An Interview with Yoshinori Ishii
Umu, London

YOSHINORI ISHII is a prominent kaiseki chef. Kaiseki is a meal that epitomizes Japanese taste and aesthetics. It is never the same twice, changing with the seasons, the locality, and the chef's creativity. Ishii has cooked at two fabulous Japanese restaurants: Kitcho, the ultimate kaiseki restaurant in Kyoto, Japan, and Iron Chef Morimoto’s Morimoto in New York City. He is now the chef at Umu in Mayfair, London.

Corky White: How did you get involved with food? Were you interested in it when you were a child?

Yoshinori Ishii: As a child I loved making things with my hands, and I loved fishing. When I caught a fish, I ate it. That was the first sashimi I made. I love to fish; the eating came second.

CW: You became a cook, though, not a professional fisherman. How did that happen?

YI: I went to high school in Saitama Prefecture [near Tokyo] and liked working in kitchens, so I entered Tsuji [Osaka Abeno Tsuji Cooking School] directly from high school, in 1989. Over a one-year course I learned kaiseki and Japanese cooking, Chinese, French, and Italian food. I learned how to use the finest ingredients and the techniques to bring out flavor. For example, if you make a French-style fond and use sake instead of wine and negi [Japanese scallion] instead of onions, you have the very best base for a sukiyaki. You can learn from all cuisines. I also worked at night in an ikesu kappo restaurant, a place where the customer chooses a fish from a tank or pond at the restaurant. I was chef for deep-fried dishes.

CW: You went on to cook at Kitcho in Kyoto. That is probably the Japanese restaurant best known outside of Japan, and probably one of the most expensive. It serves kaiseki, which may be among the most demanding of cuisines.

YI: I continued to learn at Kitcho. It is a place where they pursue perfection—and I mean perfection. Let me tell you a story about Kitcho. They emphasize perfection in the service as well as in the food. The waitress pays attention to the customers so she can tell the kitchen when the next course should appear, never rushing the customer and always serving food at the perfect moment. One time a table of guests took their time before the rice course. They were talking and relaxing, so the waitress told the kitchen to stop making the rice. The cooks waited until the waitress signaled them to start a new batch, but she had to stop them again. This went on eleven times before the last batch was finally served, so important was it to deliver the perfect rice at the perfect time.

CW: Cooking at Kitcho with such an agenda must have been difficult. What was the trajectory of learning?

YI: My first year at Kitcho was spent learning to cut sashimi and to boil foods. I also learned about organic farming and local Kyoto vegetable varieties—like the round tama eggplant and the long, brightly colored carrots. Every morning I went to the fields to choose the vegetables for the day. My favorite jobs were arranging the display of scrolls, ceramics, and tea utensils for the restaurant’s rooms. I learned to love traditional ceramics, and I myself now make dishes and bowls. If I weren’t a cook I would be a potter.

The second year I was tsukemono (pickles) chef. I also helped prepare off-site dishes for ocha kaiseki (the tea ceremony meal) events, and I maintained the tea rooms at the restaurant. I loved cultivating the mountain land owned by Kitcho. It was a mix of activities.

In years three through five I was chef for main dishes. I also continued all the other activities, especially flower arrangement. During my last three years, I was kitchen manager and loved learning calligraphy to create the menus (I’m second dan level) and other traditional arts. Through it all, I fished. When I am traveling, I am so fanatic about...
fishing that I pack my fishing rods in my bags before I pack my kitchen knives.

CW: From Kitcho you were hired to cook in Switzerland. Did that present any particular challenges, making Japanese food in Europe?

YI: I was the Japanese Embassy chef in Geneva. The Japanese ambassador entertained dignitaries from many countries, so I was required to make different foods for them, not always Japanese foods. I loved visiting Spain, France, and other countries to eat their foods. I learned to create the savor of umami by using foods like balsamic vinegar, cheese, and tomatoes.

CW: Everyone talks about umami, but I am not sure everyone knows what it means. Can you describe it?

YI: Umami is salty but somehow wider, fuller, and richer. You can find it especially in kelp (konbu), but also in bonito, beef, and many other foods. It is a taste, or a sense, derived from protein in glutamic acid. Umami is very good for your health. But when you see commercial kombucha, like the bottled kombucha drinks in the U.S., most of them are just MSG.

CW: You cooked at Morimoto Restaurant in New York City for four years. What did you do there?

YI: I was the omakase chef at Morimoto. That means preparing the special dishes for guests who ask for the “chef’s choice” menu—the most demanding cooking that involves a creative use of ingredients.

CW: Spanish chef Ferran Adrià and others are known for so-called “molecular gastronomy.” Is that something you ever practice?

YI: Yes, in fact Japanese chefs often work through the technologies we now have to make things like soy foam for
sashimi. I am currently working on a project to understand the science of grilling fish. It’s very complicated. I’ll let my wife, Yasuko [Kuroda], describe it.

**Yasuko Kuroda:** The method of grilling Yoshi uses is unique. It is a technique that combines two kinds of heat, one from infrared light and the other from regular heat. Both are generated from *sumi*, Japanese charcoal. When *sumi* is completely heated through and glowing, you use a fan to blow away the flame, which allows you to control the heat that cooks the surface of the fish. At the same time, the *sumi* is generating infrared heat that cooks the inside of the fish. If you don’t fan the flame away, charcoal cooks the fish only from outside to inside, and the outside will be burnt by the time the inside is done, and the fish will end up dry, with not enough moisture inside. This technique can also be used for meat and vegetables. It is not well understood, because we don’t yet have scientific evidence. Yoshi is hoping to establish this technique as a special Japanese grilling method, once we know the science of it.

**YI:** Yes, I spent a year just learning how to control the fanning.

**CW:** *Such intense attention to your cooking is impressive!* The word *kodawari* is often applied to people who do things thoroughly and with great care, sometimes obsessive care. Do you think this word applies to you?

**YI:** [Laughing] Well, I have a lot of *kodawari* myself, but I am very flexible. Most chefs who have *kodawari* are inflexible, and this is a bad thing—they might say, “I only use bluefin tuna.” But we know that bluefin tuna is scarce and expensive. This is bad *kodawari*.

I use my *kodawari* when fishing, too, but fishing is very relaxing for me. I am always studying different techniques for fishing, like changing the bait or the rod or the part of the river I am standing in.

In Switzerland I used to fish for perch. I would catch them and make *escabeche*—deep-fry them, then marinate them in a mixture of dashi, soy sauce, lime juice, and shallots. With rice, miso soup, and vegetables, it’s a meal. By the way, the fish for sashimi is much better if you don’t eat it right away. Layer the slices of fish with kelp and refrigerate. Day two is so much better than day one.

**CW:** What do you think makes a good restaurant?

**YI:** The people who work there. Everything they do makes the place work. Service above all must be good. We should make the customer feel relaxed and comfortable. The chef only takes care of the food; he must rely on others to make the meal good. American service can sometimes be good, if it’s just for me and close friends. But if there are important customers, then you need that Kitcho-style perfection.

**CW:** What are you doing before your next assignment?

**YI:** I’m going to Montana. I will fish.