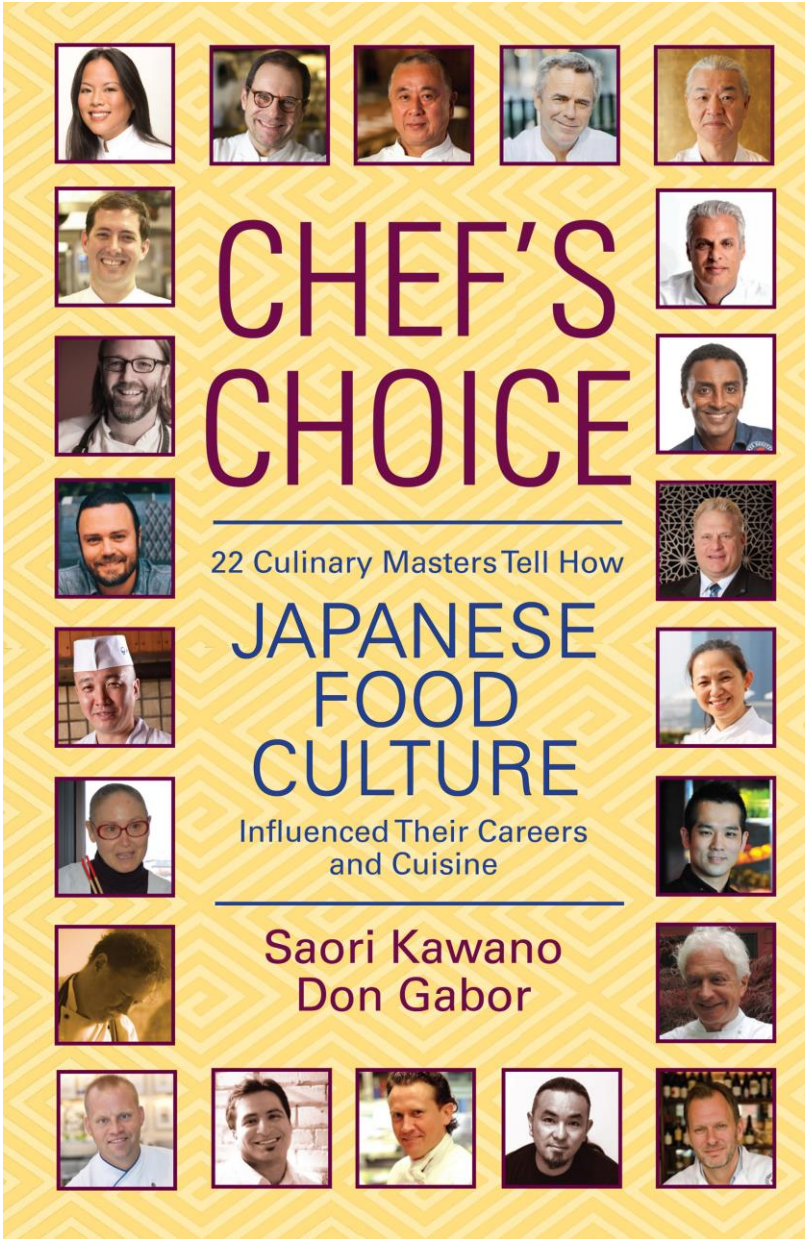

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NORIYUKE SUGIE

SEVENTEEN

NORIYUKI SUGIE

Chef, Consultant

After Noriyuki Sugie graduated from the TSUJI Culinary Institute in Osaka and The TSUJI School of Advanced Culinary Studies in Château de L'Éclair, France, he worked at three Michelin-starred restaurants in Bordeaux, including the three-starred L'Aubergade, the one-starred Le Moulin de Martorey, and the two-starred Hostellerie du Vieux. In 1996, he moved to Chicago, where he spent two years as Chef de Partie at Charlie Trotter's, and he then went onto Tetsuya's in Sydney, one of Australia's top restaurants. During Noriyuki Sugie's tenure as Chef and Partner at Restaurant VII, the *Sydney Morning Herald* claimed it Best New Restaurant of 2001.

In 2003, Noriyuki Sugie was appointed Chef de Cuisine of the Mandarin Oriental, New York flagship restaurant Asiate. After four years of rave reviews, and his designation as 2005 StarChefs.com Rising Star Chef, he left Asiate, and in 2008 launched IRONNORI, a restaurant-consulting firm based in San Francisco. Sugie also consults with clients in Asia. He has appeared as a guest chef in the series *Hatchi* and *Hatchi Mix,* and he has also hosted at Breadbar in Los Angeles.

Influences

I learned from Chef Ishinabe that cooking is important to a chef, but so is creating a team in order to nurture the restaurant.

I began working at Chef Yutaka Ishinabe's restaurant in Japan after I came back from France. I was able to see the restaurant overall, not just the cuisine, and learn about how an owner/chef conducts business. He had studied cooking in France but used Japanese ingredients to create his own Yutaka Ishinabe style. I learned from Chef Ishinabe that observing what is going on outside of the kitchen is important in growing a restaurant as well.

Working at Charlie Trotter's restaurant in Chicago also influenced me as a chef. Charlie Trotter was a rugged individual. His cooking was fabulous, but cooking for him was like being on an American sports team. He was the captain or coach. The way he gave instructions and pulled the team together was very different from the French way.

When I first arrived in Chicago and entered the kitchen, I was served a meal. As I ate, I observed the kitchen and the manner in which one of the chefs, David Myers, made his way. I noticed how sharp his eyes were. I had no idea who he was. After a year, we became close friends because I felt we had something in common.

Both Chef Ishinabe and Chef Charlie Trotter emphasized teamwork. But there are some big differences in the way Japanese, American, and French chefs communicate with their staff. In Japan, I was expected to know how to do something without any explanation of how to do it. It

was easy, because I was working with people of the same nationality. When I went abroad, there were people from different backgrounds, and there were times when I couldn't get them to understand me. During service there's a need for more communication, otherwise, standards can't be maintained. Instructions are given based on the assumption that everyone has a different mentality.

Working in France is very different from Japan. In France, the team changes about once a year. You work together for about six months, followed by a summer break of about one month. Many people change restaurants around that time. The French chefs have impressive resumes. They have studied at many places. There are no interviews. A single phone call or a recommendation by a chef decides whether you get that next position. To find a position in France, I wrote a lot of letters. I got a lot of information about getting a job there from other Japanese chefs. There was no email in those days—it was all by phone or by mail. I sent form letters in French! If the chef liked what I wrote he or she would contact me.

Once you get into a good restaurant in France, it becomes possible to move to another restaurant. For example, if you work for Chef Joël Robuchon, it means that you have his seal of approval. You work hard to gain the trust and affection of the chef you are working for so that you can be introduced to the next one. That impresses me about the French. When you want to leave a Japanese restaurant, the chef asks you why. But in France, once you give them your best, the chef will introduce you to the next place. You learn and move on. You're encouraged to learn more. This is so different from Japan.

Cuisine

The challenge is for chefs to show their uniqueness.

My goal is to incorporate the strength of Japanese cuisine into my own French cuisine—to add Japanese cuisine and French cuisine together and divide by two. That's my cooking philosophy. For example, in a dish where I need meat stock, I use dashi instead. Consommé becomes a jelly, so I make the same texture using jellied dashi. When making mousse, I make it without cream—I use tofu instead. After studying French cuisine for a time, I have learned a lot about the different natures of French and Japanese ingredients, and I've found natural substitutions. Training in this way has helped me find the direction that I want to take in my cooking. I think many chefs are looking for just that—something to give them direction.

When I develop a menu, the most important thing is to think of the season. Then I decide on one ingredient. For example, if I use a poached egg, or what we call *onsen tamago*, or "hot spring egg," I consider all of the different ways I can use it. I also think about texture, color, and shape, and how these elements tie together. Then I imagine how the ingredient would be heated. In this case, it will be slowly. What kind of sauce will go with it? The egg is soft, so I will need something like bacon to give the palate another dimension. Adding and subtracting such elements build up the menu.

All chefs do this in the natural course of their work, but when it's written down, it's interesting. For example, I write "egg" and draw the different directions it could go: fried, poached, and so on. From there, I think of all of the different things I could serve with it. Some things combine better with eggs than others. Of course, seasonality comes first, then temperature, then the plan for the dish. But I have sketches.

They make it easy to understand the menu. When I'm thinking of the menu, I sketch it in my mind.

The next step is eating the dish. First I taste it and decide whether it is flavorful. Otherwise, it can't be served to the guests. The team, including people from different countries, tastes it, too. If I think a dish tastes good but the response of others is not so good, I continue to work on it. I change things and identify what I'm looking for. I try to make the dishes enjoyable for many different people.

Putting the dish into words on the menu can be tricky.

In 2000, when I was executive chef at Asiate in New York City, I was cooking soup every day. Because I had so much leftover lettuce every day, I wanted to make something different—soup using romaine lettuce! It took a lot of trial and error, but I came up with a signature dish—Caesar Salad Soup.

When the guests make the selection from the menu, say chicken, they have a certain image of what the chicken might look like. The dish needs to meet that expectation. Dealing with customer expectations is the hard part. If the taste and expectations of a dish don't match up, no matter whether the dish is good or bad, customers might decide that the restaurant is not right for them. I have to think about how to write the menu so those dishes are easy to understand. The cooking techniques I use are simple, but putting the dish into words on the menu can be tricky.

I think preparing fish is particularly difficult. After meat is cooked, it can rest, but if fish is overcooked it can't be used. It's a delicate ingredient. And there are so many varieties of fish. Meat can have different cuts, but in terms of variety, there's beef and pork, chicken,

lamb, and duck—not so many. But there are many kinds of fish. Depending on the characteristics of the fish, a chef decides the best way to cook it and what to serve with it.

Trends in cuisine have been changing, but the dishes that chefs want to make and the dishes that customers want to eat both need to be incorporated into the menu. I think that's important.

Across the U.S., there is also a big difference in menus, taste, and mentality, so I have to research the market in each place. The menus in New York are different from the menus in San Francisco or Los Angeles. So I have to understand the audience.

As a chef, the most important thing is to put forward one's capabilities and to be recognized by the guests. By doing so, the restaurant becomes filled with customers. All chefs have a level that they consider the lowest common denominator. That's a difficult thing to determine. Chefs really need to have an understanding of what they are doing and prepare dishes that the guests will be willing to pay for.

Ingredients

In Japanese cuisine we use ingredients like dashi, katsuobushi, soy sauce, and miso. They add kakushi aji, which means "the hidden taste."

To make dashi, I use katsuobushi—dried, fermented, and smoked skipjack tuna. It's made the traditional Japanese way, but I also like to add dashi powder in the preparation. It's a way to add taste and to bring out the depth of the flavor. I often use a mixture of *iriko* dashi, *kombu* dashi, and *katsuo* dashi that comes in powder form. To the traditional Japanese chef, using dashi powder is akin to being lead astray, but I think it's okay because it adds to the flavor. These commonly used Japanese ingredients come in many varieties, but we need more workshops and information about them so both Japanese chefs and non-Japanese chefs can understand them better and on a deeper level. I think that is important.

Recently, many less-familiar Japanese ingredients have been introduced to chefs in France and America. For example, vegetables from Kyoto, such as *kyo yasai*, and pickled seafood ingredients like *uni*, *karasumi*, and *konowata*. Some are peculiar to certain areas in Japan and are very limited in availability.

There are a lot of other traditional Japanese ingredients that are healthful and that add a great deal of flavor, too, but I don't think that information about them has been easily attainable in the U.S. For example, *nuka* is a rice bran used for pickling. Japanese pickles are becoming very popular with American chefs and customers. *Natto* is made from fermented soybeans. It doesn't look very good, has a rotten smell, and leaves a strange sensation in the mouth, but it can be used as a kakushi aji, like miso. By applying heat to it, the stickiness disappears, and if you put it into a blender, so does the smell. *Saké kasu* is another ingredient made from the lees after saké has been squeezed from the fermented rice. Japanese chefs get it from a saké brewery in Japan. It's possible to make a dessert like panna cotta or cheesecake and put saké kasu on top. It's a dessert dish using fermented ingredients! I am always

interested in seeing which ingredients *ryotei* restaurants, or fine dining restaurants, use and keep on hand.

Training

At the TSUJI Culinary Institute in Japan, I learned that French cuisine is called a "plus cuisine"—you keep adding to it.

When I entered the program at the TSUJI Culinary Institute in Japan, I knew nothing about French cuisine. I think that I was barely able to touch the basics and only on a very superficial level during that one year. I learned about ingredients and the kinds of cooking skills and methods necessary in French cuisine and how to make sauces. There are many time-consuming tasks, such as making stock and preparing basic ingredients, herbs, and spices. I had to study many kinds of wines because the flavor of the sauce depends on the kind of wine used in it. But I also cleaned a lot of pots!

There wasn't much time to actually learn by doing. I had to listen and learn and watch. I was looking at the framework and I was studying it, but I wasn't able to internalize it, because during school hours there were few opportunities to spend time cutting vegetables or slicing meat and fish. I couldn't learn these techniques unless I practiced them many times, so I just had to train myself. I needed to practice at home because the test was preparing the head of a fish, cutting vegetables brunoise so that they looked like tiny dice, and cutting potatoes into the shape of small footballs. I practiced those knife skills for hours because the school tested us on how many we could make within an allotted time.

After finishing my training at Tsuji, I went to school in France because I wanted to learn more about using local ingredients. And I wanted to be where the action was in the kitchen. At the French school, there was a team that executed the menu for the day and then during service raced to get everything done.

Restaurant work is a battle with time. Something good has to be prepared within an allotted time. That is the restaurant's service. You can't study how to do service in school. It has to be done live.

I spent six months at the school and the remainder of the time on-the-job, training at a hotel restaurant in the country. This restaurant served breakfast, and people came there just to eat. It was in a beautiful environment and was a two-star restaurant at the time. The cuisine reflected the natural surroundings and the local ingredients. At first I had to half-peel vegetables and do prep work like cutting tomatoes into squares—really basic things. I was able to do the prep work fairly quickly because I'd been pushing myself to work harder to reach a high level of achievement and also to perform under pressure.

Once I felt that I could do a particular task, I asked for another task, always on my own. After cutting the vegetables, my next task was working with meat—removing the bones, tying it, stuffing it, roasting it, figuring out the number of minutes to cook it and at what temperature. The instructors were watching to see what I was capable of doing. When they asked me to do something, I needed to be able to do it or ask them to teach me how.

I think any restaurant must make sure that every detail and every step in a dish is followed exactly, to the point of obsession.

Traditional French cuisine is created according to a manual. The goal is to create consistency in the kitchen so that the result is the same each and every time. That's how the French think. In America, the result is different, depending on who does it. In Japanese cuisine, there aren't many recipe books except ones for people who make confections. Japanese chefs have their own unique flavorings. The people working for a head chef need to understand these flavorings, the timing, and techniques. There is no manual, so they have to learn by watching and doing and learning the tastes.

While I'm doing consulting work for a client, there are times when I'm unable to be in the restaurant, and the other chefs ask me for step-by-step recipes with photographs so they can maintain consistency. I think any restaurant must make sure that every detail and every step in a dish is followed exactly to the point of obsession.

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