On keeping business interesting



Chef Atsushi Numata discusses what led him to opening his own restaurant, why it's OK to learn as you go, and how cooking Japanese food is a lot like making hip-hop music.

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As told to Ken Tan, 1569 words.

Tags: Food, Beginnings, Process.

You're a native of Japan. Can you talk about why you came to New York?

My mother came from a generation of cooks, being a chef herself. My grandmother had a Chigusa, an exclusive reservation-only private dining restaurant. As kids, my brothers and I would spend our summer breaks there. One of the prep crew looked after us and got us to help with prepping in the kitchen. I practically grew up in my grandmother's restaurant. That's how I got into cooking.

Later I was producing music and beats for hip hop artists. I came to New York in 1988 because of the music. Of course, if you wanted to be in the scene, New York was the only place for hip hop. I was fully into music production then, and did a little cooking at home. Occasionally my chef friends here needed help, so I would sweat it out in the kitchen or come up with recipes. Soon I was getting offers to consult for restaurants, and that paid well. I worked in big restaurants as a line chef, too. My wife, who is also from Japan, was running a catering business then, and I helped with that. Slowly but surely I pulled away from music production. I still DJ, though.

How did you end up running a Japanese kitchen?

My wife and I used to live in the East Village. We had a catering business and always wanted our own shop. When she was pregnant with our first child, she'd walk around the Lower East Side a lot. She was a frequent at Essex Street Market and befriended a number of vendors there. One day, she was told there was going to be a stall available. Because Essex Street Market was run by a government-subsidized company the rent was pretty reasonable.

With our first kid on the way, we thought running our own business would provide a more flexible pace, so we jumped on the opportunity. Ni Deli was born. The word Ni □ means "Nippon," as in Japan; but also means New York, which perfectly summed up the duality of our situation—we were both native Japanese living and working in New York City.

How did the concept of Ni Deli come about?

Our first child had so many allergies that she almost couldn't eat any regular food. Soy is one of the main ingredients in classic Japanese foods—I mean soy sauce and beans—and my daughter was allergic to all that. She was even allergic to the wheat ramen, or soba noodles. We wanted to preserve our tradition and culture, and so we had to come up with new allergy-free and gluten-free recipes. We realized there was a wider audience for it. At that time, there was interest in allergy-free macrobiotic foods, but none that was with traditional Japanese meals.

That became the core concept of Ni: to provide traditional Japanese foods that are vegan and allergy-free, but at the same time updating the usual ingredients with local and seasonal ones. With the many Latino vendors in the market, there was no shortage of South American ingredients and produce. After all, traditionally Japanese cooking is about sourcing local seasonal ingredients, and I still use time-honored methods of preparing the meal. Experimentation and seasonal ingredients became central to our menu.



Ni Japanese Deli, Assorted sides

What was one difference in working in a big kitchen versus running your own space? You have a very modest-sized kitchen.

Japanese food doesn’t require much firepower. It can be done in a limited space. At Ni, we only have one burner and very little equipment. American kitchen systems are more compartmentalized with almost no crossovers. The fryer fries, and the dishwasher washes. Instead, I do everything, which is a good thing for maintaining the quality. I know some American chefs that don’t show up until after the prep, and who leave before the closing.

Even though it’s tiny, every morning I arrive and I feel fresh. It also has a lot to do with the Qi in that space—the energy I have created from scratch, with my own hands. Somehow being in the space resets me to the beginning; I get really humble.

Can you talk us through your daily process?

We come in the morning around 8:30am after dropping the kids off at school, and start prepping. Sometimes I would go to the Green Market in Union Square before to check out the new seasonal ingredients. Our bento box changes daily. I am always trying to invent new recipes, as I get bored easily. Sometimes I dream about what I can make with a certain ingredient the following day. So with new ingredients fresh from the Green Market every day, cooking up new stuff keeps it interesting. It’s really about experimenting on the spot—it has to work before lunch. Sometimes certain dishes, like our Okazu (small side dishes), don’t sell, so we know what does or doesn’t work. I still love them, though.

The lunch is busy with many regular customers; we tend to pause to chat and catch up. New customers are usually curious and want to know about traditional recipes. After the lunch crowd dwindles, I start prepping for the next day.

What makes a good bento box?

With just five different elements that make up a bento box meal, it must be full of surprises. What I mean is that even though the food looks simple, like a hijiki salad or edamame tofu, it is often made with layers of preparation and marination, which achieves complex profiles. The tastes must be different yet complementary. And of course the colors and textures must please the eye as much as the tongue. Like a good hip-hop song, there are many elements working in harmony to be successful.

What inspires your creativity?

Ingredients and the seasons inspire me. When you eat fresh and seasonal foods, your body responds. You will feel it. Your body works like nature—it responds to the seasons. In the summer you enjoy cucumbers and during the winter, root vegetables. That's the law of nature.

Whenever I see certain seasonal produce, they take me back to my childhood of helping my grandmother in her kitchen. I know exactly what to do because of those days. My mother's and grandmother's recipes always come back to me, but now I'm remixing them with my New York twists.

I like to eat out. New York City is great with its many different cultures, restaurants, and cuisines. I like to think about how other chefs use different ingredients. The city is a big source of inspiration.

What would your advice be for someone who wants to get into this? Do they need experience?

You can always gain experience after you open the business. Learn everything about the business and plan your vision. Map out how everything is supposed to work. You don't always get it right, but don't give up. There's always a solution.

We had to learn many things the hard way. We couldn't do hot foods in the beginning. Our first winter was a disaster: no one wanted cold food. But mistakes and challenges make us stronger. We're still learning every day. To me, many New York restaurants give up too quickly. There's a restaurant I used to go to in the East Village. They had great food, but they closed after three months. I'm not sure why. When you decide to start a business, make sure you have enough capital to sustain the business for at least a year.

We have been very fortunate to have the freedom to do what we believe in, and to be unique. People recognize that. I remember at first our Latino neighbors didn't want to try our food. "Oh, sushi?" With a little education they realized what we do is healthy. They have also seen our kids grow up on this food. We have a great relationship now. It might take a while, but eventually you will have your own audience. Building your own audience takes time sometimes.

From DJing to running a business to raising a family, how do you keep from burning out?

My kids play a major role in keeping me from burning out. Each day, they remind me of my purpose. Even though I may wake up tired, whenever I see them, I feel energized. They keep me returning to the kitchen.

Be passionate about what you do and keep things interesting for yourself. I get really excited going to the Green Market to check out the new produce and interact with the farmers. Farmers love and appreciate the feedback you offer. Then returning to my kitchen with my finds, I have fun with creating something new. It's like the old days of crate digging in dusty record shops, then returning to the studio to make good vibes with samples and beats.

Atsushi Numata recommends:

Dr Brian Weiss

Any works by pre new wave Japanese bands, for example Tokyo Rockers

Lonely Boy by Steve Jones, coincides with Dr Weiss

Nikkatsu movies, especially with Akira Kobayashi

"Big Kotta" by K Dub Shine

Name
Atsushi Numata

Vocation
Chef, DJ


Rice ball
Sandwich
Quinoa
Sea Weed
Noodles