We love to hear people say "Washoku is great!"

Charms of Washoku, Traditional Japanese Cuisine

Part.2

Four young chefs who are active at home and abroad preserving traditional Japanese culinary arts came together from Kyoto and Tokyo for the second round of talks on the charm of washoku. This follows the previous session in 2013. Washoku is now a trending cuisine attracting worldwide attention. The panel discussed the appeal of washoku as seen by people outside Japan.

At Marunouchi Hall on September 27, 2014

Panelists

Takuji Takahashi
Third-generation owner and chef at Kinobu, in Kyoto.

Born in 1968. After graduating from university, he trained in Tokyo Kitcho in Tokyo. His culinary style of adopting new theory and methods has been widely praised. He is also a certified senior sommelier and well versed in wine. Kinobu is a *ryotei* (prestigious and well-established traditional Japanese restaurant) located in a traditional Gion Festival neighborhood.

Hisato Nakahigashi
Fourth-generation owner and chef at Miyamaso, in Kyoto.

Born in 1969. After graduating from high school, he studied hotel management and service in France. After returning to Japan, he trained at Tsuruko in Kanazawa. He offers a new style of *tsumikusa* cuisine with a preparation based on freshly-harvested wild plants and seasonal vegetables. Miyamaso is a *ryotei* nestled in the rustic natural setting of Hanase, Kyoto.

Yoshihiro Takahashi
Fifteenth-generation chef at Hyotei, in Kyoto.

Born in 1974. After graduating from university, he trained in Kanazawa. He then returned to Kyoto to work under his father, Eiichi, the 14th-generation owner and chef at Hyotei. He carries on the practice of traditional Japanese cuisine based on multi-course *kaiseki* dinners. Hyotei has a 400-year history, and is located near Nanzenji Temple in Kyoto.

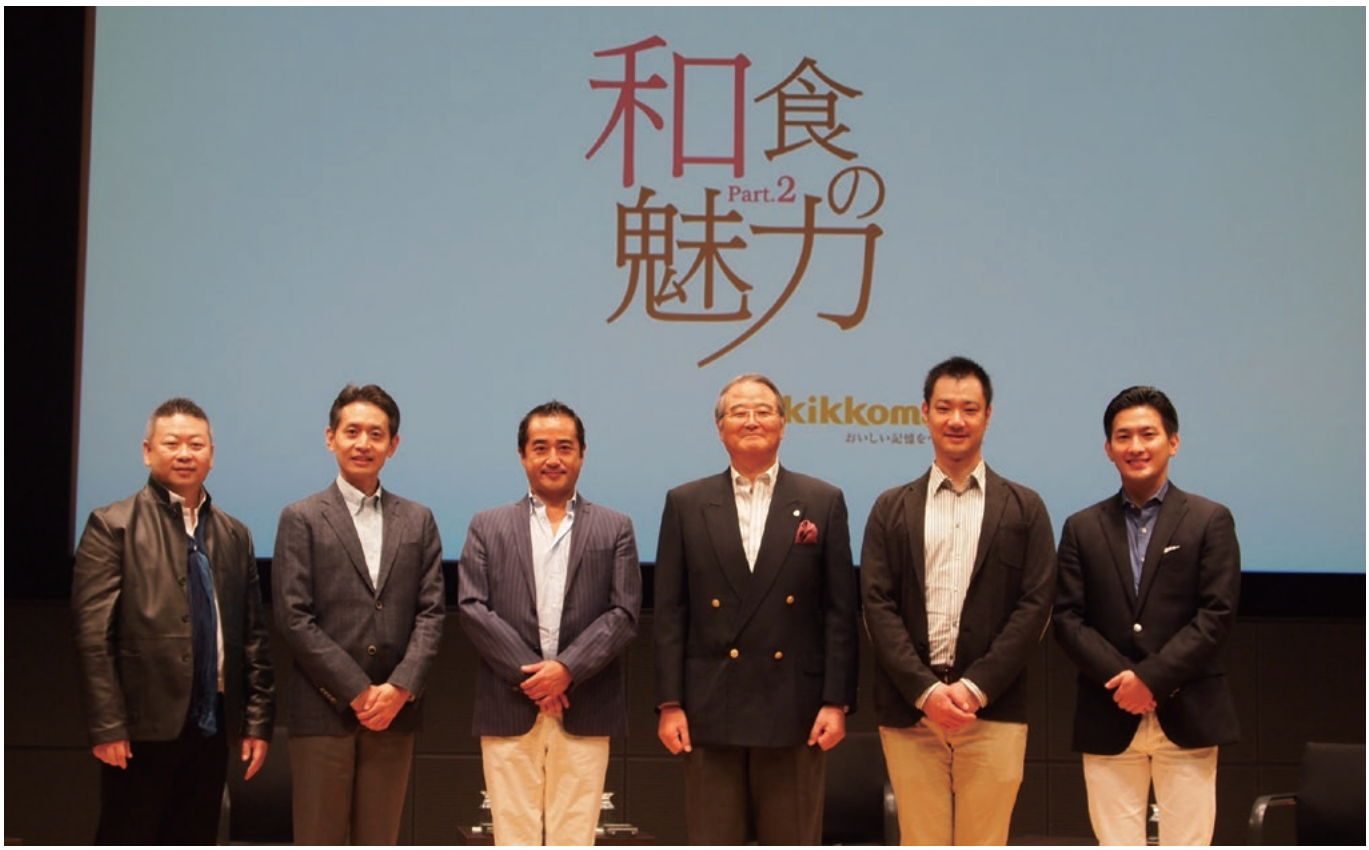
Naoyuki Yanagihara
Successor at Kinsaryu Culinary Discipline and vice-president of Yanagihara School of Traditional Japanese Cuisine.

Born in 1979. After graduating from university, he worked for a food manufacturer. Thereafter, he experienced working in the galley of a Dutch sailing vessel as the only Asian crewmember. Currently, alongside his father, Kazunari, he teaches the study of Japanese cuisine and *cha-kaiseki* (meals served in formal tea ceremonies) at their cooking school in Akasaka, Tokyo.

Moderator

Hitoshi Kakizawa
Food business consultant

Born in 1967. Trained at Tsuruya in Osaka. After working as executive chef at the Japanese Embassy in Washington, DC, he succeeded his father as the 2nd-generation chef and owner of a Japanese restaurant in Toranomon, in Tokyo. He also served as the general manager at MURASAKI, a restaurant operated by Kikkoman at the Japan Industry Pavilion during Expo 2010 Shanghai China.



H. KAKIZAWA: First let me introduce the topic of today's discussion. Washoku is integral to our lives and extremely important to us, but we often forget about its existence, like water and air. We would like the chefs to talk how they feel about washoku. And we would also like to hear what their experiences overseas tell them about how washoku is perceived by non-Japanese. Let's begin by asking each of you to share your thoughts on washoku's inscription in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List.

T. TAKAHASHI: You may think that the inscription of washoku in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List will not change anything in your life, as it will not affect the way to prepare miso soup or rice. But the inscription itself is enormously significant, as it shows that Japan's food culture has gained global recognition. It has made our daily meals an opportunity to be more aware of our identity as Japanese, rather than simply being a source of nutrition or a way to fill our stomachs. Washoku is essentially a cuisine that uses *kombu* kelp. In fact, the use of kombu as an ingredient is uniquely Japanese. In the rest of the world, kombu is mostly discarded or composted. A distinctive feature of Japanese cuisine is *dashi*-soup stock made with kombu and *katsuobushi* (dried bonito) shavings. This is a striking characteristic of Japanese cuisine. Dashi tastes even better with a hint of soy sauce added. It is really quite significant that people rediscover Japanese cuisine as such.

H. NAKAHIGASHI: I think the more challenging part will be after inscription. The inscription has brought global attention not only to Japan's culture and cuisine, but also to the spirit of the Japanese. For instance, settings for washoku often include a hanging scroll and *ikebana* flower arrangements that reflect the season. Such considerations will also spread overseas along with washoku, which will bring even more attention to Japan from around the world.

Y. TAKAHASHI: I think the inscription was a good opportunity for Japanese to become aware of the global

attention being lavished on washoku. We Japanese have created our own culture by eating washoku. It is ingrained in our genes. I felt a renewed sense of importance that washoku concepts be passed on to the next generation.

N. YANAGIHARA: There are four main characteristics of washoku that led it to being inscribed as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. The first is the rich variety of ingredients. Japan is endowed with a diversity of foods, thanks to a landmass that extends across several latitudes. The second characteristic is healthfulness. The third is its distinct reflection of the four seasons. And the remaining characteristic is culture. One of interesting things in Japanese culture is the preparation of New Year's dishes. Think of why we have special dishes at the beginning of each year. For instance, three typically celebrative hors d'oeuvre dishes are herring roe marinated in lightly seasoned dashi, sweet simmered black soybeans, and candied dried Japanese anchovies. Each of these has a symbolic meaning (herring roe symbolizes prosperity for the family and a lot of descendants, black soybeans suggest good health, and dried Japanese anchovies symbolize a good harvest), and we eat them with these wishes in mind. This sort of cultural custom may appear strange to people outside Japan. It is based on our belief in the spiritual power in words, and how we place our hopes in foods. When I bring up this topic overseas, people show considerable interest. So, I would like to call more attention to this aspect of our food culture to people overseas.

H. KAKIZAWA: Thank you. By the way, do you know how many washoku restaurants there are outside Japan? According to statistics, there are more than 56,000. Compared with 26,000 just eight years ago (in 2006), the number has more than doubled. Washoku has spread rapidly, hasn't it?

T. TAKAHASHI: It certainly has. The primary reason for this trend is the improved distribution of ingredients. Participating in overseas events, I have noticed that the quality of the ingredients is steadily improving. The handling and transporting of ingredients has improved, and there are more Japanese seasonings available. It is significant that even less common side dish ingredients for Japanese cuisine can be found in overseas supermarkets.

H. NAKAHIGASHI: Some time back, I lived in France for about six years. There were no more than four restaurants in France that served dishes properly prepared by Japanese chefs at that time. The rest were Japanese restaurants in name only, serving sushi or noodles made by obviously non-Japanese chefs. Japan's culinary culture was little known to the outside world in those days. However, as more people learn that Japanese cuisine is healthy and culturally significant, people around the world who eat Japanese dishes have gained increasingly sophisticated palates. Today, there are good Japanese restaurants in many parts of the world.

Y. TAKAHASHI: Recently non-Japanese customers have greatly increased at my restaurant. In the past, many foreign customers couldn't finish some of their plates, such as their sashimi. Sashimi served overseas is mostly salmon and tuna, while the first choice in Japan is red sea bream. At my restaurant, we serve sea bream sashimi prepared from live fish, which is not rigid but has a firm texture. At that time, it was not easy for foreign customers to appreciate the dish. Today they clear their plate. I see the difference as a fact.

N. YANAGIHARA: Soy sauce consumption would be the best indicator of how widely Japanese cuisine has penetrated. I visit local supermarkets whenever I go overseas, and wherever they are, soy sauce is sold. The export volume is also growing rapidly.

H. KAKIZAWA: Thank you. The thing foreign tourists most look forward to in Japan is the food. I also hear that in questionnaires asking foreign tourists what their favorite cuisine is, washoku is inevitably at the top of the list. How do you feel about these changes in the preferences of people outside Japan, and their acceptance of washoku?

N. YANAGIHARA: The Tsukiji Market has many foreign visitors these days, maybe more foreign than Japanese visitors. The market is closed to unauthorized visitors until 9 in the morning. As soon as it hits 9 a.m., the market is so packed with foreigners that it is hard for us to walk. They are quite interested in the culture of eating raw seafood. They are also looking with keen interest at the big 200 kg bluefin tuna laid out on the boards waiting for auction. Eating raw seafood as sashimi was not part of their culture before. Foreigners

generally did not care for raw seafood or fishy smells. But they began to eat sushi as generations progressed, and it seems they are rapidly developing a taste for washoku. I think their palates are learning to appreciate the subtleties of washoku.

H. KAKIZAWA: Thank you. What image do you think people overseas have of washoku?

T. TAKAHASHI: First, they respond to the appearance of the dishes served. Many comment on its beauty. They say washoku is simple and has a natural feel. Second, they point out how the dishes are light yet flavorful. They also notice that all dishes are structured on umami, with hardly any oil used, and of course that they taste great.

There was an event in Moscow that I recently participated in. It was my second visit to Russia after a 10-year absence. My previous visit was for a food event held on International Women's Day, on March 18, where we served multi-course kaiseki dinners to about 70 well-known women. At that time, the only available seafood was frozen, except for trout. The trout was packed in ice, but its entrails had degraded. Ten years since then, Moscow now has some marvelous markets. They are well organized with separate blocks for octopus, sea bream, and so forth. In the fish tank, there were live Japanese spiny lobsters, homard lobsters, scallops and common oriental clams. The greater the diversity of available ingredients, the more varieties of Japanese dishes you can make. I felt that Russia was abounding with ingredients, so Japanese cuisine will develop rapidly there.

H. NAKAHIGASHI: What I know firsthand is that, across Europe, *yuzu* citrus is exploding in popularity and many chefs there are eager to use it. Yuzu is used not only in dishes for meals, but also in confectioneries. Now, fresh yuzu can be exported to the EU, and chefs in Europe are wondering how the Japanese use it. To explain how to use yuzu, I went to Spain. The venue was a Michelin 2 star restaurant in Barcelona called ABaC. The chefs there wanted to use yuzu and learn more about it, not simply because it was a Japanese ingredient or because it was fashionable, but because they were really interested in its aroma. The simplest way is to sprinkle the grated peel on food. But they were not satisfied with just that, and I was showered by questions about yuzu.

H. KAKIZAWA: How do people overseas view yuzu?

N. YANAGIHARA: People overseas are strongly interested in the aroma. Japanese cuisine is essentially composed of umami, while cuisines overseas use spices. So, they want to use yuzu to add the aroma typical of Japanese cuisine. Soy sauce lends Japanese flavor to dishes, but the addition of some aroma, with the young leaves of Japanese peppers or yuzu, gives a Japanese accent to the food. As yuzu has an aroma that can be seen as a signature of Japanese cuisine, I hope we will be able to bring it overseas more freely.

H. KAKIZAWA: Mr. Yanagihara, which country did you visit?

N. YANAGIHARA: I visited Israel. In fact, the city of Tel Aviv already has 200 sushi restaurants. A sushi competition between various restaurants in the city was held. It was the 3rd competition, called Kikkoman Sushi Master 3. Some thirty sushi bars and restaurants in

Israel participated, and each made sushi as the media and audience watched. In 30 minutes, each team had prepared an assorted plate of sashimi, rolled sushi and hand-shaped sushi.

H. KAKIZAWA: It must have been a huge event.

N. YANAGIHARA: It was indeed. Participating chefs came from many countries, including Asia, Europe, and of course Israel. Each team was made up of two chefs. I was told that winning the Sushi Master is a prestigious achievement. This is the winners' work. As seen from your side, sashimi is placed at the rear, with hand-shaped sushi before that and rolled sushi at the front. I chose this plate as the best because all hand-shaped sushi pieces were consistent in size, as well as hygienic. Preparation, presentation and taste were also considered in the judgment. The young guy in the picture is the 1st place winner, Meidan, a 26-year old Israeli. In answer to my question about how he learned to make sushi, he replied that he had no culinary training at any Japanese restaurant. He had taught himself by watching YouTube videos.

H. KAKIZAWA: With your experiences overseas, you would understand how washoku is viewed in other parts of the world. Are there any common points that stand out among the different experiences you have all had?

T. TAKAHASHI: I think our cutting technique will increasingly spread overseas. Cutting and cooking are two equally important techniques in Japanese culinary arts. Although foods are cut by a knife in the right hand, the left hand plays a role like a sensor, and should be identical in sensitivity to the right hand.

H. NAKAHIGASHI: Techniques are important, but what I think of first is how Japanese dishes are composed. Today, overseas chefs also pay attention to nature, and have begun to think about how nature should be incorporated in their dishes. While with Japanese cuisine you can directly perceive nature from the dishes and arrangement, with western cuisines it is rather difficult to feel the elements the chefs have adopted from nature. They should study to overcome this issue of how to express nature in their dishes.

N. YANAGIHARA: I think one of the ways washoku appeals to overseas chefs is how the fish is handled. The spread of sushi throughout the world was made possible by improved distribution, with ice and styrofoam containers becoming widely available. But, in Japan, fish has been eaten raw since long before the easy availability of ice or refrigeration. This was possible because of the proper handling of fish, and this is also the reason Tsukiji Market is so popular today. For instance, the way the ice is used and how fish is placed are important for each individual fish. It is a general practice that we place fish with its head on the left and its belly toward us. This rule was established to keep fish fresh as long as possible, as flesh on the lower side tends to go bad faster than the upper side, due to the entrails inside and the weight of the fish imposed on this side. With this rule observed by everybody involved in handling and selling fish, flesh on the upper side of the fish can be kept fresher than the lower side. So, beyond just knife techniques, I think this kind of know-how should be exported abroad more. When I visited France and some other countries, I found chefs were especially interested in the *ikejime* technique of paralyzing fish to quickly put it to brain death and remove blood to keep fish fresh. Even common techniques like this in Japan are received with awe overseas.

H. KAKIZAWA: I believe that, as well as with handling fish, methods of handling other ingredients should be taught as well. Before closing this discussion, I would like a few comments from each of you.

T. TAKAHASHI: The appeal of washoku outside Japan and inside Japan are probably different, and I think we have to consider them separately. Although washoku is now listed by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage, for many people overseas Japanese cuisine is still relatively myste-rious. Japanese cuisine is not

thoroughly understood abroad. So, I think it is important to convey the concepts of Japanese cuisine correctly based on this premise. Turning to Japan, washoku is related to our lifestyles, eating habits and our way of living. If a proper diet is not maintained, our lifestyles are disrupted. In order to maintain a good life, a proper diet is essential.

I also would like to say something about the oil left in the pan after cooking, for example in French or Italian cuisine. We cannot clean oily pans without using a considerable amount of detergent, which pollutes the water. As Japanese cuisine basically uses dashi stock without oil, used pans can be cleaned only with water if washed soon after use. If dishwashing detergent is used, only a little is needed. This is not only convenient but environmentally friendly, which is especially important to Japanese, who place water at the center of life. This is a feature that we can be proud of in Japanese cuisine.

H. NAKAHIGASHI: For me, the appeal of washoku is the chance to create a dish that makes me feel as though I'm coexisting with nature. I think being conscious of nature leads to protection of the natural environment. It is a fact that, today, Japanese cuisine or washoku is losing influence in the lives of Japanese people. In proportion to this trend, the natural environment is getting worse. We must deliberately protect what we are offered by nature, rather than overharvesting to prepare our foods. I think this mindset is key to the continued advancement of Japanese cuisine, and a source of pleasure when preparing delicious dishes. When we go overseas, we notice that chefs there view Japanese ingredients as being of very high quality, as well as delicious and nutritious. This could also be important for Japan's economy. Japanese cuisine cannot be separated from nature. By being conscious of nature, we can protect the environment. By doing so, we can live in a healthy balance with nature. I think people around the world are now paying more attention to this basic principle.

Y. TAKAHASHI: It is common among all cuisines that there are unspoken conversations going back and forth between those who make the dishes and those who eat them. The person who prepares a dish would think about the best way for the foods to be enjoyed and how they should be prepared. The person who eats the dish may wonder what the thoughts were of the person who prepared it, where and how the ingredients were harvested, what sort of ingenuity was involved, and what would be the best way to enjoy the dish. Both parties muse over the thoughts of the other party. No matter where the setting may be, whether at home, in a restaurant or else-where, the food will improve through more of this mutual reflection by both parties.

N. YANAGIHARA: I think the Japanese will benefit most from washoku's inscription on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List. Japanese cuisine will develop even more in the future, and what is necessary for this development is the cultured sense of taste each Japanese person has. This sense of taste is not innate, but is something that is nurtured and acquired. It grows as we eat foods of different flavors, starting with childhood. Today, if mothers do not cook, children can grow up on fast foods and boxed meals sold at convenience stores, which are mostly uniform and strong tasting. When these children grow to adulthood, they will have no sense of taste. Then, even if they dine at a fine restaurant, they won't be able to appreciate the wonderful flavors, and will be unimpressed. Dietary education from early childhood is extremely important. I don't mean that children should be given gourmet or expensive foods. I mean they should have foods with good flavor prepared with genuine dashi stock. For example, boiled spinach tastes great if it is soaked in dashi stock mixed with a hint of soy sauce. But to ensure it tastes great, the spinach should be boiled properly and the soy sauce and dashi should be combined with the proper proportions. Attention to these details in preparing a dish helps develop the sense of taste. This is true not only for the sense of taste in children, but in adults as well. I would like to suggest that those in the audience pick up some katsuobushi and kombu on the way home to make good dashi today.

H. KAKIZAWA: Thank you. Today we explored the beauty of washoku together with you, the audience. I think you have gained some sense of what washoku's appeal is, so that you can convey it to others and prepare delicious washoku dishes. We hope that you will think "Washoku is great!" in your everyday life. Thank you for your attention today. I'd like to thank the panel for your valuable comments.