

American Dream 2.0: Fresh, Organic,...Sustainable?

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“It will fall apart.”

As I watched my wild sockeye salmon *nigiri* disintegrate in a puddle of maple-infused soy sauce, I realized that Yoshi was right. Always dip the fish-side of the roll, *never* the rice. Keeping it together seems to come naturally to Yoshi, who founded New Haven’s first sushi bar forty years ago.

My first visit to Miya’s Sushi was during Restaurant Week in the city – a precious time of the year when your average college student has a valid excuse to step out of the dining hall, into the big bad world of fine dining. This is when I met Bad Tempura Geisha Boy, the Japafrican Queen and the Hot Headed Cowgirl. No, I was not in the latest bestseller of young adult fiction. I was at Miya’s, the only place in New Haven (and possibly the world) where cashew butter, shrimp, banana, avocado, honey, goat cheese and hot peppers meet each other on the same plate. I thought my friend was being too adventurous with this order. So I played it safe and asked for the grasshopper and cheese roll instead.

I happily got back home with a not-so-empty pocket, a satisfied appetite and a wild curiosity. I thought back to the events of the evening: good service, excellent food, a relaxing ambiance and all those things that make for a good Yelp review. But there was something else about Miya’s that made me want to go back – for more sushi and more stories. I contacted Yoshi’s daughter Mie, who shares her name with the restaurant (albeit with a different spelling – it was changed for guests’ convenience). A week later, at 5:17 pm of a typical and dreary New Haven afternoon, I was greeted and led to a wooden bench by Devin, the host for

the evening. I would be seeing Mie shortly. As I sipped on my pickled ginger-lime soda, I looked around to notice an understated décor—string lights, candles, Japanese idols and a coloring book for entertainment (something had to be crazy!). Mie and her brother Bun, along with their mother, had been running the restaurant for over a decade. Bun Lai was no small deal. A pioneer in the world of food sustainability, he created the first vegetarian sushi roll and is the man in America's seafood sustainability movement. Today, I was meeting with his sister Mie who left her real estate job three years ago to permanently commit herself to help the family business.

So how did it all happen? Mie could not seem to divorce the story of Miya's from the story of Yoshi. Her mother came to America as the Japanese wife of a Chinese professor at the Yale School of Medicine. Mie knows that this was not a common union at the time, but love knew no bounds and neither did her mother. She had always followed her heart. This daring spirit is what came in handy when Yoshi resisted opposition from everyone including her own husband to open her own restaurant. "My mom did not do it to become popular. As a stranger in a new country, who spoke very little English, she felt homesick. She didn't want others to feel that way. So she opened Miya's." Before I could ask any further, Mie explained the origins of the restaurant's name. "*Mie* is the word for 'shrine' in Japanese. My mom always wanted people to feel welcome and comfortable here. She wanted to share her culture with the people around her."

We were interrupted by Devin, who brought me a tasting of the initially unsettling but eventually delicious *salam* roll. My immediate question to Mie was not about the story but about the za'atar in my sushi...how did this meet with the idea of Yoshi's traditionalism?

"*Salam* means peace in Arabic and the roll was created as a tribute to that idea...making the world a better place for everyone. That is why my mom

started this restaurant, that is why we focus on taking pressure off the environment, that is why we include so many cultural influences on our menu. It's social activism." A decade ago, Miya's revamped their menu to use sushi as a means of combining distinct flavors. Even though this idea of fusion-infusion fits perfectly with the trends of today's burgeoning food industry, I sensed that Miya's symbolized a movement rather than a trend. Mie confirmed this thought soon after: "It's really not about the food." That was a bold claim to make for a restaurant but revolution seems to run in the family.

Another welcome interruption came our way—Yoshi herself, wearing a simple Japanese blouse, walked up to us with a knowing stride and a calming smile. Mie left us to chat for a few minutes and we got along like a house on fire. Yoshi filled some gaps in the story Mie had earlier recounted. As a first-generation immigrant and the wife of a professor, she faced challenges that came not only from her new environment but also from within the confines of her household. The norm for each of her female Japanese friends, "even the doctors," was to accept their lives as "housewives forever." Yoshi did not have a problem with the idea. But she had a problem with following it herself. "When I was young, I did not have any dream to be this or that. But when I came here, I have to say that this culture—American culture—really made me think. Do I have to be just a housewife?" Coming here is not the only thing that changed her mind. "When my daughter was born, I finally decided that I want to work and I told her father that I don't feel respected. He would go from being assistant professor to associate professor to tenured professor. But once my children had grown up and gone way, then what? I would just be taking care of the house as an unpaid housekeeper. I could not see such a future for myself or for my daughter. I had to do something. I really wanted to do something."

And she did. The results of her dream are evident. Yoshi's story embodies what many would call the classic American Dream. By realizing the value of her

dream, however, she became eager to disseminate it to everyone who needed it. The third and final interruption of the evening was made by Ilan, the newest employee at Miya's. A young refugee from the Congo, Ilan did not speak very good English, just like newly married Yoshi during her first days in America. This minor impediment, however, did not make him a weaker candidate. All Mie required was someone kind and hardworking, and Ilan fit the bill perfectly. It was his first day at work and both the mother and daughter got busy for a few minutes, explaining some logistics to him. I watched in front of my eyes what I had been hearing about so far. Miya's to me was no more about an outlandish sushi menu or the sustainability of fishing practices. It was all of this and more; a place that safeguarded its culture not as a "secret recipe" on the menu or a style of cooking in the kitchen but as a complex system of values. A place where Yoshi's American Dream becomes accessible to everyone, guests and employees alike.

Bun had always taken an interest in keeping the restaurant alive. Three years ago, Mie decided to join her family permanently. What brought her back to her namesake? It turns out that Yoshi's confident manner was more deceptive than I had imagined—a terrible stroke a few years back had left her severely ill. Mie rushed to help and became the reason for Yoshi's survival today. "I had my phase of being rebellious and not wanting to work here. But my mom's health scare really affected me—it made me think about everything she had been doing here. When I became the reason for her being alive, I felt responsibility in keeping something bigger alive. It was a blessing in disguise."

When Bun gave the menu of New Haven's first traditional sushi bar a completely untraditional makeover, the family faced a lot of criticism. They lost the loyalty of some regulars and received flak from traditionalists in the restaurant business. "People said we were not a sushi restaurant anymore." What they did was not trendy at the time. In today's almond butter and matcha

latte-obsessed world, where “organic” is the true label of legitimacy, it is hard to imagine the rejection of such a seemingly trendy movement. The cultural backlash at the time, however, did not favor such a radical change. But it also did not deter the family from sticking to its values. Mie expressed some comments that rang a bell: “We did not do it to be trendy. We resisted the opposition.”

When Yoshi opened the first restaurant, she faced opposition from within, from traditional and sexist notions of immigrant culture. When her children decided to remodel it, they faced opposition from the outside, albeit from similar traditionalists in the food world. The result? Yoshi followed her American dream with a passionate resistance and founded New Haven’s first sushi bar. The same resistance and spirit of her American Dream sustained itself thirty years later when Bun fought the criticism to make Miya’s the *world’s* first sustainable sushi bar.

America’s “authentic” restaurant culture is deeply tied to the history of its immigrant minorities. Today, the nation has come out of its food coma and plunged into a food revolution. Sustainable agriculture, cooking methods, restaurant ethics, food documentaries and other such “hot topics” have become important to the public fairly recently. Critics argue that this new movement uses food to appropriate minority cultures while proponents portray it as a vehicle of cultural empowerment. The politics of culture in today’s America demand that we question the implications of such “movements.” Protectionism is not the answer but misrepresentation is not a close contender either.

Second-generation children in families of immigrant minorities frequently find themselves conflicted about their cultural identities. Oftentimes, at home, children imbibe distinct cultural practices—the language they speak, the customs they follow and the food they eat. When they step out, however, a multiplicity of influences overwhelms and leaves them feeling conflicted about their cultural

bearings. The choice lies between breaking away from one's roots and fervently sticking to them—or so says popular wisdom. After getting to know Mie and her mother, I discovered that there exists a way to choose neither of those options. Dominant critiques of today's youth often accuse them of self-centered hedonism. With our heads buried in our phones and noses flung high up in the air (achieving the impossible, aren't we?), we seem too concerned with ourselves to care about the past or the future. Mie's words, however, convinced me of the opposite. "I am proud of my culture and I want to use it to make other people embrace where they come from. Eventually, we are all just drops of the same ocean, you know. The ocean is big enough for us all—let's make some space."

Yoshi had earlier told me that she exposed her children to both Chinese and Japanese culture at home. Mie explained how she got in touch with her roots while studying abroad in Japan as a fifteen-year-old high schooler. Bun, who was born in Hong Kong, was always proud of his Chinese upbringing and curious about his mixed heritage. Fundamentally though, for the brother-sister duo, it's not about saving any one of these, and for that matter *any*, traditions. "New Haven and America, for that matter, is a melting pot with people from all over the world. We grew up around many different cultures and want to welcome each of those here—on the table and on the menu." Mie was aware about what her words meant in today's context: "Today, more than ever, we need to nurture but also share and exchange our culture with others. And that includes everyone—the guests we serve, the chefs and servers we employ, and the species we use for cooking."

Miya's is trying to do something no other restaurant has attempted before. Mie's reference to food as social activism came back to me. "It is hard to resist when people get comfortable with a situation that might not actually be so 'comfortable' for everyone. At Miya's, we are only trying to bring both sides to the same table. You and I could have radically different cultures and opinions.

But let's sit over a meal and talk about it—why is that not comfortable?" That evening, I got home feeling comfortable yet uncomfortable. Miya's had made me see food from a lens I had not known.

"You ate a carp? And a dandelion? Eh, maybe it's a Japanese thing."

Miya's cooks with invasive species of fish that take pressure off the highly demanded varieties of ocean ecosystems. Weeds, flowers and other invasive or neglected plant species are reimagined as edible and healthy options on their menu. A friend, quoted above, could obviously not get over this. And for a while, neither could I. After some reflection that night, I concluded that while this was surely not a "Japanese thing," it was Miya's' version of "all-you-can-eat" sushi. And that unique version is precisely what Mie and Bun are creating and recreating every day at their shrine on 68 Howe Street.

"Sushi here connects us all. To each other, to the food we eat and to the people who cook and serve it for us."

Yoshi knew her mission statement for Miya's right from the beginning. Like every roll on its menu, Miya's always seems to be at full capacity but surprises you with how much it can pack into a tiny space. Yoshi recently went through another stroke. Mie does not know how much longer she will be around to smilingly welcome every guest or to help the chefs personally carve each of the traditional eggrolls. What she does know, however, is that she and Bun will continue Yoshi's vision to give everyone at Miya's a home away from home. Yoshi never wanted either of them to join her. This was *her* restaurant, but also *her* risk. They both, nonetheless, joined their mother voluntarily to continue the family's legacy of sustainability—sustainability of the environment, of food, of tradition. Most importantly though, the sustainability of values. Keeping cultural values intact can be challenging in a world where everything seems to be

falling apart. I had learnt from my personal *nigiri*-dipping experience though that in such times, one thing Yoshi and her family know better than anyone else is how to keep it together.