The “Japanese Turn” in Fine Dining in the United States, 1980–2020

Abstract: In the 1970s, Japanese cooks began to appear in the kitchens of nouvelle cuisine chefs in France for further training, with scores more arriving in the next decades. Paul Bocuse, Alain Chapel, Joel Robuchon, and other leading French chefs started visiting Japan to teach, cook, and sample Japanese cuisine, and ten of them eventually opened restaurants there. In the 1980s and 1990s, these chefs’ frequent visits to Japan and the steady flow of Japanese stagiaires to French restaurants in Europe and the United States encouraged a series of changes that I am calling the “Japanese turn,” which found chefs at fine-dining establishments in Los Angeles, New York City, and later the San Francisco Bay Area using an ever-widening array of Japanese ingredients, employing Japanese culinary techniques, and adding Japanese dishes to their menus. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, the wide acceptance of not only Japanese ingredients and techniques but also concepts like umami (savory tastiness) and shun (seasonality) suggest that Japanese cuisine is now well known to many American chefs.

Several years ago I discovered that sashimi was being served at Providence, the top Continental restaurant in Los Angeles. I wondered how this was possible. After all, when the late great French chef Paul Bocuse was accused of serving raw food in the Japanese style in the mid-1970s, he categorically denied it and rejected all suggestions of foreign influence because the integrity of French cuisine was absolute. Another great French chef, Alain Chapel, refused even to discuss “Japanese influence” (Blake and Crewe 1978: 72, 85).

To find out what might explain the sashimi at Providence, I began by looking for what Michael Cimarusti, the restaurant’s chef, had said about Japanese cuisine and found an interview in which he admitted that unagi (eel) was his favorite ingredient and that he loved aged soy sauce as well (Food and Wine 2015). I also remembered that as early as the 1980s, Japanese dishes had occasionally appeared on the menus of fine-dining establishments in Los Angeles. Further research revealed that chefs at a number of haute cuisine restaurants in both Los Angeles and New York City had begun to use Japanese ingredients and culinary techniques at that time and that some of them were serving Japanese dishes and had adopted the tasting-menu format inspired by haute cuisine restaurants in Japan. I then searched for what these chefs had said about Japanese cuisine in interviews and also analyzed their cookbooks and menus. To my surprise, I found that a few, when describing what they were doing at their restaurants, even used Japanese culinary concepts like umami (savory tastiness) and shun (seasonality).

I decided to call what I was finding the “Japanese turn,” which I define as follows: First, it was an extended historical moment that began in the 1970s and extended to 2020 when Japanese cooks became a presence at haute cuisine restaurants in Europe and Japanese cuisine influenced fine dining in France and the United States. Second, the Japanese turn first was manifested in France in the 1970s, then in Los Angeles and New York City in the 1980s, and developed further in the 1990s and early 2000s, spreading to the San Francisco Bay Area as well. Third, the Japanese turn took place just as fine dining was being redefined by nouvelle cuisine, the “new cuisine” that emerged in France in the 1960s and 1970s, and by the several regional cuisines it spawned in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. In fact, this reimagining of fine dining in Europe and the United States enabled the “Japanese turn.” Now, in the twenty-first century, Japanese culinary influence can be found at many top fine-dining establishments in these cities.

In this analysis of the Japanese turn, I use the existing documentary record, first, to identify some of the chefs who used Japanese ingredients, culinary techniques, and concepts between 1980 and 2020; second, to show how each contributed to and advanced the Japanese turn; and third, to explain what led chefs to do these things and what larger developments drove the Japanese turn. This approach allowed me to track the Japanese turn as it occurred in the kitchens of these chefs in different places over time.
The Japanese Turn in France (1970s–1990s)

The earliest evidence of the Japanese turn was the increasing numbers of Japanese cooks and stagiaires in the kitchens of the best restaurants in France in the 1970s. “In the seventies,” French chef Daniel Boulud wrote, “the biggest group we had, in terms of wanting to learn the movement of France, was the Japanese. Every kitchen had two or three Japanese cooks inside…. It was very interesting and very strange…. the Japanese learned, went home and then replicated the French cooking” (Kamp 2006: 238). Eddy Leroux, currently chef de cuisine at Daniel in New York City, had a similar recollection: “In the 1970s and 1980s, there were many chefs from Japan working and studying in France” (Gabor and Kawano 2014: 77).

David Kinch, chef-owner of Manresa in Los Gatos, California, who trained in France in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, remarked, “It was rare to see an American, or anyone else, in a French kitchen. But what is funny is that I do remember that every place I worked over there, there was at least one Japanese cook” (Friedman 2017). When asked about this, Kinch reported that in 1992 he saw Japanese in the kitchens of L’Espérance, Restaurant Guy Savoy, and Restaurant Taillevent in Paris; Bernard Loiseau in Saulieu; and the Hôtel de la Poste in Beaune (Kinch interview 2018). Michael Anthony, executive chef at Gramercy Tavern in New York City, added: “All through the 1990s, I saw a huge wave of Japanese chefs moving to France and staying there for two or three years. They often did not get paid any wages and lived together in one apartment. They became a wonderful subculture of the restaurant industry in Paris” (Gabor and Kawano 2014: 200).

Who were these Japanese who began appearing in growing numbers in French restaurants in the last quarter of the twentieth century? They were young Japanese men, and a few women, who trained first in Japan before going to Europe for more training. This was the path blazed by Nobuo Murakami (1921–2005), who started working at the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo at age eighteen and then trained at the Hôtel Ritz in Paris for three years (1955–58) before returning to the Imperial Hotel (Ueda 2001). Many of Murakami’s successors did exactly as he had done: working first at a hotel in Japan, receiving more training in Europe, and then returning to work at a hotel restaurant in Japan.

The Japanese who followed Murakami to France were introduced to nouvelle cuisine while training with chefs associated with the new movement: Paul Bocuse, Alain Chapel, Michel Guérard, Raymond Oliver, Roger Vergé, Jean and Pierre Troïgros, Joël Robuchon, and others. No doubt they found much of it both appealing and familiar. Consider the ten-point formula that Henri Gault, Christian Millau, and André Gayot devised in 1973 to sum up nouvelle cuisine (Mennell 1985):

First, reduce the cooking time for fish, shellfish, poultry, and game. Second, choose fresh, locally sourced ingredients. Third, offer shorter menus. Fourth, use fewer refrigerated ingredients. Fifth, use the new “processes and machinery of cooking, conservation, cleaning and comfort.” Sixth, avoid using marinades to mask the strong flavors of meat and game. Seventh, abandon the brown and white sauces that are a staple of the cuisine classique. Eighth, be attentive to customers’ dietary needs. Ninth, prefer the “aesthetics of simplicity.” Tenth, be inventive (Gault 1996: 124–126).

Nouvelle cuisine affirmed much of what Japanese chefs had been taught to value, such as the importance of using and respecting the very freshest ingredients in season and being open to experimentation. Their response was predictable. One of these Japanese trainees, Hiroshi Yamaguchi, who worked with Bernard Loiseau at his La Côte d’Or, remembered that when he first tasted his mentor’s cooking, he thought, “This could work in Japan.” In fact, the title of Yamaguchi’s first cookbook, Furansu ryori: karusa no tekunikku (French cuisine: The technique of lightness), and its recipes suggest that he did indeed embrace the nouvelle cuisine approach (Yamaguchi 2007).

Why were there so many Japanese doing stages in French restaurants from the 1970s onward? First, culinary school enrollments in Japan jumped dramatically in the early 1970s, and this, according to Hidenori Yamauchi, director of the Tsuji Culinary Academy in Japan, was due to the impact of the foreign chefs and restaurants at the 1970 International Exposition in Osaka (Robinson 2007). To wit, the number of graduates of Japanese culinary schools rose from 5,054 in 1969 to 16,744 in 1974 and then to 20,899 in 1979 and remained above 20,000 until 2014 (Robinson 2007). Second, a stage in Europe became an established part of a Japanese culinary student’s training. Consider the case of the Tsuji Culinary Academy, one of Japan’s leading culinary schools. In 1980 Tsuji started sending its graduates to France for an additional six months of training, followed by a six-month stage at a French restaurant. French chef Paul Bocuse helped Tsuji establish its first cooking school at the Château de l’Éclair, in the suburbs of Lyon, and a second in 1989, nine miles away at the Château Escoffier Reyrieux (Steinberger 2004). Over the next two decades, Tsuji sent a steady stream of students to France and by 2010 was sending 280 students a year to France and farming them out to restaurants in its 500-restaurant network in France (Robinson 2007).

The Japanese turn in Europe also brought leading nouvelle cuisine French chefs to Japan. As Michael Steinberger pointed out, “Japanese cuisine was a particular source of inspiration” for
these chefs, who “were struck by the simplicity of the presentations and the emphasis on freshness and returned to France eagerly to apply these ideas” (Steinberger 2004: 22-23). David Bouley recalled that “in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I saw American and French chefs going back and forth from America and France to Japan” (Gabor and Kawano 2014: 35). Paul Bocuse, Alain Ducasse, Joël Robuchon, and many other French chefs traveled often to Japan, ostensibly to cook and teach but also to taste and learn.

Several leading French chefs even opened restaurants in Japan, which required many trips and long stays. Alain Chapel opened Restaurant Alain Chapel in Kobe in 1981, and Phillip Jousse, its executive chef, returned to France to take over the restaurant after Chapel died in 1990. Joël Robuchon and Jean-Claude Vrinat opened Taillevent-Robuchon Château Restaurant in Tokyo in October 1994, regularly spending two weeks each year there, and in 1995, Bernard Loiseau opened E O Bernard Loiseau Signature in Osaka. By 2010, ten leading French chefs had restaurants in Japan: Paul Bocuse had six; Joël Robuchon had three; Alain Ducasse and Pierre Gagnaire had two each; and Michael Bras, Michel Troisgros, Marc Haerlin, Guy Martin, and the Poucel brothers each had one (Steinberger 2004). The setup at Robuchon’s L’Atelier de Joël Robuchon may even have been inspired by the counter seating in sushi shops.

As this was happening, these French chefs began to “discover” Japanese cuisine. No doubt, nouvelle cuisine chefs’ preoccupation with fresh, locally sourced ingredients, their avoidance of sauces and marinades that masked the strong flavors of meat and game, and their “aesthetics of simplicity” made Japanese haute cuisine extremely attractive. Even though they brought back much from their trips, David Bouley observed that “when these … French chefs came back from Japan, they just changed the vegetables a little bit, and they made tasting menus. They didn’t really know how to use Japanese ingredients in their cuisine” (Gabor and Kawano 2014: 35). Akira Hirose, who worked briefly under Joël Robuchon at Le Célebrité in the Nikko Hotel in Paris in 1979–80, remembers seeing Robuchon add drops of soy sauce to a vinaigrette for a langoustine appetizer, which confirms Bouley’s observation (Hirose interview 2019). Thus, at this stage, the Japanese turn was an additive and supplementary process, a matter of experimenting with Japanese ingredients.


The “Japanese turn” next appeared in Los Angeles in the early 1980s. Chef Wolfgang Puck opened Spago on Sunset Boulevard in 1982 and then Chinois on Main in Santa Monica a year later (Andrews 1987). If Spago was a quintessentially “California cuisine” restaurant, whose “feeling … is American, with suggestions of Italy and Southern France,” as Puck described it, Chinois on Main, in contrast, was an explicitly Asian-fusion restaurant, offering “the modern application of dining in the Chinese manner” (Puck 1985: xiv). Chinois on Main became famous for both its adaptations of Chinese standbys like roast pork and roast duck and its invention of new dishes like “Oriental Duck Salad,” “Chinois Chicken Salad,” “Whole Sizzling Catfish with Ginger and Ponzu Sauce,” and “Sesame Flavored Crab Risotto with Sautéed Winter Vegetables” (Chinois on Main menu, 1990s).

Puck’s restaurants were also part of a new American regional cuisine movement that began with Alice Waters and Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California, in the 1970s. As Puck himself explained, echoing Waters, “In the name of authenticity and absolute freshness, local products are being used whenever possible as we learn to depend less and less on imported goods” (Puck 1985: xiv). Clearly, locavorism and fusion were incubating in Los Angeles in the early 1980s, encouraging chefs to experiment with Asian ingredients and dishes.

At the same time, Japanese chefs with training in Continental cuisine were coming to Los Angeles. Several of them were sent by the Tsunoda family, who owned hotels and restaurants in Japan, to open La Petite Chaya in Silver Lake in 1984 and then a sister restaurant, Chaya Brasserie, in Beverly Hills later that year. Although these chefs began their careers in Japan, they had training in Continental cuisine, and they offered what was described as “French-Japanese” cuisine, which initially was more “French” but then leaned toward what they termed “healthy cooking” (Dosti 1987). The food at the Chaya restaurants in Los Angeles resembled the nouvelle cuisine that appeared in France in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the “California cuisine” that Alice Waters pioneered in the 1970s and Wolfgang Puck made famous in the 1980s, but with one difference: Japanese ingredients like “Japanese eggplant” and “Japanese mushrooms” appeared on the Chaya restaurants’ menus, as did new concoctions like “soy ginger dressing,” “plum dressing,” and sashimi (Chaya Brasserie menu n.d.). Nonetheless, sashimi already had appeared on the menu of Le Gourmet, another French restaurant in Los Angeles, introduced by a young Japanese American chef, Roy Yamaguchi (b. 1936), who was cooking there (Le Gourmet menu, February 1, 1984). Yamaguchi grew up in Japan, the son of a Japanese American father and a Japanese mother, and after graduating from high school he enrolled at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, as one of its first Asian students (Yamaguchi interview 2009). After graduating...
in 1976, he moved to Los Angeles, where he cooked at a succession of restaurants, mostly French, and ended up working under Jean Bertranou, a “nouvelle cuisine master,” whose restaurant, L’Ermitage, was arguably the best French restaurant in Los Angeles at the time (Roy’s 1992). In 1979, Yamaguchi cooked at Michael’s before moving later that year to La Serene, and in 1981 he moved to Le Gourmet in the Sheraton Plaza La Reina near Los Angeles International Airport. Yamaguchi described his time at Le Gourmet:

I had a chance to blossom at Le Gourmet. I could buy top-quality ingredients and have things flown in. It’s where I began to mix French and oriental culinary styles. … I wanted to be different from other chefs. … And with my background, it was natural for me to add ginger here and wasabi there. I had no idea I was starting something new. (Henderson 1991)

Yamaguchi also claimed that in 1980 he invented something he called “Euro-Asian cuisine,” which offered a framework for experimentation with Asian ingredients, dishes, and culinary techniques and encouraged the Japanese turn in Los Angeles (Yamaguchi interview 2009). In 1984, Yamaguchi opened 385 North on La Cienega Boulevard, just north of the Beverly Center, in West Hollywood, where he offered a full-blown version of his “Euro-Asian cuisine.” He used more Asian ingredients than the Chaya chefs did—ginger, Chinese peas, shiitake and oyster mushrooms, shiso (perilla), and soy—and many of his main dinner dishes were made with Asian ingredients: “Grilled Marinated Veal with ginger lime sauce,” “Mesquite Smoked Duck with ginger cassis sauce,” and “Steamed Whitefish with leeks and shiitake mushrooms” (385 North menu, April 1986).

In the 1980s several other Japanese chefs in Los Angeles experimented with the new fusion cuisine. Hiroki Sone, a graduate of the Tsuji Culinary Academy, had cooked at an Italian restaurant in Tokyo for four or five years before Puck hired him for the new Tokyo Spago. When he arrived in Los Angeles for a two-month introduction to “California cuisine,” he recalled that “at that time, I didn’t have any clue. I really thought American people ate only hot dogs and burgers. I was not educated, but that really opened my eyes.” (Lurie 2013). The Tokyo Spago opened in 1983, and Sone cooked there for one and a half years. He then returned to Spago in Los Angeles, where he stayed for four years (Lurie 2013). In 1988, he and his wife, Lissa Doumani, whom he met at Spago, opened their own restaurant, Terra, in St. Helena in northern California, whose menu included exquisite “Euro-Asian” dishes (Sone interview 2018).

Sone was not the only Japanese chef whom Puck hired. Another of his chefs, Kazuto Matsusaka, began his career in Los Angeles in the late 1970s. He was a teppanyaki (Japanese-style grilling) cook at Pear Garden on La Cienega Boulevard in Los Angeles when another Japanese chef, Hideo Yamashiro, who was at Ma Maison, enticed him to switch to French cuisine. Matsusaka’s training thus began at Ma Maison and continued at L’Ermitage. In 1982 Puck invited him to cook at Spago and in 1983 asked him to run the kitchen at Chinois on Main when it opened. In 1992 Matsusaka left Chinois to open Zenzero in Santa Monica (Parsons 2005).

At Spago and Chinois on Main, Sone and Matsusaka prepared what Los Angeles food critic Jonathan Gold called “Europeanized Chinese food.” When they opened their own restaurants, however, their offerings were decidedly more Japanese. One food writer remembered Sone as “one of the first Bay Area chefs to employ Japanese touches on a Western menu” at Terra (Bauer 2011). The menus from Terra reveal Sone and Doumani’s Japanese turn. Throughout the 1990s, their food used Japanese ingredients as well as Japanese culinary techniques to create their signature dishes. One was a tuna or salmon tataki flavored with either a vinaigrette made with daikon sprouts, wasabi, tobiko (flying fish roe) and yuzu (Japanese citron) or a lemon ginger vinaigrette. Another was “Broiled Sake Marinated Sea Bass with Shrimp Dumplings in Shiso Broth.” Their cookbook, Terra: Cooking from the Heart of Napa Valley, published in 2000, includes recipes that call for ginger, miso, and soy sauce as well as Japanese eggplant (nasu) and pumpkin squash (kabocha) (Sone and Doumani 2000).

In her review of Zenzero, Ruth Reichl, then the restaurant critic for the Los Angeles Times, noticed Matsusaka’s Japanese turn. Highlighting his use of tempura as well as shiso, wasabi, and soy sauce, she pointed out how his food had changed from his days at Chinois on Main:

Zenzero’s food is cleaner, more severe, less rich—more Japanese than the food at Chinois. Matsusaka is at his best when the food is pared down. His fish tartare is a terrific dish—wonderfully rich tuna chopped and mixed with bits of shiso, some wasabi, some soy—served on rounds of cucumber. It relies on the quality of the fish. There is a salad made of fried calamari, reminiscent of one once served at Chinois. What you notice here is the lightness of the fying, the crunch of squid rings against the crisp of slivered vegetables. This is a salad informed by the best tempura, and it is wonderful. (Reichl 1993)

When Matsusaka opened Beacon in 2004, the LA Weekly restaurant critic Jonathan Gold also commented on the chef’s Japanese turn: “Beacon is a new kind of hybrid—Matsusaka has moved his cooking back toward Japan, but toward a kind of Japanese cuisine inflected by the clean lines, big flavors and relaxed cross-cultural inclusiveness of the best
California cooking” (Gold 2004). This is the Japanese turn described by two fine food writers.

Beginning in the 1980s, Los Angeles became known as the home of a new “Euro-Asian cuisine” represented initially by Chinois on Main, 385 North, and the Chaya restaurants and later by Terra, Zenzero, and Beacon. This “phenomenon peculiar to Los Angeles,” according to Gold, found “Japanese guys cooking Europeanized Chinese food for Americans: small, exquisite portions, high-style lacquered chopsticks, and black beans on everything” (Gold 2004). When these Japanese chefs opened their own restaurants in the late 1980s through the 1990s and into the early 2000s, they did more than just use Japanese ingredients in an additive or supplementary way, as the nouvelle cuisine chefs had. First, they used many more Japanese ingredients than the nouvelle cuisine chefs had; second, they started adding Japanese dishes like sashimi to their menus and replacing some non-Japanese dishes; and third, they began using Japanese techniques such as tataki and tempura-style deep frying. Clearly, Gold’s “Japanese guys” advanced the Japanese turn in Los Angeles in the 1980s and 1990s.


Chefs at fine-dining establishments in New York City discovered Japanese cuisine in the mid-1980s and 1990s. Barry Wine may have been one of the first chefs to look to Japan. He and his wife, Susan, opened the Quilted Giraffe in New Palz, New York, in 1975 and moved it to Manhattan in 1979, where it quickly became the city’s most expensive restaurant (Fried 2002). One of Wine’s innovations was his tasting menu, which, he admitted, “looked Japanese” (Gabor and Kawano 2014: 270–271). His Japanese customers, detecting Wine’s interest in Japanese cuisine, arranged for him to visit Japan, promising, “You’ll get to see some Japanese restaurants.” This trip, Wine later admitted, is “how the Japanese influence at The Quilted Giraffe came about” (Gabor and Kawano 2014: 271).

Wine went to Japan in 1985 and “came back a man transformed,” remembers David Kinch, who then was working at the Quilted Giraffe.

He came back with boxes of plates, plateware, and serveware, and nothing was round anymore, nothing was symmetrical. All of a sudden, we had different shaped plates, with different colors, and they were handmade and had to be hand-washed. He worked very, very hard to incorporate a lot of these elements that he was so profoundly influenced by into the cooking he had going on. It was a remarkable take and caught us all by surprise. (Kinch interview 2015).

The result, according to journalist David Kamp, was that “the Quilted Giraffe evolved from a defiantly American place into New York’s fanciest Japanese American–fusion restaurant, serving yellow tail sashimi, Kobe beef, a Wolfgang Puckish ricotta cheese and wasabi pizza, and a $135 version of the ritualized Kaiseki tea ceremony.” Driving this change was Wine’s realization that “what we called nouvelle cuisine was, in fact, very Japanese … the small portions on big plates, the emphasis on what was fresh in the market, the taste of food unmasked” (Kamp 2006: 317).

Quilted Giraffe menus from before and after Wine’s 1985 trip to Japan confirm his turn toward Japanese cuisine. Menus from the late 1980s and early 1990s reveal that Wine used soy sauce in “Sweetthreads and Chips with Caramel Soy and Sesame” and created a “Wasabi Pizza with Sashimi Tuna.” He also started offering Japanese-style tasting menus, or what he called “American Kaiseki,” one that consisted of “Caviar Beggar’s Purses,” “Lobster Salad,” “Wasabi Pizza,” “Sweetthreads,” “Confit of Duck,” and “Tasting Desserts” and a second that consisted of “Duck with Relishes,” “Grilled Salmon,” “Veal Rolled with Tuna,” “Lobster Yakitori,” “Rack of Lamb” and “Tasting Desserts” (Quilted Giraffe menu n.d.). Moreover, diners even could create their own tasting menus (Gabor and Kawano 2014). Wine not only used Japanese ingredients in an additive and supplementary way and replaced non-Japanese dishes on his menus with Japanese ones but he also created a version of the omakase, or Japanese-style tasting menu.

Wine’s discovery that the “nouvelle cuisine was, in fact, very Japanese” encouraged the Japanese turn in that city from the late 1980s through the 1990s, much as the new “Euro-Asian cuisine” had done earlier in Los Angeles. (Kamp 2006: 317) Although the Japanese turn occurred for different reasons in Los Angeles and New York City, in any case, from the late 1980s and through the 1990s, chefs at many of the leading restaurants in New York City started experimenting with a variety of Japanese ingredients (Gabor and Kawano 2014).

As they did this, these chefs began to appreciate these Japanese ingredients’ special qualities. Michael Romano, for instance, found that miso was “a good foundation for other dishes and ingredients” and “a replacement for the basic starches in our kitchen.” He also learned to like soy sauce as a “meat essence without meat,” adding it to one of his pasta dishes, tagliatelli 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” (Gabor and Kawano 2014: 186). Wylie Dufresne, who had cooked at Jean-Georges and several other of Jean-Georges Vongerichten’s restaurants, learned to appreciate the “mild ocean flavor of kombu [kelp]” for stocks as well as many other Japanese ingredients (Gabor and Kawano 2014: 51).

New York chefs tried other Japanese ingredients. David Bouley discovered the versatility of a starch made from the
kudzu vine (kuzu) common in Asia and used it as a thickening agent, made noodles out of it, and dredged sweetbreads and fish in it (Gabor and Kawano 2014). Several chefs even tried *ishiri*, a fish sauce from northwestern Japan that is made by fermenting squid intestines for several years. Nils Noren described it as smelling and tasting like canned meat but capable of adding umami to a dish. Eddy Leroux even found ways to use it: It “can taste strong,” he admitted, “but I’ll use just a few drops so that it absorbs into the other ingredients to bring out the back flavor. I want a mellow taste” (Gabor and Kawano 2014: 81).

Some New York chefs adopted Japanese culinary techniques as well. David Bouley was introduced to the Japanese way of handling fish. He learned that certain fish were killed using the *ikijime* method, which entailed inserting a wire into the spinal column of a fish in order to kill it instantly and preserve its freshness. Once he saw the results, he willingly paid more for fish handled in this way (Gabor and Kawano 2014). Eddy Leroux used the *ishiyaki* (lit., “baking on hot stones”) method of grilling meat on heated chunks of Himalayan salt, which allows the meat to absorb the salt naturally while cooking. Even Japanese-style pickling caught on (Gabor and Kawano 2014). Who could have predicted that leading New York chefs, starting in the late 1980s and extending through 2010, would do all these things?

At first glance, it seems that what some New York chefs started to do in the late 1980s and through the 1990s simply repeated what chefs in Europe were doing. They, too, discovered that the “nouvelle cuisine was, in fact, very Japanese,” as the nouvelle cuisine chefs and the Japanese cooks who worked in their kitchens had found a decade earlier. They also started using Japanese ingredients in an additive or supplementary way and replaced non-Japanese dishes on their menus with Japanese dishes. But they did two other things that were different. First, they adopted Japanese culinary concepts. As happened at the Quilted Giraffe, they adopted the omakase or tasting-menu format found at haute cuisine restaurants in Japan, which highlighted the importance of fresh, locally sourced ingredients and respected their natural flavors. Second, they began to experiment with a variety of Japanese culinary techniques such as making stock with kombu, preserving fish with the *ikijime* method, using *ishiyaki* to grill meat, and pickling with rice bran and salt.

But the Japanese turn in New York City was distinctive in a second way: the city was a major site of the Japanese economic invasion that brought dozens of Japanese companies to the city and thousands of Japanese employees. Not surprisingly, the result was a new demand for Japanese cuisine. By the 1980s there were nearly two hundred Japanese restaurants in the city, including many first-rate restaurants serving food comparable to what one could find in Japan. What made this possible were wholesale markets selling high-quality Japanese seafood and shellfish and importing Japanese ingredients. The city’s leading chefs not only could visit and dine at the fine Japanese restaurants in Manhattan, including Shinbashi, Inagiku, Takezushi, and Hatsuhana, but also they now had access to a wide range of imported foods.

The Japanese Turn in California and New York (2010–2020)

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the Japanese turn became even more conspicuous in many fine-dining establishments in California and New York. Leading chefs like Michael Cimarusti began to add Japanese dishes to their menus, such as the sashimi mentioned earlier. Cimarusti’s case reveals something else about the Japanese turn in this century—it was also driven by Japanese soft power. In 2009 he was one of four chefs invited by the Japanese Culinary Academy to visit Japan for two weeks to “spend days in the kitchen with these chefs about what makes Japanese cuisine so special and Kyoto cuisine so unique.” (Rabe 2010)

Cimarusti returned to Los Angeles with the deepest admiration for the skill of Japanese chefs and the antiquity of their culinary traditions. Among those he met and learned from was Yoshihiro Murata, the chef-owner of Kikunoi, a Michelin-starred *kaiseki* restaurant in Japan (Ibid).

Many Los Angeles chefs did as Cimarusti had done, adding to their menus dishes made with Japanese culinary techniques, and a few even adopted the omakase format. They also began to use even more Japanese ingredients in their cooking than they had in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. Like chefs in New York City, they continued to use nori, kombu, *katsuobushi* (dried bonito flakes), and high-quality short-grain rice in additive and supplementary ways. But they also started to use esoteric ingredients like white soy sauce and fish sauce. In addition, seafood and shellfish imported from Japan began to appear on their menus: fish like golden eye snapper, flounder, and mackerel; shellfish like sea urchin and geoduck; and the delectable Japanese beef called wagyu. What made this possible were the wholesale markets that imported high-quality seafood and premium ingredients from Japan to meet the growing demand. In Los Angeles, for example, the number of Japanese restaurants rose from 106 to 160 between 1995 and 2015, and the number of sushi shops jumped from nine in 1995 to forty-eight in 2015, an increase of 273 percent. In 2014, there were 115 sushi shops in Los Angeles, and it was now possible, according to one sushi
master, to have seafood flown in overnight from Tokyo (Naruke personal communication 2019).

Chef Josef Centeno was one of the first to do all of these things at his restaurant Orsa & Winston, which opened on Fourth Street in downtown Los Angeles in 2013 and recently was awarded a Michelin star (Centeno interview 2018; Michelin 2019). His menus follow the tasting-menu format typical of haute cuisine restaurants in Japan. A menu from February 6, 2016, offered the following courses:

kinmedai crudo, mulled thompson grape, gooseberry chawanmushi, winter citrus, uni, caviar, sunchoke shiso ragoutoni “carbonara,” beef lardon, chestnut soup of winter squash, scallop, asian pear, kamut, red currant wagyu ribeye, garnet yam-tot, celery root—creamied spigarello gianduja, miso caramel, vanilla cream, winter herbs

A close reading of this menu reveals Asian ingredients (kinmedai [golden-eye snapper], uni [sea urchin], shiso, Asian pear, wagyu ribeye, and miso) as well as a Japanese dish—chawanmushi (a steamed custard made with eggs and dashi). Orsa & Winston’s menus from 2016 through 2018 confirm that Centeno consistently used several different kinds of Japanese fish and shellfish, including aji (jack), uni and mirugai (gaper clam), as well as a variety of vegetables, mushrooms, and fruit: maitake (hen-of-the-woods) mushrooms, shishito (sweet green peppers), shiso, turnips, and yuzu.9 Also prominent on his menus is Satsuki rice—a high-quality short-grain rice developed by the former Los Angeles sushi chef Morihiro Onodera and a Japanese farmer in Rocha, Uruguay—that Centeno uses to make rice porridge (okayu) (Hallock 2014). The porridge and chawanmushi are, of course, Japanese dishes. His use of a wide array of Japanese ingredients and culinary techniques to make Japanese dishes, as well as his embrace of the omakase menu format, is typical of this stage of the Japanese turn.

Another Los Angeles chef, Michael Voltaggio, exhibited the modernist edge of the Japanese turn at Ink, the restaurant he opened on Melrose Avenue in 2011. Like Centeno, he used the usual Japanese ingredients in additive and supplementary ways. But he also used unusual ingredients like yamanomio (Japanese mountain yam), which he apparently learned about from Nobuyuki Matsuhisa, the chef-owner of Matsuhisa and the Nobu restaurants.10 Voltaggio even made his own soba (buckwheat noodles). He had cooked for a time at Bazaar, the José Andrés outpost in the Hotel Nikko in Beverly Hills, and was introduced to the basics of the new molecular gastronomy, which may explain his deconstruction of Japanese dishes.11 A striking example was his version of a Japanese pub standard, shishito peppers topped with katsuobushi (dried bonito) flakes. His version, “Shishito Peppers, Bonito Sand, Tofu Mayonnaise,” consisted of grilled shishito peppers topped with a granular “katsuobushi sand” made from dried bonito flakes and served with a dollop of “tofu mayonnaise.” It was a Japanese dish made with Japanese ingredients and state-of-the-field modernist culinary techniques. The sheer creativity of Voltaggio’s modernist reading of this dish is stunning.12

In northern California, Hiroki Sone and Lissa Doumani, the chef-owners of Terra, continued to use Japanese ingredients and techniques to make Japanese dishes, but they did even more (Terra menu, August 26, 2012). At Ame, the restaurant they opened in 2005 in the St. Regis Hotel in San Francisco, they replaced typical Italian dishes with daringly brilliant and novel Japanese ones. One example from the “From the Raw Bar” section of the menu was “Lissa’s Staff Meal: Cuttlefish Noodles Tossed with Sea Urchin, Quail Egg, Umani Soy Sauce and Wasabi,” to which could be added “Optional Sonoma Tezukuri Natto (Fermented Soybeans).” Who could have imagined that handmade natto would be served at a restaurant in one of San Francisco’s toniest hotels.13 The “Appetizer” section featured a dish made with imported Japanese oysters, “Agedashi of Miyagi Oysters in Dashi Broth with Wakame Seaweed, Momiji Oroshi and Trout Roe,” and their version of a Japanese standard, “Chawan Mushi’ Japanese Savory Custard with Lobster, Sea Urchin, Shitake and Mutsuba Sauce,” that became one of the restaurant’s signature dishes (Ame, winter menu, 2013).

A second feature of this stage of the Japanese turn is that chefs previously not serving anything resembling Japanese dishes began to use Japanese ingredients. The best illustration of this may be Carlos Salgado, a fine Mexican American chef and one of the leaders of the “Alta California cuisine” movement (Esparza 2017). Salgado jumped to culinary prominence in 2016 when Taco María, his small, twenty-four-seat restaurant located in Costa Mesa, California, was ranked fifth by the then-Los Angeles Times restaurant critic, Jonathan Gold (Gold 2016). Then in 2018, Gold named Taco María the restaurant of the year, and it won a Michelin star in 2019 (Gold 2018; Michelin 2019). Salgado’s dinner menu is clearly Mexican, consisting of exquisitely prepared moles, tamales, chile rellenos, and tortillas made from a blue heirloom corn sourced from a secret producer in Mexico.14 But he admitted that he routinely uses Japanese ingredients like kombu, white soy sauce, and miso and even dashi to add umami to his culinary creations (Salgado interview 2018).

In New York City, Michael Anthony, the executive chef at Gramercy Tavern, makes traditional American dishes, often with Japanese ingredients and culinary techniques. A close
reading of his Gramercy Tavern Cookbook confirms his use of dried bonito flakes, kombu, miso, and panko (Japanese bread crumbs) (Anthony 2013). Anthony pickles vegetables in a Japanese way using nuka (rice bran) and adds them to scallop and duck liver dishes. He also makes a mushroom purée to which he adds marinated kombu, giving it “an indescribable, slightly smooth mouthfeel from the umami” imparted by the kombu dashi (Dai-ichi Tsushinsha 2014: 53). How chefs like Anthony, Salgado, and Centeno are using Japanese ingredients and culinary techniques suggests that Japanese cuisine is now well known to many American chefs.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, there is evidence of a deeper understanding of Japanese cuisine, the third feature of this stage of the Japanese turn. For example, much of what David Kinch serves at his Michelin-starred restaurant Manresa in Los Gatos, California, is made with an array of Japanese ingredients. Recipes in his cookbook, Manresa: An Edible Reflection, call for not only different kinds of soy sauce, ginger, nori, rice wine vinegar, sushi rice, shiitake mushrooms, shiso, tofu, and wakame (a brown seaweed) but also four kinds of kombu (Kinch and Muhlke 2013). When I asked him about his use of rishiri kombu, a premium kombu from northern Japan, Kinch explained that he uses it to make ichiban dashi, the primary stock, but to be able to use this particular kombu, he has to filter local water to achieve the softness of Kyoto’s legendary water.15 When asked about his use of battera kombu, another Japanese variety, he said that for visual effect and acidity, he pickled it before adding it to a dish (Kinch interview 2018).

Kinch’s knowledge of Japanese ingredients and culinary techniques is the result of a year spent working at restaurants in Japan and a two-week trip to Japan in 2009 as the guest of the Japanese Culinary Academy and part of the same foursome that included Michael Cimarusti, the Los Angeles chef, and two leading Scandinavian chefs, René Redzepi and Hans Välimäki (Kinch interview 2018). Like them, he is quick to admit that he has learned a lot from Japanese chefs (Mind of a Chef 2015).

Kinch is a master of umami. “Umami,” he wrote recently, “became an important factor for the balance of flavor in all of my dishes.” One of his favorite umami-enhancing ingredients is dashi, which has a “subtlety and delicacy” that allows one to do almost anything with it:

I use dashi as a seasoning and a base which serves as a versatile blank slate, delicately infusing all sorts of dishes. A very important thing about umami is the synergy between ingredients. I emphasize this because if the kombu equals one and the katsuobushi (dried bonito flakes) equals one, when you put them together then it’s NOT two, it’s FOUR or FIVE. The combination of them has a synergistic quality. (Dai-ichi Tsushinsha 2014: 62)

Kinch finishes many of his dishes with a dressing made with white dashi and extra-virgin olive oil, which may “seem like an unlikely combination for finishing the dish … but it is one of my favorite dressings” (Kinch and Muhlke 2013: 62).

Kinch also uses his familiarity with Japanese ingredients and culinary techniques to invent new dishes. The “bonito butter” he serves with squash shoots and pole beans is a good example. “Our bonito butter reframes the best characteristic of dashi in a Western context,” he explained.

The result is one of those special dish components that magnifies the deliciousness of whatever it comes in contact with. … The decidedly untraditional steps that we take include reducing the dashi base while the bonito flakes are still present in order to extract some bitterness. And then we add an unexpectedly luxurious layer of richness with butter. (Kinch and Muhlke 2013: 88)

Here Kinch does something that Japanese cooks are taught never to do: he reduces the dashi “while the bonito flakes are still present,” and he does this, he explains, “to extract some bitterness.” His understanding of Japanese ingredients and culinary techniques allows him to improvise.

Kinch’s improvisation shows that even though he uses Japanese culinary techniques in a foundational way, his basic approach is still French. This is how he described it:

I don’t want anyone ever to come to Manresa and to look at a dish and say he’s doing a Japanese dish. I want the underlying principles to be buried underneath the naturalness of my presentation, my personal style, and always with an emphasis on the quality of the ingredients. (Kinch interview 2018).

New York chef Michael Anthony would agree. He admits that even when he is “trying to find a way to cook a distinctive American style, “there is an undercurrent of Japanese spirit” (Dai-ichi Tsushinsha 2014: 53). But he, like Kinch, is careful to clarify that what he is doing at his restaurant is not “fusion” but a matter of using Japanese ingredients and culinary techniques to enhance the flavor of what he is making (Anthony interview 2020). These chefs’ careful explanations of how they use Japanese ingredients and culinary techniques suggest how far American chefs have come from the first manifestations of the Japanese turn in the 1970s and even the developments of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s.

In this last stage of the Japanese turn, many American chefs did three things that had not been done before. First, they designed tasting menus that highlighted the freshness and seasonality of their ingredients. Second, they used Japanese ingredients and techniques to enhance the flavor profile of their dishes without disclosing these additions or supplements. Finally, a few chefs began to use what they learned from Japanese cuisine to invent new dishes. The chefs who
can do all of these things were lucky enough to have spent time in Japan, to have worked with chefs who had this experience, or to have been introduced to the rarefied world of Japanese haute cuisine through the Japanese Culinary Academy.

Conclusions

The Japanese turn first began as increasing numbers of Japanese cooks and stagiaires made their way to France to study with French chefs in the 1970s and 1980s and as many of the leading French proponents of nouvelle cuisine started visiting Japan at this time, where they were introduced to Japanese cuisine. The result was the unexpected discovery by both the French chefs and their Japanese students that nouvelle cuisine shared much with Japanese haute cuisine. Initially, the nouvelle cuisine chefs used Japanese ingredients playfully, adding them as a kind of culinary experiment or supplementing non-Japanese ingredients with Japanese ones.

The second manifestation of the Japanese turn came in Los Angeles in the 1980s and 1990s. Inspired by the nouvelle cuisine and the new California cuisine, chefs at Spago, Chinois on Main, 385 North, and the Chaya restaurants started using Chinese and Japanese ingredients as additives or supplements to make what Roy Yamaguchi called a new “Euro-Asian cuisine.” When several of these chefs opened their own restaurants in the 1990s and early 2000s, they also started using Japanese culinary techniques to make dishes whose simplicity and lightness food writers noticed and identified as evidence of Japanese influence.

The Japanese turn next manifested itself in New York City from 1985 through the 1990s. In 1985 Barry Wine, chef-owner of the Quilted Giraffe and an advocate of nouvelle cuisine, discovered the affinities between his culinary approach and Japanese haute cuisine and accordingly started doing what the chefs offering a “Euro-Asian cuisine” in Los Angeles were already doing. Other chefs at many of the city’s best restaurants began experimenting with Japanese ingredients, even esoteric ones, chiefly as additions, supplements, and replacements. They also started experimenting with Japanese culinary techniques and the omakase menu format.

In the second decade of this century, the Japanese turn entered its final stage. Many top chefs in Los Angeles, New York City, and the San Francisco Bay Area were routinely using high-quality seafood flown in from Tokyo’s fish markets and ingredients such as premium kombu, dried smoked bonito, and condiments that were once hard to get. Many chefs also had accepted Japanese culinary techniques like ikijime and Japanese-style pickling and had learned something about the different types of dashi and their uses. Some chefs even were employing Japanese culinary concepts like umami and shun when describing their culinary offerings. All this suggests that owing to the Japanese turn, Japanese cuisine is now well known to many American chefs cooking at fine-dining establishments.

Joël Robuchon summed up well the full impact and significance of the Japanese turn. In a 2009 interview, on the eve of the third and last stage of the Japanese turn, he described what his L’Atelier restaurants offered as “Japanese-inspired French cuisine” and declared that “we can look toward Japan for the future of food; Japan honors the seasons, has the simplest ingredients and the most beautiful presentation” (Boyd 2019).

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NOTES
1. Providence was perennially ranked number one in Jonathan Gold’s Best 101 Restaurants in L.A. and was recently awarded two Michelin stars in 2019.
2. What was called “California cuisine” appeared on the West Coast in the 1970s and was followed in the 1980s and 1990s by the New American cuisine, Southwestern cuisine, and Hawai’i regional cuisine.
3. Although evidence of Japanese culinary influence can now be found throughout the United States, it has always been most apparent in New York City and Los Angeles, the cities with the biggest concentration of Japanese restaurants and the best suppliers of imported Japanese ingredients, fish, and shellfish.
4. Tataki (lit, “diced”) is a Japanese technique for dicing fish or meat.
5. Ikijime means “to force to live” and is also spelled ikejime.
6. The Japanese Culinary Academy was founded in 2004 to promote understanding of Japanese cuisine overseas.
7. Kaiseki, the most refined form of Japanese haute cuisine, developed together with the tea ceremony from the seventeenth century onward and is served in a multi-course omakase format.
8. Katsuobushi is made by first drying bonito, then smoking it, and finally curing it with a mold (Aspergillus glaucus). Its shavings are used to make dashi.
10. Yamanoimo is also called yamaimo.
11. José Andrés learned its techniques at El Bulli but dislikes the term “molecular gastronomy.”
13. Nattō is fermented soybeans.
15. *Ichiban dashi* (lit., “number one dashi”) is the first brew made with high-quality kombu.

REFERENCES


Chaya Brasserie menu. n.d. Menu collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

Chinois on Main menu. 1990s. Menu collection, Los Angeles Public Library.


AUTHOR’S INTERVIEWS


