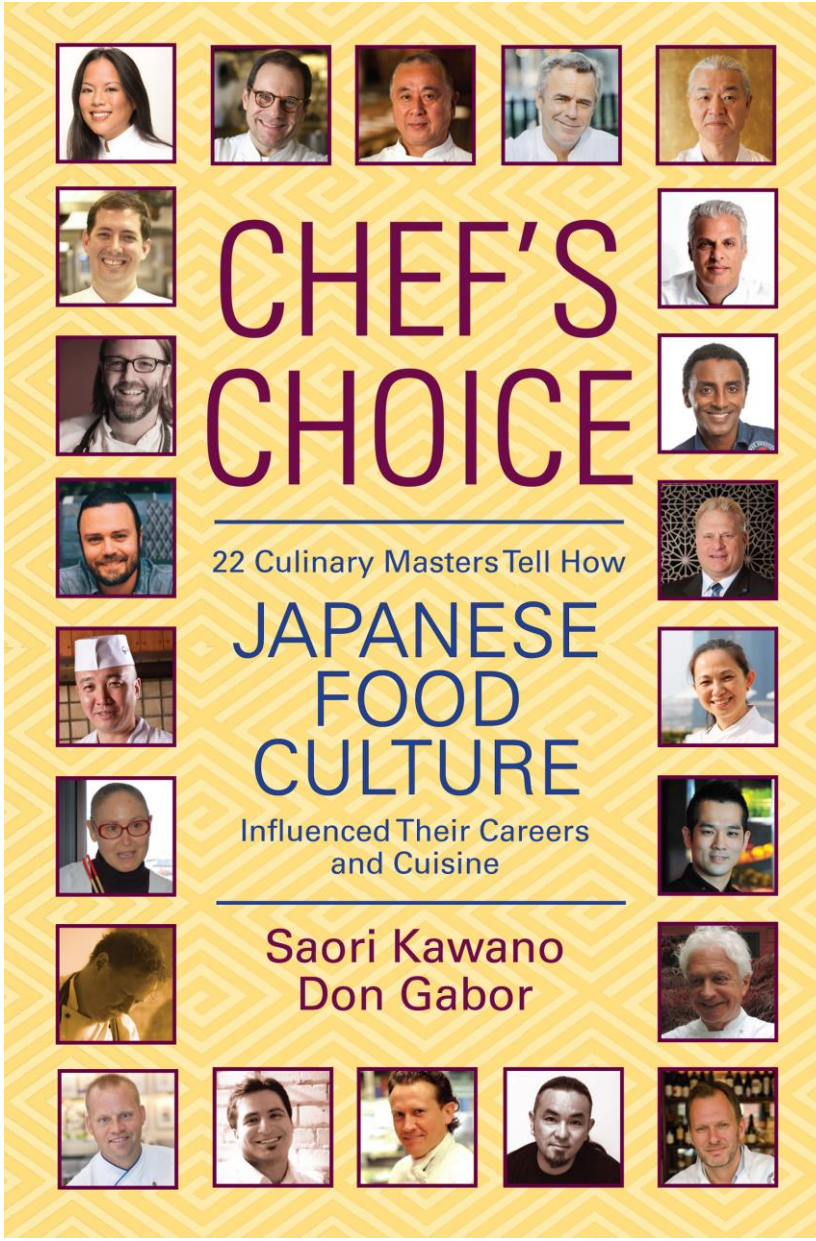

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NILS NORÉN

Past Vice President of Restaurant Operations
for the Marcus Samuelsson Group
Past Executive Chef, Aquavit, New York City

Nils Norén was born in Stockholm, Sweden. After attending culinary school, Nils worked in several of Stockholm's top restaurants. He is currently Founder and Director of Absolute Culinary by Asil. He provides unique food and beverage advisory and support services through his team of dedicated world-class professionals and specialists.

Nils was Executive Chef at Restaurant Riche, Chef de Cuisine at Restaurant KB, and served as the coordinator of cooking classes at Restaurant Akademin. In 1998, Nils Norén was hired as Chef de Cuisine at Restaurant Aquavit in New York City. He worked closely with Chef Marcus Samuelsson before being promoted to Aquavit's Executive Chef in 2003. Nils Norén left Aquavit in 2006 to become the Vice President of Culinary Arts for The French Culinary Institute's culinary, pastry, bread, and Italian food departments. In 2011, he left the FCI to become the Vice President of Restaurant Operations for the Marcus Samuelsson Group. Nils moved on to start Absolute Culinary in 2015.

Influences

At 19, I was playing percussion in a reggae band when I woke up one morning and thought, "I've got to do something. I want to cook."

When I was seven or eight years old, a school friend and I made a cookie recipe. I was so fascinated that I could take flour—something that doesn't taste very good by itself—add sugar and a couple of eggs, mix it, roll it, cut it, bake it, and out comes something delicious. Then, when I was 12 or 13, my dad took me to London, where we went to jazz clubs and his favorite Italian restaurant to eat spaghetti carbonara. This was the best thing I had ever tasted! When we came back to Sweden, I looked in every cookbook I could find for recipes for spaghetti carbonara so I could replicate them, find the one I liked best, and then perfect it.

At 19, I was playing percussion in a reggae band when I woke up one morning and thought, "I've got to do something. I want to cook." I went to an unemployment office that same day, and two days later I was auditing a cooking class. A week later I started cooking school. That was how it started, and I've never looked back. I think that from that time on, I've never worked less than 12 hours a day in the kitchen. I stayed at the school as much as I could, and I was there as early as possible. When I had an internship, I worked double shifts every single day because I felt I had to do this. Cooking became a passion right away, but to this day, I have no idea why I woke up that morning and decided I really wanted to be a cook.

Career Path

I got my first restaurant job after I graduated from culinary school at the age of 20 and went to work for one of the few one-star Michelin restaurants in Sweden. I started working in pastry, but they soon promoted me to sous chef. Less than a year later, I started cooking professionally; I was sous chef for a one-star restaurant! That was really scary, but I had worked hard, and it paid off. For the next eight years, I worked at a lot of different restaurants in Sweden. The first restaurant was French, and then I cooked in all kinds of places, from Asian to classic Swedish. I was executive chef for the first restaurant to receive the star from Michelin for cooking Swedish food.

There are a lot of similarities between Japanese food and Swedish food. I think that is part of why I find it so appealing.

I first had Japanese food with a good friend and coworker who had worked in the first Swedish restaurant to serve sushi. On our days off, we went to his house and made sushi. It wasn't perfect and probably not the best, but we'd make these huge platters of sushi, maki, sashimi, miso soup—the whole thing. I loved it! I'm sure someone from Japan would say that it was horrible, but for me, not knowing the standard, I thought it was great. It certainly left me longing to know more about Japanese food. So I bought my first Japanese cookbook, and soon after that, I was hooked!

There are a lot of similarities between Japanese food and Swedish food. I think that is part of why I find it so appealing. In Sweden, we have so much herring, gravlax, and other types of cured or raw fish. The textures and flavors are familiar to us. In terms of flavor, Japanese

food has a little bit of sweetness to it, and Swedish food does, too. Also, the taste of Japanese food, like Swedish food, is very clean. In Sweden, there were a couple of stores near us where we could buy Japanese ingredients, and I think I was in that store at least three times a week. I was always trying to persuade those stores to get more and better-quality ingredients.

Marcus said, "Nils, I need a sous chef. I don't want anyone else. I want you."

When I visited New York for the first time, I went with a friend of mine to Aquavit because we wanted to see what it was all about. At that time Marcus Samuelsson was working there as a cook, and over the next two weeks I got to know him before I went back to Sweden. When Aquavit's executive chef unexpectedly died, the owners asked Marcus if he wanted to be executive chef. That's when he called me and said, "Nils, I need a sous chef. I don't want anyone else—I want you." Aquavit was a one-star restaurant when I came to work there in June 1995. In September 1995, we got our three-star review from Ruth Reichl, the food critic for *The New York Times*, so we tripled the number of stars in no time.

Cuisine

When I worked at Aquavit, we actually served Swedish cuisine in two ways. The cafe was more casual but a lot more traditional. For fine dining, we needed to adapt the menu, because even though we

could find a few Swedish ingredients, we couldn't find everything. Even if I wanted to be super-traditional, I couldn't.

When I create a dish, I get a shape in my head. I start to work from the shape and then think about the flavors.

Because there are similarities between Japanese and Swedish food, we used the ingredients, ideas, and techniques from both, and I think there's room for both. If it's good food, it's good food. If it's well executed, well thought out, all the textures are good, and if it tastes good, then it's a good dish. Sometimes when I create a dish, I get a shape in my head. I start to work from the shape and then think about the flavors. It might sound odd, but I work a lot with shapes. My food is highly designed for several reasons. Because I like shapes, I always work that way, and I also think about how the food should be eaten. Flavor is the most important part of the dish, but it has to make sense. You need to arrange everything the way that it's meant to be eaten. So that's how I work out a new dish.

For example, I had an interesting cooking project at American architect Philip Johnson's Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut. The house was designed in the 1940s and is now a museum, but when Philip Johnson was alive, he had the longest-running salon in America, with the greatest minds in architecture, art, and design talking about important issues and new ideas. In 2008, the museum decided to bring back the salon with a moderator and ten guests to talk about various topics, and they asked me to cook the food. One of the topics at the salon was "simplicity."

I thought about simplicity in food and asked myself, "What's the simplest shape you can make?" It's a circle! So I based the whole menu and every dish around a circle. For example, I made a tomato

salad based on circles. There was a slice of tomato sitting on a round crouton, which sat on top of a small circle of goat cheese, next to pureed spinach and basil. I repeated this on the plate in one row of circles. Setting limitations for myself—like saying that every single element of this dish is going to be round—made this project more interesting. It forced me to think differently than I normally do.

I prepared another meal where I created the dishes around colors. Every single dish had one color—white, yellow, red, or green. If I say every component in a dish has to be yellow, then I can't think about it in a normal way. I have to think in a different way, which means that I end up creating some interesting dishes. But I still keep in mind that food should be eaten and enjoyed, and it should not be complicated.

Whether you pay $3 for a sandwich or $200 for the chef's tasting menu, it doesn't matter. It's the whole experience, from the front of the house to the back of the house, that's important.

Another important way the Japanese mindset has influenced my cuisine is the relationship between the prepared dish and the whole dining experience. Everything sets a tone, and all of the elements of dining are important and connected as one—including walking up the stairs to the restaurant, opening the door, being greeted by the hostess, and being seated. The tableware, the flowers on the table, and the plated food are all part of the experience, too. A successful chef must focus not only on what goes on in the kitchen, but also in the front of the house, because at the end of the meal, what the guest leaves with is part of the experience. If even one thing doesn't live up to the guest's expectations, then the meal is not going to be as good as it could or should have been.

I think many chefs are not trained to see the dining experience as a whole and don't understand the importance of working with the front of the house. If the front of the house doesn't deliver the food the way you want it, then the service won't be as good as you want it to be either—and you want it to be good, because you want to perform at the highest level, whether you're cooking simple or complicated food.

For example, even when I serve a cheese sandwich, I want to be sure I serve the best cheese sandwich in the best way possible. If I serve it over the counter with a paper napkin, I want to make sure the paper napkin is the right size for the sandwich and that it's handed to you so you'll have a good eating experience. It doesn't matter whether you pay $3 for a sandwich or $200 for the chef's tasting menu. It's the whole experience, from the front of the house to the back of the house, that's important.

Traditionally, the relationship between the front of the house and the back of the house has always been difficult, because it's often an "us-against-them" mentality. A lot of the difficulty, especially here in New York, occurs because the front of the house makes more money. They get the tips—the back of the house doesn't. On the other hand, many cooks come into the business because food is their passion, whereas a lot of the waiters and waitresses are just there to make some money until they can get a music gig or an acting job. They may not care as much about the product.

There are ways around this problem, and that's where management comes in. As the chef, if you start at the top and make it clear how you want things to work by setting standards and expectations, then it's going to trickle down through the organization. If you're a chef who is serious about having a successful restaurant, then you must make sure that the front of the house and the back of the house work together. There's no other way.

Ingredients

I really like Japanese apple vinegar. It's so bright and flavorful. It's fantastic!

There are a lot of good, high-quality Japanese ingredients used in American restaurants these days, and many chefs take them for granted. For example, if I say to a chef, "Use mirin or miso or soy in the dish," they will most likely respond, "Oh, okay," and not give it a second thought, because many of these Japanese ingredients are part of the restaurant's pantry. The chefs will use them in their dishes, but the dishes have nothing to do with authentic Japanese food.

When a non-Japanese chef uses a Japanese ingredient, it triggers other chefs to try it, too. At first, only a few chefs may use a particular ingredient, and then many other chefs start using it, too. But it all starts with one or two chefs. I think that most professional chefs really respect the tradition and quality of Japanese ingredients. The quality of ingredients means a lot to me, and I think that's something that every chef can appreciate.

There's a good reason why Japanese-inspired food is so popular. The ingredients are simply delicious! I love kombu, miso, and mirin, but one of my favorite ingredients from Japan is apple vinegar. It's so bright and flavorful. It's fantastic! Let's say I want to make a dish with fluke. What can I find that'll add a little bit of sweetness to brighten it up? I really want to use this Japanese vinegar, so I'll try it and make adjustments to make it work. *Katsuobushi* is great, too. It's dried *bonito*, or tuna, fish flakes used to make dashi stock. That's what I start with. Then there's the Japanese fish sauce, *ishiri*. When you smell it and eat it, it's like opening a can of Spam. It has the smell of

canned meat and is definitely umami. I've used it in a few dishes. If you find a Japanese ingredient you like and it's a good product, you'll be able to find a way to work it into your food, one way or the other.

The only reason I use new techniques and different ingredients is so that I can make better products for my guests.

Nearly every style of cooking in every single country has been influenced by ingredients from other places and cuisines. In Swedish food we use a lot of spices, such as cinnamon, cardamom, and ginger, because we were one of the first countries in the world to start trading with the Far East and Asia. Someone who doesn't know that might say that we're engaged in "fusion cooking," but we've been using these spices for hundreds of years.

I don't like the label "fusion cooking" because it implies something negative, but the reality is that most chefs today are influenced by other cuisines. It's the same as when people say "molecular gastronomy." It sounds disgusting, but it doesn't really describe what it is. I think labels like these tend to give a negative impression of chefs that they don't deserve. The only reason I use new techniques and different ingredients is so that I can make better products for my guests, and I believe that should be every chef's goal.

Training

You can make the best onion soup, but if your station is a mess, it doesn't really matter. You will not succeed.

I think one of the most important skills that a chef needs is organizing a station. If you cannot be organized, both physically and time wise, it's not going to work. When I was the Vice President of Culinary and Pastry Arts at The French Culinary Institute, we put a lot of emphasis on organization, teamwork, and time management. The average age of the students there was about 26. Some came in with experience, and some had none. The students didn't expect that they needed to know very much about these three things, but in time they learned that each one is an important part of cooking.

Students think that creativity is the most important part of being a chef, but it's actually not. They will eventually have a chance to be creative, but they won't get that opportunity right away. Good chefs need the right mindset. They need to be curious, look at everything, and taste and read as much as possible.

One thing I always tell new chefs is, "By deciding that you want to make culinary arts your career, you will never taste food the same way, ever again." This is good in one way, and not so good in other ways. For example, before entering a cooking school program, if you're at a restaurant, you can say that a meal was good or bad and just walk away. But if you are a chef, you can't do that anymore. Instead, you need to ask questions. If the meal was good, why was it good? What was the flavor? Was the balance good? Or if it wasn't good, what was it that fell short, and how could it be done better? You have to think critically, because you'll learn from that as well.

During my time at the FCI, we had several famous guest Japanese chefs demonstrate various authentic Japanese cooking techniques. To

prepare for these special events, the students read ahead of time about the specific Japanese ingredients, products, and cooking techniques to be used in the demonstrations. The more background they had, the more they learned from the demonstrations. Plus, they had a greater appreciation for the chefs' skills and for Japanese cuisine.

I also made it clear to the students that when they started out in this profession, they were not going to be chefs when they left, but they would have the tools to become great chefs. The FCI emphasized classic learning because chefs must learn the basics, but the school also took the position that chef training needed to be progressive and include newer cooking techniques that may not be standards of the industry, at least not yet.

One of the more important resources in any kitchen is the person you work next to.

When I was a chef at Aquavit, I wanted anyone who interviewed for a job to have basic skills, absolutely, but after that, attitude was most important. I usually interviewed people twice. If I got a good feeling from the person and I thought he or she had the right attitude, then I could teach him or her exactly what to do and how to do it. I don't think you can train adults to have the right attitude—they either have it or they don't. I always told new chefs, "One of the more important resources in any kitchen is the person you work next to. In my kitchen, there are people from around the world—Japan, Peru, Brazil. They have grown up with different foods and know different things about foods. That's why you should talk. Learn from each other. I've learned so much from all of them."

The trend toward modern Japanese cuisine and western-style, Japanese-inspired menus provides opportunities for chefs who know techniques for preparing raw and cooked fish and using soy, miso, mirin, and other Japanese ingredients.

Ten or 15 years ago, Japanese restaurants could get kitchen staff from Japan. Today it's more difficult and expensive. As the trend toward Japanese-related cuisine continues, many chefs and restaurateurs will find it easier, faster, and less expensive to hire domestically trained chefs with Japanese cooking skills who speak English rather than bring traditionally trained Japanese chefs from Japan with limited English-language skills.

Another trend directly relates to the popularity of Japanese cuisine and the Japanese mindset regarding ingredients. Today, we care much more about our ingredients than we did even 10 years ago. Many customers are willing to pay extra for the highest quality ingredients. As chefs and consumers, we care more about what's in our food products. For the longest time, especially in this country, the goal was to make food that was cheaper and lasted longer. That was the most important goal. If the taste wasn't so good, it didn't matter that much. We had lost the connection between where food is grown and how it ends up in its final form. Now, we have reversed that trend. We're going back to caring about where and how ingredients are grown, and we want the end result to taste good. I think, to some degree, we have the trend in Japanese cuisine to thank for that.

A Day in the Life

Chefs must deal with unexpected things quickly and efficiently.

When I was starting out as a chef, I didn't sleep at night. I'd wake up because I forgot to order this or that or I didn't put something on my list. I can't tell you how many sleepless nights I had. But those sleepless nights also helped me to be organized and to write everything down. Eventually, something disastrous is going to happen in the kitchen, whether it's the grease tipping over just before service or something else. If something happens, you can't just say, "Oh, this is terrible, what do I do?" Yes, it's terrible, but it's not going to go away, so you've got to act on it right away. You can't say, "If things aren't exactly right, I can't work!"

At the old Aquavit location, we had a small fire that damaged our exhaust fan. So the next day at lunch, the kitchen was really hot because the exhaust fan wasn't working. I was standing next to the window expediting, and the dining room was full. Then, smack in the middle of service—it couldn't have been busier—the kitchen was at least 100 degrees. Of course, hot air rises, so the sprinkler went off. Cold, dirty water was spraying all over the lines, all over the already plated dishes, all over everything in the kitchen, and all of the food was swimming in dirty water!

What did we do? We had the kitchen upstairs, but that wasn't going to be enough. So we got all the cassette burners going and moved everything we could upstairs. We actually managed to get the food out! By dinner service, we had the sprinkler fixed, but the exhaust fan was still down. We had to take turns standing on an upside-down milk crate with a bucket of ice water held over our heads to cool down the sensor so the sprinkler wouldn't go off again. All of these unexpected things happened, but we still got every dish out for

lunch, we made it through dinner service, and the next day, everything was fixed and back to normal.

Another time that I had to make the best of a bad situation was in 2000, when I did an event in Mozambique. I was cooking for the King and Queen of Sweden and about 2,000 guests. The hotel was beautiful, built in the 1920s and located right next to the ocean. But when my team and I walked into the kitchen, there was the dirtiest kitchen I'd ever seen! We had to cook for the King and Queen of Sweden and all of those people, so the food had to be good! There was no way I could say, "I can't do it."

I asked the people at the hotel, "Okay, give us another room." So we took another room and cleaned the whole place up and tried to do what we could. But we had another unexpected, even bigger problem. We had all sorts of food products sent in from Sweden for the dinner, but unfortunately, someone forgot to put the perishables in the fridge, so we had to throw a lot of it out and find substitutes.

Four of us worked four days straight without any rest. So what would have been the alternative? I couldn't just run out and go back to Sweden. They expected to have food. Could it have been better? Yes, but at least we had a place that was reasonably clean where we could cook. We had someone drive into South Africa, pick up some salmon, and bring it back so we could make gravlax and other Swedish dishes for all of the guests. With a lot of extra work and juggling, the dinner was a success! I learned a tremendous amount from these experiences, and now I never worry. That doesn't mean that I'm not quality driven. I absolutely am. But if something happens, I say, "Ok, don't worry, we'll figure it out. There's always a way around it."

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