



# Tetsuya Wakuda



## THE QUIET MAN

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Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, a young man arrived in a foreign land. He knew nothing of the language, little of the culture. He did know a bit about cooking. He worked with those who could teach him. He learned. He opened a small restaurant. Then a bigger one.

Pretty soon that restaurant was one of the best in the world. Even so, he didn't care to talk about it much. But if you pressed him about it he would say, with the humility that is so prized in his adopted land, "I'm just a cook. It's only food. Yes. In the end, it's just food."

Tetsuya Wakuda, the accidental chef. "I am very lucky, I think."

Australia is lucky, too. Tets, as he is universally known, was not intending to stay—he was just planning to earn some money before embarking for America. Famously, he knew only that in Australia kangaroos and koalas were 'everywhere' (he soon learned differently) but he knew enough of the language to tell a Greek real estate

agent that he needed three things—a room, a job, and English lessons! The real estate agent had a suggestion. He said, "Tetsuya, the best school is in the kitchen. They feed you, teach you English then they pay you at the end of the week. What other school does that?"

#### TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS

If this suggests that Tets found both his home and his vocation completely by accident, then that is not strictly true. For three years he had worked in a large Tokyo hotel, learning western food as well as Japanese. "All the basic techniques." But as training was entirely dependent on the whim of the chef for whom one worked, Tets was not convinced that cooking was really for him. Indeed, he had an idea that he might become a gunsmith.

But when he arrived in Australia at the age of 22 he found himself, thanks to the good advice he had received from his real estate agent,

again in a kitchen. Washing dishes. It was a start. And a little later on, when a chef named Tony Bilson needed a sushi chef for his restaurant, Kinselas, Tets stepped up. In return, Bilson taught him to cook.

"I started by doing some Japanese food ... and then he gave me the chance to do other things and he basically told me to trust my instincts and to try mixtures."

The kitchen at Kinselas was set up like a Japanese kitchen, "with a lot of Japanese knives," and Tets began to feel more confident there, not least due to Bilson's encouragement. He had the opportunity to test a lot of his 'mixtures.' But he was also learning that first of all cooking about technique, about precision and attention to detail. "Then you bring it to the next level; you work on taste and textures."

Tets worked. And learned. Then he moved on. Six months here, a year there, working with others from whom he could learn. He helped start a few places: Roses, Kytes, Ultimo's, which he could have taken over "but the rent was very high and the position not so good ... and then this place came available." A tiny shopfront in suburban Rozelle that he called simply Tetsuya's. And tiny it truly was (the downstairs dining room sat around 20) but from little things big things can grow.

#### ROZELLE

By then Tets had married. Which was lucky, because that meant he had someone to help him in the kitchen, and as the kitchen was just about big enough for two it worked out fine. His wife, whom he taught, did cold larder and presentation. The restaurant sat 44 people, and the menu was four courses. Between them Tets and his wife served nearly 200 dishes every day. He didn't pre-cook anything, and he changed the menu every three to four weeks. Cooking was his life.

But Tets did not cook for himself—he cooked for his customers. Having a restaurant is "about making people feel comfortable, about recognising your customers, and remembering what they like," he says. And what they liked

was Tets' food. As one critic noted, his dishes, "conjured up in a kitchen roughly the size of the passenger section of a stretch limo, are subtle, elegant, exquisitely balanced and in no way designed to draw attention to their creator."

Yet they could not help but do so. Though there has been much talk of 'fusion,' of 'Pacific-Rim cuisine,' these were not the dishes that Tets presented. His 'mixtures' were a combination of the Japanese tastes of his homeland and the French technique he had learned from Bilson, always exquisitely presented and guided by an extraordinarily sure hand.

Or mouth. Because for Tets, there is only one real secret to cooking. You must like to eat. "If you eat, you taste, so you know." He pats his stomach. "You have to be a good eater."

But simply being 'a good eater' does not account for Tets' success. His luck in finding himself in a country which boasted no great culinary history cannot be underestimated. Few places other than Australia, he believes, would have allowed his cuisine to develop in the way it has. In Australia, he says quite simply, has has been free to do as he will.

This is due in part to the wave of immigration that followed World War II. Europeans, particularly Greeks and Italians, arrived in the tens of thousands. Asians, too, and those from the Middle East found homes from home in Australian cities, and their influence permeated the culture, and the food. In a way, Australian cuisine was but a blank slate, to be written on in a dozen languages or more.

"Australia is a young country ... we don't have centuries of food history," he says. "Each cuisine has certain things you can do, you cannot do. And we don't have that."

#### GROWING

Because no one told Tets what he couldn't do, he just went on and did it. His passion was all-consuming. He had little in the way of family life. He had only Tetsuya's, his customers, and his staff.

Which kept on growing. Though Tets' success had been virtually instantaneous, it was nearly four years before he was able to expand

Previous spread: Australian chef Tetsuya Wakuda photographed, with fish, for a magazine feature in 2003.

Opposite: Tetsuya in the kitchen of his Sydney restaurant, Tetsuya's, which opened in 1989 and is regularly named among the world's best.

both kitchen and dining rooms. And even though there were now eight in the kitchen, if Tets was not there the restaurant did not open. To all intents and purposes, for Tets the restaurant was home.

He never returned to Japan. But nor did he forget where he had come from. In his expanded kitchen he continued to marry the flavours and techniques of east and west. He used no dairy products, because “people seem to expect that in a Japanese-style restaurant.” He served a lot of seafood, and in dishes such as his confit of ocean trout with unpasteurised roe Tets managed to create dishes that would long stand the test of time.

### KENT STREET

He stayed in Rozelle for ten years. The restaurant was full almost constantly. It won three hats in the *Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide*, Australia’s equivalent of the Michelin. Tets was recognised (along with Rockpool’s Neil Perry) as the country’s greatest culinary asset.

Though it would be a stretch to claim that he did not even notice, Tets’ focus was always on the food. He no longer cooked everything himself—he had staff now—but he could not help touching, tasting and testing everything in the kitchen. And still, if he was not in the kitchen the restaurant was closed.

But in 1998 he was asked by the James Beard Foundation if he would go to New York and cook. He said yes. He closed the restaurant for a month, taking his staff with him. And it may have been then that he realised that one day he would be able to let go.

In 2000 Tets let go of Rozelle, moving Tetsuya’s to a heritage building in Sydney’s CBD. The space was much larger, requiring even more people to realise his vision. He had always claimed that “my staff are my family and it’s wonderful to see them grow.” Here he would have to let them grow further. In a way it was

almost humbling. Yet he had no choice but to learn to delegate.

He learned. He taught. Then he delegated. He found that it was the palate which it took longest to train, but eventually he could say, ‘it’s not like I would do, it’s not the same, but it’s very good.’ And one day, after 14 years, he might even sit down at a table in his own restaurant and enjoy food not cooked by him.

He did. And then he promptly fell asleep.

### MONACO

It is fortunate that Tets *did* learn to delegate, because quietly, humbly, he had become a chef of international standing. He had always stated that he would not travel beyond his restaurant save for charity or for friends. But his status amongst his peers was such that there were many invitations he could not refuse. He was invited, for example, alongside such luminaries as Albert Roux, Ferran Adria, Daniel Boulud and Juan Mari Arzak, to attend the 81st birthday celebration of Paul Bocuse in Monaco. More, he was asked to cook for it.

He could not say no. Bocuse first visited Japan in 1965, and Tets acknowledges his influence in imbuing Japanese chefs with French technique. “I will always be grateful to Bocuse,” he says, because he “had an enormous impact on chefs in my native country . . . a profound effect on chefs and restaurantgoers everywhere.”

Even those in Sydney, Australia who had once dreamed of going to America, but have instead found themselves at the very peak of their profession. As friend and equal Charlie Trotter has said, “His amazing technique, Asian heritage, sincere humility, and insatiable curiosity combine to create incredible, soulful dishes that exude passion in every bite.”

Tets, if pressed, would doubtless put it differently.

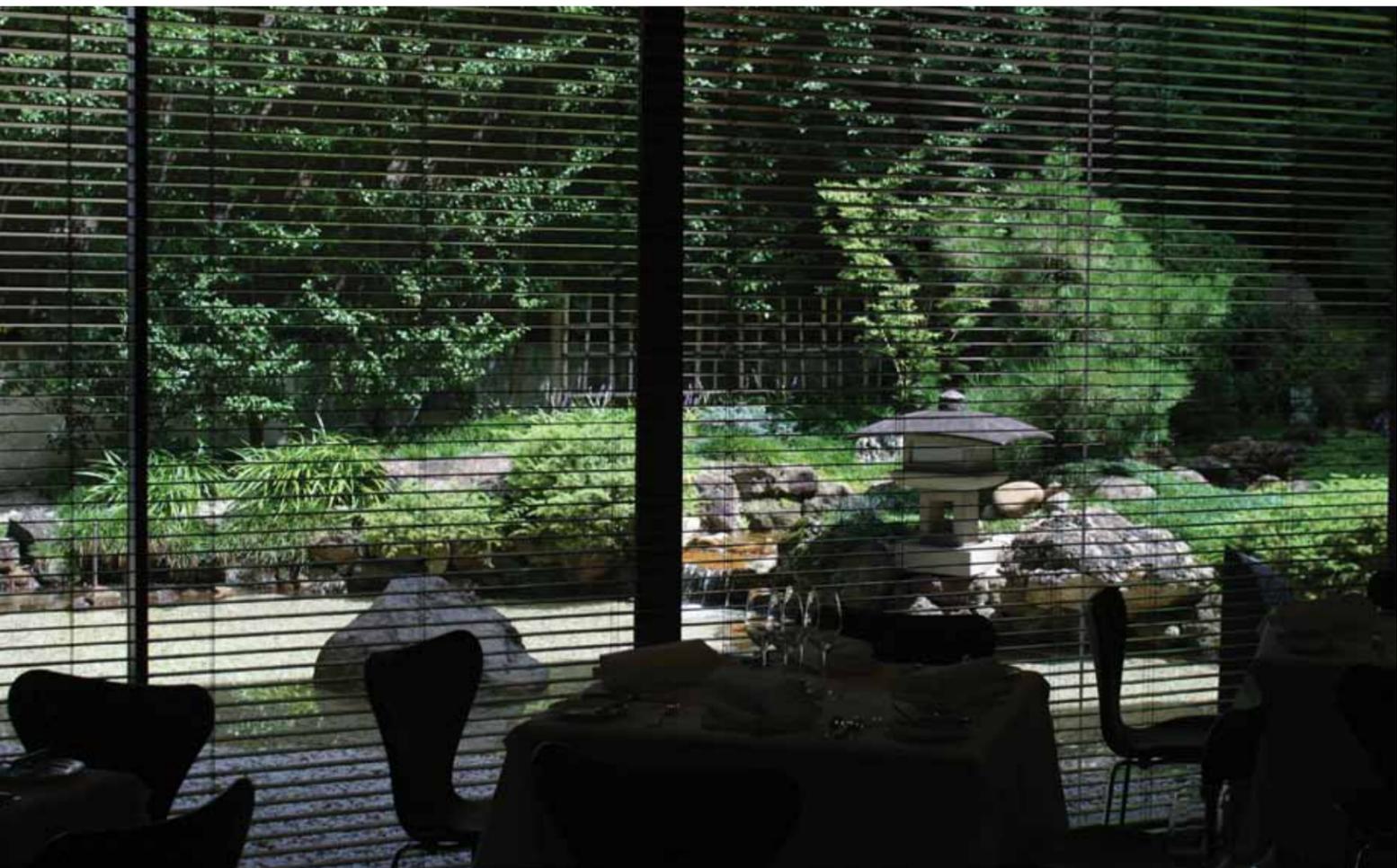
“I am not precious about it. Food is food. In the end, you have to eat.”



This page: Examples of Tetsuya’s blend of Japanese and French cuisine can be seen in his saikyo yaki of ocean perch (far left); terrine of Queensland spanner crab with buckwheat; and smoked ocean trout with Osetra caviar (below).

Overleaf: Tetsuya’s occupies a heritage-listed site, with the main dining room overlooking a Japanese-style garden.





## Confit of Ocean Trout

Skin a 350 g fillet of ocean trout and cut crosswise into 70–80 g pieces—they should weigh no more than 100 g.

In a small tray, immerse the ocean trout in a mixture of grapeseed oil and olive oil, coriander, pepper, basil, thyme and garlic. Cover and allow to marinate for a few hours in the fridge.

Preheat the oven to its lowest possible setting. Take the fish out of the oil and allow to come to room temperature. Cover the base of a baking tray with chopped celery and carrot. Put the ocean trout on top and place in the oven. Cook with the door open so that the fish cooks gently, painting the surface every few minutes with the marinade. This should take no more than 10 minutes: the flesh should not have changed colour at all, and feel lukewarm to the touch.

Remove the fish from the oven and allow to cool to room temperature.

Puree 1/4 bunch of Italian parsley with 100 ml of olive oil in a blender. Add 1/2 tablespoon of capers and blend.

Finely slice 1/4 of a bulb of fennel on a mandolin. Toss with lemon juice, salt and pepper to taste, and some lemon-scented oil or lemon zest.

Sprinkle the top of the fish with finely chopped chives, konbu and a little sea salt. Place some fennel salad on the base of the plate. Put the ocean trout on top and drizzle a little parsley oil all around. Dot the ocean trout with caviar at regular intervals.



# Borders

## THE TASTE OF INTERNATIONALISM

Tetsuya Wakuda has no Michelin stars: he is the only one of our chefs not to. But we must assume this fact is of little concern to him. It is simply an accident of geography, and perhaps fate, that he should have arrived in Australia and stayed. Had he set up his restaurant in any of the 21 countries—including his native Japan—which Michelin inspectors now visit there is no doubt that he too would have his stars.

Which is not to say he will not get them. In 2007 Michelin published its first guide to Tokyo, and in 2008 the Michelin Guide's director, Jean-Luc Naret, stated that the company was considering their options "from India to Australia." Because cuisine, just like publishing and tires, is global.

That Michelin should be looking east is hardly surprising. As Jean-Luc Naret says, "Japan—and Tokyo in particular—seemed the natural gateway to Asia, which is so rich in gourmet food and cooking traditions."

But what was surprising was that Tokyo

restaurants were awarded a total of 191 stars, more than triple the number of Paris. Eight of those restaurants were given three stars (Paris has but 10 three-star establishments) and it confirmed Tokyo as prime contender for the title of dining capital of the world. In 2008, when the star count rose to 227, with another three-star restaurant added, Naret told a press conference that "Tokyo is, and remains, the most starred city in the world. Japanese cuisine is dynamic, diverse, rich and interesting."

The rest of the world, it seemed, was lacking something. But what?

Perhaps a scientific paper published in 1909 by a Japanese chemist named Kikunae Ikeda is the first place to look. There one will find, extracted from seaweed, the ionic form of monovalent glutamate, or glutamic acid. Ikeda named it umami, and it has become known, after sweet, salty, sour and bitter, as the fifth taste.

Umami is a Japanese word meaning savoury, and it is this 'meaty' flavour particular to dashi

stock, made from kelp (kombu) and bonito flakes (katsuobushi) which Ikeda successfully isolated. The flavour it describes is common to such savoury products as meat, cheese, and mushrooms; in fact, nearly a century earlier, Brillat-Savarin's had described it as *osmazome*, which was his early attempt to encapsulate the main flavoring component of meat as extracted in the stock-making process.

But it is in Asian cuisines such as Japan's, where meat and meaty flavours play a much smaller part, that the understanding of umami as a taste with its own specific receptors—and hence the necessity of catering specifically to them—has become integral.

### EAST MEETS WEST

Of course there is much more to it than seaweed and fish flakes. We have seen that the integration of Japanese flavours and techniques with those of the west have proved remarkably successful for chefs like Nobu Matsuhisa and Tetsuya Wakuda. But these both ply their trade away from their native land. What is it that accounts for the Tokyo chefs' new-found success?

For an answer to that we might look to Kiyomi Mikuni, regarded by diners, critics and fellow chefs alike as perhaps the most innovative and talented non-traditional Japanese chef currently at work.

Born in Hokkaido, the son of a fisherman, Mikuni set out at a young age, going first to Sapporo and then to the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. Later he made his way to Geneva to take a job at the Japanese Embassy, and it was in Geneva that he encountered French cuisine.

He was hooked, and spent the next eight years working under some of the greatest French chefs; like Ducasse, Mikuni found himself a disciple of Alain Chapel whom, like Ducasse, he still considers his true master. But he was not destined to remain in France, and in 1985 Mikuni returned to Japan and opened his own restaurant, incorporating elements from both French and Japanese traditions. "As a chef, I specialise in French cuisine," Mikuni says, "but I am also Japanese and a

native of Hokkaido, which is an area famous for its kombu. The basis of my cuisine is French, but, in adding my Japanese sense of taste with umami, I have developed an original cuisine style. Umami, continuing from the four tastes of the west—sweet, salty, bitter, sour—makes a fifth, Japanese-born taste."

To accompany grilled fish, for example, Mikuni might serve a risotto of made with green peas and traditional dashi stock, or blend the flavours of rosemary and chervil with maitake (a perfumed mushroom) and a Japanese herb called kaiware. In fact, he owes his fame to the skillful mingling of two very different cuisines.

It would be a mistake, however, to imagine that all or even many of Tokyo's great chefs have French cuisine as the basis of their cooking. Michelin's Jean-Luc Naret has spoken of "a tradition passed on from generation to generation and refined by today's chefs," and of the nine three-star restaurants, four serve traditional Japanese cuisine and two are sushi bars.

Nor are Michelin fastidious about applying standards of decor, ambiance or even facilities. Located near a subway exit in the basement of an office building, the three-star Sukiyabashi Jiro does not even have its own bathroom. The restaurant is tiny, seating only about 20 people at its counter and tables; still, it is the stuff of sushi legend. Chef Jiro Ono is considered a national treasure, and his chefs make their way each day to the huge Tsukiji fish market, a short walk away, and return with only the best and freshest. In stark contrast, Hamadaya is located in a former geisha house in an older Tokyo neighbourhood, and the services of geisha are still offered as part of the dining experience. The food is elegant classical Japanese cuisine, with a strong emphasis on seasonal elements, the finest ingredients and service on beautiful dishes. Such are the choices available in the world's new culinary capital, and with an estimated 160,000 restaurants in the city, it is possible for the committed diner to find anything and everything inbetween.

Opposite: Jiro Ono, 81-year-old master sushi chef, shows off his famously soft hands, one of the secrets to his renowned sushi, in front of Ono's sushi restaurant, Sukiyabashi Jiro, in Tokyo, Japan. Sukiyabashi Jiro was awarded three Michelin stars in 2007.

## THE NEXT BIG THING

The first Michelin guide to Tokyo sold over 300,000 copies, and must be accounted a phenomenal success. But with success often comes criticism, and Michelin is still accused of having a French bias: there are three French restaurants at the top of the Tokyo list, but no Chinese, no Italian, no tofu restaurants.

Jean-Luc Naret disagrees. “There are 40 types of cuisine in the London guide,” he counters. “We are giving stars to Indian, Chinese and Japanese restaurants...” And if it is true that the company is seriously considering devoting a guide to Shanghai, as has been claimed, then certainly the tally of starred Chinese restaurants will grow accordingly. Or perhaps Australia might be next. Or Hong Kong. Or Macau.

Yet wherever Michelin goes, it must be remembered that it is chefs who make cuisine, not critics. Chefs such as René Redzepi of Copenhagen’s Noma, whose regeneration of lost Nordic traditions, cutting-edge techniques and assiduous sourcing of native Scandinavian ingredients have become the hallmarks of a new Danish cooking. So intent is Redzepi on authentic ingredients that Noma employs up to five foragers, whose sole job is to gather up wild produce, and his menu changes monthly to reflect the seasonality of his produce—horseradish ‘snow’ with razor clams wrapped in parsley jelly with clam juice, dill and parsley being just one example of this dynamic Scandinavian cuisine.

Another Scandinavian chef who is refining and personalising Nordic traditions is Magnus Ek, whose Swedish restaurant, Oaxen Skärgårdskrog, is located on an island accessible only by ferry, and even then only in summer. “A true modernist, Ek creates dishes that are pared down but complex,” says *Food & Wine* magazine, “as with his lobster carpaccio on herb ice accompanied by green-tea jelly.”

Or his king crab porridge in red wine and basil vierge with caramelized emulsion of pig’s blood and shellfish butter, lardo in crispy pastry and salt-baked celeriac, flavoured with some of the 15 or more types of wild local herbs Ek and his wife gather whilst out walking their dogs.

Nor is the combination of innovation and tradition confined to northern Europe. After learning his skills at various Michelin starred establishments, chef Alex Atala returned to his native Brazil to open D.O.M. in 1999. Here he applies French techniques to Brazilian ingredients, creating tasting menus that might include a codfish brandade in a black bean reduction, or filhote—a type of catfish—in a manioc crust, or a salad of pumpkin, crayfish and squid with Amazonian flowers.

And in Sydney, Peter Gilmore at Quay complements the restaurant’s unrivalled views of the harbour, Bridge and Opera House with innovative modern Australian cuisine such as his signature ‘sea pearls’, individual balls of smoked eel brandade encased with slow braised octopus tentacle and egg white pearls, tartare of sea scallop with horseradish crème fraîche coated with tapioca pearls, silver leaf and rosemary flowers, and pearl meat and abalone encased in dashi jelly.

Each of these chefs is engaged in taking cuisine in new and exciting directions. And there are countless others, in Argentina and in Africa, the West Indies and the South Pacific, combining new ingredients with traditional techniques, foreign flavours with local styles. Their efforts are impossible to catalogue, because only the very best and most passionate of them will rise to the level of a Ducasse or a Guérard. But if they are true chefs, in the purest sense of the word, then even if they do not go to Michelin, it is possible that Michelin might one day come to them.



Left: Chef Pierre Gagnaire of France gives a demonstration during the World Summit of Gastronomy 2009 held in Tokyo, Japan. The three-day summit was a culinary cultural exchange which examined global culinary issues while promoting awareness of Japanese food culture.