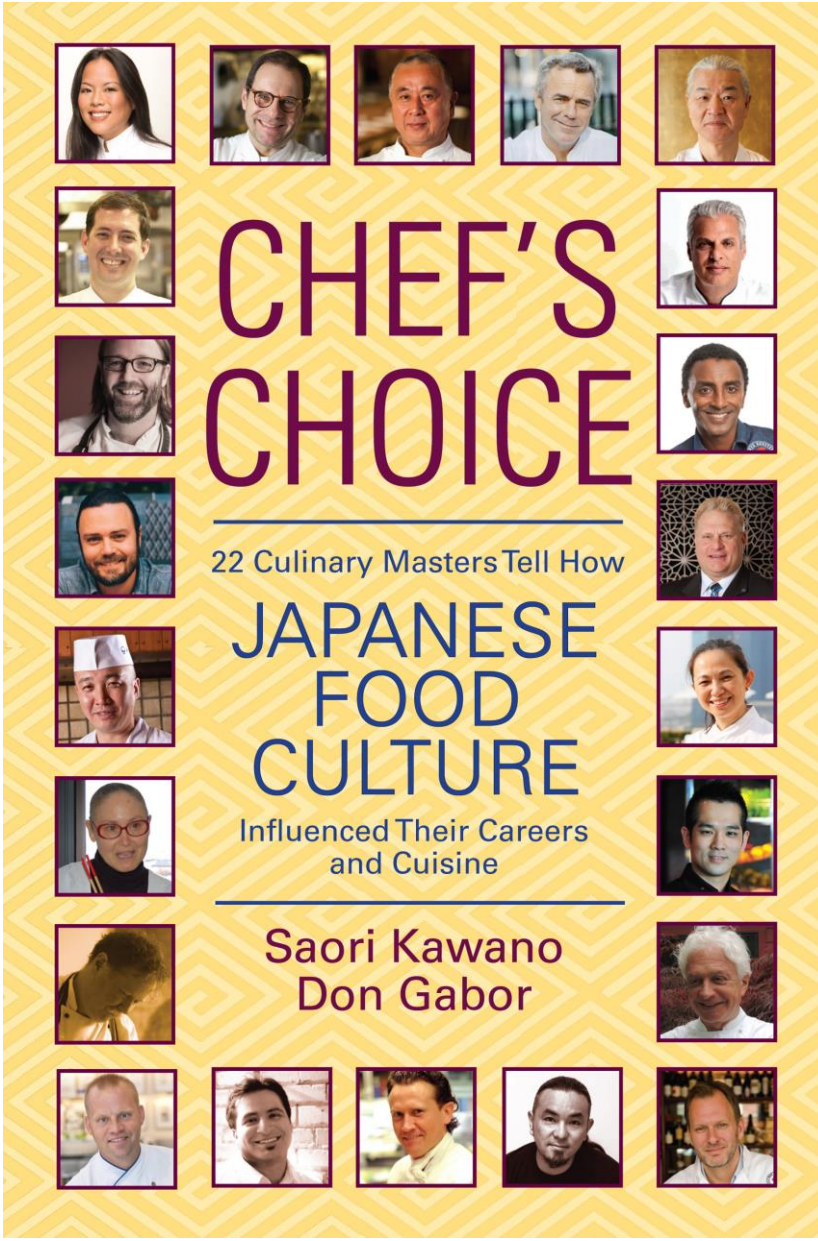

Table of Contents

TWELVE

TONI ROBERTSON

Executive Chef, Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group, Singapore

A graduate of the renowned Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago, Executive Chef Toni Robertson has prepared her exquisite cuisine in some of the world's finest hotels, including The Ritz-Carlton Chicago, Four Seasons Beverly Hills, and as Executive Chef at the Palace of the Lost City Hotel in South Africa. Toni became the first female Executive Chef of a luxury hotel in Southeast Asia at the Pan Pacific Hotel in Singapore. She joined the Mandarin Oriental, New York team in 2005 and moved to the Mandarin Oriental, Singapore in 2014.

Toni Robertson was the first female chef to be inducted into the Singapore chapter of the Chaine des Rotisseurs, the world's oldest international culinary organization. She is certified as a sommelier from the Court of Master Sommeliers and was welcomed into the Order Mondial under the direction of Master Sommelier George Milliotes.

Influences

Food was always my passion.

My fondest memories from Burma, where I was born, are walking to the local market with my grandmother every morning to buy the ingredients for the day's meals. Even as a little girl, I was enthralled with the hustle and bustle and the sounds and smells of this gathering place as we went about our daily ritual. It was there that I first learned how to appreciate food and how to select the best ingredients. It was in the market that I think my passion was born. By Burmese standards, we were well off. We were of Chinese descent, and my father was a successful businessman who wanted all of his kids to be educated professionals—preferably doctors. But school was never my strong point, so I always seemed to find my way into the kitchen, usually to hide out.

Our family cook would put me to work. "If you're going to hide in here, peel some garlic. Chop some of this. Stir this pot." She gave me simple tasks to do, and I started to learn about cooking from the ground up. But in Asia, being a cook was not like it was in America or Europe. It was not a particularly desirable position and usually meant that you would work as a servant for others, so the idea of being a chef never really entered my mind. There were no famous chefs in Burma to idolize. But I knew that I loved food and cooking.

In 1979 as a teenager, I immigrated to the United States amidst the political turmoil in my country. My parents were still in Burma, so I first stayed with my oldest sister Peggy, a doctor, in Hawaii, where I learned English by watching soap operas on TV. We moved to Chicago a year later, where I was able to complete my high school

education. Peggy had a great passion for cooking, and I think if she had not gone into medicine, she would have been a great chef. She and her husband, Patrick, also a doctor, took vacations around the world to faraway places like Paris, where they would eat and drink at the great restaurants. Peggy even went to cooking classes. I learned my first real dishes from my sister. I think the first thing I ever baked on my own was rum baba. I was underage and already into the rum! Then I made a soufflé. Imagine making a soufflé and being so excited when it actually turned out perfect! I was addicted.

Although food was my passion, cooking as a profession was still not a realistic option for me at that time. I had another stop to make along the way. After graduating from high school, I joined the U.S. Air Force and became an emergency room medic. With a family full of doctors, it wasn't such a stretch for me to gravitate toward medicine. I loved the Air Force because it opened up so many opportunities for me. In fact, I served seven years on active duty and another five years in the Air National Guard. I often say that the experience I gained in running an emergency room, working in that "controlled chaos," was perfect training for preparing me to work in the kitchen. I was fortunate enough to be stationed early in my career in a little town in Germany called Spangdahlem in the Eifel mountains, where the borders of Belgium, France, and Luxembourg come together.

Every weekend that I could get away, my mission was to find somewhere new to eat. It was normal on a Friday for my friends and me to hop on the train and head down to Paris. We didn't have a lot of money, so we would go to a little bistro or a sidewalk cafe, watch the world go by, and share items on the menu. I thought I was eating in the dining room at the Ritz! Instead, I was sitting outside at the Café de la Paix, dreaming that I was sitting in the same chair that Ernest

Hemingway sat in, sipping espresso, and eating baguettes and cheese. That was my introduction to the culinary world.

Living in Europe also gave me the opportunity to try cooking the foods that I ate on my dining excursions. We always had single friends over to the house for dinners when I experimented with new dishes, and on holidays I cooked feasts and invited service people who didn't have family close by. I had the best Christmas parties at my house! I learned recipes from cookbooks or magazines like *Gourmet*, *Food & Wine* or *Good Housekeeping*. I also worked the overnight shift at the U.S. Air Force Emergency Room, and we used to do potluck dinners with themes. I always made a main dish. For example, if it was Mexican night, I would make the meat dish, and everyone else brought taco shells, lettuce, or tomatoes. If you came to our emergency room at 2 a.m., patients, nurses, doctors, the ambulance drivers, even the security and local police were there eating those potluck dinners. It was a big buffet for all of us, and it was fun.

Career Path

I was lucky to be hired at the Ritz-Carlton Chicago as the "salad girl."

There came a time when I had to follow my passion for cooking or decide to stay in the military. It really was not that difficult a choice. I had to give it a shot. I knew I wanted to realize my dream and cook for a living, so I left the service, moved back to Chicago, and enrolled in the culinary program at the Cooking and Hospitality Institute of

Chicago to learn the basics. Today, CHIC has grown into a premier culinary training academy in the Chicago area, teaching hundreds of students, but at the time I attended, we had only five students in my class. I was fortunate enough to receive one-on-one training, which I think was instrumental to my early development. After I graduated, I was lucky to be hired at the Ritz-Carlton Chicago as the "salad girl." I started in the basement and washed lettuce all day long for the entire hotel—all three outlets and banquets. I literally worked my way up from the bottom!

My first interview at the Ritz-Carlton was with Chef Fernand Gutierrez, who was a legend in the Chicago area. He was a typical Frenchman—large, loud, and, for me, very intimidating. But Fernand was also a chef who was ahead of his time. In a day and age when kitchens were the exclusive haven of male chefs, he gave women a chance to work in one of the finest and best-known kitchens in the country. That just wasn't done at that time.

I had already decided even before the interview that if I wanted to be a good chef some day, I needed to get into a great kitchen with a great chef who could mentor me. I told Fernand I would do anything to work in his kitchen. Unfortunately, "anything" turned out to be a position as either a pastry helper or a salad person. Even to this day, I have never been drawn to pastry like I have to cooking. I love pastry, but baking is a science that demands accurate measurements and discipline—neither of which I seem to do very well. Cooking always seemed to me to be the more creative of the two art forms. So I told Fernand, "No, I don't want to do pastry—I'll be your salad girl," not having the slightest idea what that really meant!

I found out quickly! I worked in the basement near the loading dock area, where trucks would make their deliveries of lettuce and other produce. At that time, there were no pre-made salad mixes like

we have today. We did everything from scratch. I washed and prepared salads for thousands of guests each day. It was very cold in the basement during the harsh Chicago winters, and very hot and muggy during the summers. My hands would ache at the end of the day from being in the ice-cold water all day washing and preparing the lettuce.

What I learned was that even the simplest tasks, like preparing lettuce, took skill. I discovered that the best way to clean lettuce is to first take it apart, chop it, and then throw it into the coldest water possible. If you let it soak for a few minutes and don't stir the water too much, you can use your fingers to "fluff" the lettuce so that the dirt and sand just drop to the bottom. Then you gently scoop out the lettuce, and it is perfectly clean.

Chef Gutierrez ran a disciplined kitchen, and I figured out early on that being a good chef didn't happen overnight. It took time and commitment, and you had to pay your dues. But I was also not shy about wanting to improve my skills and get better. I was both anxious and ambitious. I would knock on Chef Gutierrez' door and ask, "Can I come up? Can I do this or that for you?" One time I overheard him say that he didn't have anybody to bone chickens. So I said, "Can I come up and do it for you? You don't even have to pay me for it."

He could have said no, but instead he said, "Come on. You can help," guessing that I'd never boned a chicken in my life. That was his way of giving me a chance. He was right about my lack of experience, but I watched a few of the more experienced cooks and then jumped in. The first few were a certifiable disaster—but I mastered the technique quickly and was boning chickens like a pro in no time!

I was always looking toward the future. I showed up every day knowing that this was the first step on the ladder of my career.

I washed lettuce for over a year, but I knew that I had a future beyond the basement if I worked hard. Every day I told myself, "Tomorrow they might have something else available for me." I was paying my dues. I was always looking toward the future. I showed up every day knowing that this was the first step on the ladder of my career. I had learned discipline and professionalism in the military, and I knew that someday I would move upstairs. It wasn't easy, not interacting with the other cooks and never seeing plates of food, but I never lost faith. Then one day, a pastry position opened up. I couldn't believe that my ascension to the twelfth-floor kitchen was going to be through the pastry department!

I think my coworkers quickly figured out my limitations as a pastry cook. I spent a great deal of time plating desserts, which in those days meant "pulling sugars." My hands went from the cold of ice water and lettuce to the heat of cooked sugar, which was used to make roses. At that time at the Ritz-Carlton, every dessert plate had sugar roses on it. We did a lot of promotions that year—which meant a lot of sugar roses. My fingers were constantly being burned.

In 1985, a young French chef named Emile Tabourdiau from Paris came to do a promotion in the dining room of the Ritz-Carlton. As we worked together on a dessert, he asked me if I was the only Asian in the kitchen. It was unusual enough to see a female cook, but an Asian female was truly a rarity in those days. He had some ideas about some Asian ingredients he was interested in using. "How do you use this? What is the best way to prepare it?" he would ask me. I started working with him on these dishes, and we had a great time. At the

end, he asked, “If your chef will let you, why don’t you come to Le Bristol in Paris and work with me?”

What an opportunity. I didn’t hesitate and told him, “I’ll pay my way! I have vacation time, and I’m sure my chef will give me the time. I want to work in your kitchen!” So off I went to Paris for three months, with the blessing of Fernand, to apprentice with Chef Emile. By the time I returned to the Ritz-Carlton, a position in *garde manger* had opened up, and I was once again given an opportunity. At the time we made cold canapés and appetizers, of course, but we also made pâtés and terrines from scratch, including our own smoked salmon in the cold area. I took the position.

In the mid 1980s, the brunch at the Ritz-Carlton Dining Room was the place to be on a Sunday. We’d have about 300 or 400 guests, and we decorated all of these old-fashioned mirrors with whole poached salmon in aspic. We stuffed the pâtés and terrines with everything imaginable. It’s a dying art today, but Fernand was still old school, and I learned to make all of the classics. We put our little twist on everything. One of the great aspects about working in the Ritz-Carlton Chicago was the tremendous volume. Everything was big—the banquets, the number of covers in the dining room, the café. If ever there was an example of controlled chaos in a kitchen, it was the Ritz-Carlton. When I smoked salmon, I didn’t just smoke one salmon; I would smoke 40 to 50 salmon at a time. I did it repeatedly until I mastered it. It wasn’t long before I moved up again and became a saucier on the hot line.

When you work the line, you have the recipe, the technique, and the plating card, which you follow to the letter if you want to stay in the good graces of the chef.

My short but passionate apprenticeship in Paris introduced me to the seasonality of food, which would forever change my view of the culinary arts. It was there that I first realized that great cuisine is best built around the ingredients at hand. It was springtime in Paris, so I peeled cases and cases of fennel. In the 1980s French cuisine was still considered king. My cooking had become very westernized as I immersed myself in traditional French cooking and French cuisine. However, at home, away from the kitchens at the Ritz-Carlton, it was very different. There I cooked the dishes that I grew up with in Burma and enjoyed eating my native cuisine—with its Thai, Indian, and Chinese influences. At home, I never really left my Asian roots. But at work, the two cuisine styles never crossed. I kept them separate.

When you're working your way up, you take your direction from the chef you are working under. Fernand was a great chef, but you weren't going to see any bean sprouts or daikon radish in his dishes. When you work the line, you have the recipe, the technique, and the plating card, which you follow to the letter if you want to stay in the good graces of the chef.

It was only when I began working in Singapore in the mid-1990s as Executive Chef at the Pan Pacific Hotel that I really rediscovered my Asian passion and my roots and started to incorporate them into my cuisine in a fundamental way. In Singapore, I worked with a Japanese master chef who introduced me to the traditional kaiseki cuisine. I was immediately in love with it. The beautiful preparation of the dishes was like a fashion show, with one element linked to another. By the thirteenth dish, I was in love. It opened my mind. The ingredients were not new to me. I had used seaweed, salmon roe, wasabi, and soy sauce in the past. But it was the way they were used that drew me in.

Although I had overseen a Japanese restaurant at the Grand Wailea Resort in Maui, Hawaii, it wasn't until Singapore that I think I really began to appreciate the true artistry of Japanese cuisine. I was inspired for the first time to really rethink my style and incorporate the simplicity of ingredients and the complexity of flavors into my more global-style cuisine.

Training

> *If the only position that's open is in the employee cafeteria, take it. Be the best cafeteria cook there ever was and prove that you can do it.*

People come and interview with me for positions all the time. Many have impeccable credentials from the best culinary schools. The truth is, I don't have much turnover in my kitchens, so often the positions that do open up are at the lowest levels. What I learned from my start in Chicago is that there is always opportunity if you make it. When someone comes to me and says, "Oh, I want to be a cook in fine dining," I tell them, "If there is only a position in the employee cafeteria, take it. Work in the cafeteria. Be the best cafeteria cook there has ever been. Prove that you can do it. Own it and showcase your talent. If you do, you'll be noticed."

In most kitchens, even the lowliest "salad girl" will get noticed if she consistently works hard and rises to the challenge. To chefs who want to move up, I say, "When the door's a little ajar, make your own opportunity. It may not be the opportunity or position you were looking for, but if you're talented and a team player and if you show

that you have the potential and the desire to learn your craft, the chef will notice you." I am always thankful that I had the opportunity to work every position in the kitchen. I worked in every department, from banquets to the café to fine dining. It made me a better chef.

Times have changed a lot in terms of managing kitchens and developing a staff. Some of this is due to better training and culinary schools, and unfortunately, too much of it is due to the influence of television. In the past, new cooks wanted to be part of the organization. They would come to me and say, "I want to work for a great hotel group. I want to work for the Mandarin Oriental and be a part of something special. I want to come to your kitchen and work with you, learn from you, and develop my craft."

Today, I see young people just out of the top cooking schools, and they come to me and say, "Hey. I've got three or four other people I can work for. I can work for you. I can work for Jean-Georges. I can work for Daniel Boulud. I can work for just about anybody. So what are you going to do for me?" My reply is definitely not what they usually expect. To them I say, "Good luck. Go for it." Fortunately, I know that Jean-Georges and Daniel are saying the same thing. But I would be remiss if I didn't say that I am concerned that the next generation of chefs is not developing the same fundamental skills that we learned as young culinarians.

Too often, in this day and age of the celebrity chef, too much emphasis is placed on where young chefs worked before or what school they graduated from. I think those are important qualities of course, but when I'm talking to a candidate one-to-one, I'm looking for that spark—the one thing that tells me this is someone I should be bringing onto the team. If he or she says to me, "Chef, I really want to work in this kitchen and learn from you. I'll take any position you have if you just give me a chance to prove myself," that person

certainly has my attention, even without the best credentials. And it is in those rare instances that I remember sitting in front of Chef Fernand Gutierrez, nervous and scared, but determined to work in his kitchen. I was asking for the same chance that this candidate is asking for right now. But I tell these young chefs, "If you want to learn from me, you must be sincere about it. If you are, then I'll give you my time, and for a chef, time is everything—there's never enough."

When I see the talent and know that the person wants to learn, then at this stage of my career I feel that it is my responsibility to be a mentor and teacher. At the Ritz-Carlton, I had my guardian angels. I had Pascal Vignau. I had Fernand Gutierrez. These were my chefs—the mentors who set me on the right path and taught me the basics, upon which I developed a career. It was a lesson I will never forget.

I always tell new cooks to just take the opportunity and create something out of it. I could have been a salad girl, washing lettuce, for the rest of my life, but I kept moving. My goal was never to be a sous chef or garde manger chef. I was always looking for an opportunity to work the hot line—to be a saucier. At that time, the saucier was king, because French cooking is all about the sauce. So you're at the pinnacle of your cooking career when you became a saucier. It was only after I reached my goal that I realized that I wanted to run a kitchen some day and be the chef.

When someone applies for a job as a cook, I'm not necessarily looking for a specific cutting technique or a certain level of knowledge. I can teach the technical skills. What I want to see is passion and personality—whether or not a person is going to fit into my kitchen. If I see that someone won't be a good fit, then I've learned that I should not waste his or her time and mine. I am also not looking for creativity. Most young cooks think they are more creative

than they really are. It's that learning curve they need to focus on. The creativity comes later.

When young cooks are looking for a position and I ask them to make a ham and cheese omelet for me, I don't want to hear, "Oh, I know it's a ham and cheese omelet, but I'm going to put some goat cheese in there instead of ..." That's not what I'm looking for.

I am also looking for style—style is something that you can never teach. It's the intangible element in cooking. For example, if someone gives me a plate with a mountain of food on it, then I know that person doesn't really understand the nature of cooking. But if a cook gives me a plate that may not be perfectly executed but is done with thought and style, then that is someone I know I can train.

Cuisine

A lot of chefs look at the end result first and work backwards. I look at the ingredients first and build upwards.

Whoever first used the words "seasonal cuisine" had to be thinking of me! I live by the ingredients that I have at my fingertips. Although my background and training are in classical French cuisine, I don't do French anymore. My cuisine style is actually similar to Japanese cuisine, but I also don't cook Japanese food. What I did was use French cooking as the foundation, and then, little by little, I started infusing my dishes with Asian ingredients. As my cuisine has evolved over the years, I find that I use a lot of the basic Japanese ingredients—soy sauce, rice, miso, wasabi, daikon, and seaweed. Like

the trained Japanese masters, I always keep it simple, with elegant presentation and an emphasis on technique. I love Japanese cooking because it is art on the plate—the confluence of textures, flavors, elegance, and presentation.

What I love about cooking is that it is constantly changing and evolving. For me, the market and the season dictate what I will be cooking. For example, if artichokes are in season, I think, "What am I going to do with these artichokes?" Sometimes I'll be flipping through a cookbook or eating at a restaurant and a dish or recipe will suddenly inspire me. I think, "Oh, this looks good," and then I start moving in that direction. I start thinking, "Maybe I'll make artichoke appetizers, or a carpaccio with artichokes. Or I'll make a salad of raw shaved artichokes." If I decide to shave it, my next question will be, "Who serves shaved artichoke?" I think about the fundamentals of cuisine. Should I base it on an Italian or California style cuisine?" Then I ask, "What goes with shaved artichoke?" I normally love it with really nice parmesan. And I'll need a citrus. Maybe a Meyer lemon or a yuzu. Then I add olive oil to round out the flavor.

Now I have a dish with artichokes that has the saltiness of the cheese and the subtle flavors of the olive oil. But I need a contrasting texture—a crunchy element. So I decide to put a shaved fennel in there. Finally, the dish is starting to come together, and I ask myself, "Okay, now, visually, what else does it need? Oh, I can use baby arugula to provide the color and visual aesthetics." And that's my process for how a dish evolves.

It's a process that can take some time, or it can happen instantly, like a songwriter writing a new lyric or new music. Sometimes it just happens, the words and music are right there and everything flows, and other times I work on it for days or weeks. Sometimes I can

clearly see in my mind how the dish is going to work. Other times I know I've found something special but can't put my finger on it yet.

What is it that sparks my imagination? Maybe I'm going to use miso in my dipping sauce or make it into a marinade. It's like playing a chess game and calculating the next move. I'll think about the texture. The look and the flavor of miso is similar to peanut butter, so then I think, what do I make with peanut butter? I use peanut dipping sauce for the satay. So why don't I try to make a miso dipping sauce, not necessarily for chicken satay, but with crudités? Then I'll add it into some of our dishes, usually in small amounts, first marrying it into the marinade or into the sauces. It's basically about layering. I ask, "How can I elevate that particular item, that particular part?" I never know what I'll end up with. Instead, I keep working and experimenting until I get it right. That's how an ingredient like miso can take me in a new direction.

It starts with the taste and then ends with the taste.

Great restaurants are great because they consistently produce outstanding cuisine. But I have learned that I also need to keep the guest intrigued with variety and new dishes. That can be a little bit of a slippery slope, and I have to be careful. When I go shopping or when I go to a food show, I am always on the lookout for something that I'm not familiar with. And when I find that ingredient or item I taste it, because it all starts with the taste. From there, I need to find the best way to incorporate that ingredient into my cuisine. For example, I love Japanese mountain potatoes, but I don't feature them as a main dish. It's not for lack of trying, but the first time I put mountain potato on the menu, my guests reacted in a way that I didn't expect. "Oh, it's

slimy!" they told me. "That's the way they are supposed to be," I told them. But I love this potato, so now I put it into a dish with other ingredients. I cut the mountain potato into small pieces and braise them in something like dashi. Then I serve the pieces of potato with a fish dish, like a branzino. In this way, I can layer in the ingredient and introduce it in my cuisine in a way that does not alienate my guests.

Ingredients

The direction of the menu and dishes changes with the ingredients I discover or rediscover.

When I'm learning about an ingredient, I study and taste the individual products first. I'm going to look at all of the different varieties of that ingredient to see what differences I can pick out between producers. I'm looking for a flavor component, a texture. When I look at the ingredient, I may not know which direction I'm going to take until I taste it, and then there's that little bit of inspiration. Something sparks in my head and points me in the direction I need to go. I never arbitrarily say, "I'm going to use this ingredient for this dish." For example, I'll taste different types of miso—white miso, red miso, and a blended version. Then I will taste individual brands. I'll try a mouthful to determine the texture, the grittiness, the saltiness, and the flavors that remain on my palate.

The best chefs know when to stop adding ingredients.

I admire chefs who make beautiful, wonderful dishes with a minimum of ingredients. It reflects confidence and considerable skill to selectively marry just a few ingredients and create a wonderful dish. Too often, chefs today want to open the cupboard and take every ingredient out and try to figure out how to use them all in one dish. "More is better" seems to be the approach. Oh, the dish looks wonderful, and it has great texture and color, and the chef will extol the complexity and composition of the dish. But does it taste good?

Great chefs are artists. Like great writers, they also have to be good editors. And like great painters, they have to know when too many colors detract from the piece. Successful chefs know their limits. They know how to use just enough ingredients to draw out and capture the five senses and then stop.

Sometimes a chef creates something in the kitchen but forgets the customer's point of view. For example, a common mistake new chefs often make is with presentation. They will serve a beautiful seafood soup with whole giant prawns, heads and all. The presentation is beautiful and very elegant, but the guest will say, "How am I going to eat that?" The prawns are so big they will not fit on a soupspoon and the head is still intact. When I create a dish, I always take the guests' perspective and try to appreciate their point of view. What looks wonderful to me may not be appealing to someone sitting at my table. After all, the dining experience is not about the chef—it's about the person eating the cuisine.

Tools

Just give me a knife and I can create something.

My favorite kitchen tool has always been a knife. I think that is a very Asian trait. I've never been drawn to special tools, especially the electronic variety. I don't need a Cuisinart. I don't need a blender. I don't need anything else—just give me a sharp, well-balanced, Japanese-made knife and some inspiration, and I can create good food. I have a great collection of knives that I've gathered over the years, but my favorites have always been Japanese knives.

As a chef, the knife is my extension—this is who I am. I discovered Japanese knives during a promotional event in California. I'd always admired Japanese knives but thought they were too expensive. I was afraid that I would put my knife down in the kitchen, turn around, and it would be gone. However, when one of my chefs de cuisine came into the promotional event with a case of these beautifully balanced Japanese knives and I had the chance to use them, I said, "Oh, I have to have that." I paid $300 for my first Japanese knife, and it is still my favorite to this day. It was only after I started using it that I truly appreciated the value of a great knife.

When you choose a knife, hold it in your hand—get comfortable with it. Once you find the knife that you are most comfortable with, you've found your best friend. Then the knife will speak to you. I use three Japanese knives. The vegetable knife is shaped like a small cleaver and is called a "usuba." I actually use this one most of the time. It takes some time to develop skill with it, because it is not traditionally used in American culinary schools. I have a long slicing knife, a *yanagi* that works well on everything, and a paring knife, which is called "petti knife," for delicate tasks. I carry those three knives with me all the time. Without them, I would be lost.

Did you enjoy this mini memoir? If so please email us your opinion at don@dongabor.com.

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