



Mitsuru Yanase



Kei Kobayashi

EAST MEETS WEST

Japanese chefs are now at the helm of some of France's most prestigious kitchens, while others have settled in Paris and opened Franco-Japanese restaurants of their own. *Isabel Best* reports on cross-cultural cuisine at its most *haute*. Food photography by *Richard Haughton*

Like any other kid, when Shinichi Sato was growing up in rural Hokkaido, northern Japan, he wanted to watch cartoons. His father, however, preferred cookery shows. And since there was only one television, it was cookery or nothing. Soon enough, Sato became enthralled by the sight of French chefs in their toques: "I thought they looked really cool."

In 2000, aged 22, Sato arrived in Paris unable to speak a word of French. From restaurant to restaurant he sought paid employment if possible, internships if necessary, hoping to learn the kind of exultant French cooking of his childhood fantasies. Living off €80 a week, he slept on friends' floors. But the longer he stayed, the more elusive his vision became. He was about to give up when he found work at Pascal Barbot's *Astrance* in the 16th *arrondissement*. It was an epiphany: "It's a cuisine that revolves around the product. There's no sauce, no *jus*, no bouillon. It was shocking. Nothing I'd learnt about French cooking in Japan – with all the emphasis on sauces – was like this."

Fourteen years later, Sato has his own restaurant, *Passage 53*, in a 19th-century Paris arcade. Alongside postcard collectors' shops, jewellers and retro bistros, *Passage 53* is notable for its aloof poise, its white curtains hiding a minimalist white interior. This is where Sato won two Michelin stars within two years of opening. It is also where the Japanese takeover of Paris began. ▶



Shinichi Sato



Opposite page: Kei Kobayashi's mackerel, escabeche jelly and horseradish



TOKYO TO PARIS... AND BACK

Shuzo Kishida trained at Pascal Barbot's Astrance in Paris from 2003 to 2006 before returning home to open Quintessence, a three-Michelin-starred French-style restaurant.

Shinobu Namae trained under French chef Michel Bras and Heston Blumenthal. He now runs L'Effervescence, a one-Michelin-starred restaurant, whose menu focuses on French cuisine with Japanese ingredients.

Hidemi Sugino trained for several years at Pâtisserie Peltier in Paris before setting up his eponymous shop, which specialises in delicate desserts.

Masahiro Morishige was mentored by French chef Marc Veyrat. He's now the owner and chef of Tokyo's La Butte Boisée.

Toshio Tanabe trained at restaurants including L'Espérance before returning in 1983 and opening Ne Quittez Pas in 1988, a restaurant famous for using soil as an ingredient.

Clockwise from top left: Shinichi Sato's "sea snails and parsley from head to toe"; Kei Kobayashi's breaded boar and mâche salad; Kobayashi's citrus and ginger sorbet; Sato's scallops and mixed beets; Kobayashi's roast hare, blackberries and winter vegetables



Yoshitake Hiroki

◀ Sato's story is not unique. In the past few years a nouvelle vague of Japanese chefs cooking modern French food has been emerging from the country's most prestigious kitchens and winning Michelin stars. Cooks like Yoshitake Hiroki, who also worked at Astrance before opening Sola in the 5th arrondissement in 2010, complete with a choice of French and Japanese dining rooms. Or Kei Kobayashi, who trained at the Plaza Athénée before opening his own restaurant, Kei, in 2011, near the Louvre. Or Takayuki Honjo, who passed through Astrance, Mugaritz and Noma before opening Restaurant ES last year in the smart 7th.

Their restaurants are typically discreet (the names rarely appear on the exterior); minuscule – 20 covers are standard; and in keeping with the *omakase* sushi-bar tradition, the chef decides what you get. The food itself is light, precise and based on seasonal ingredients sourced with obsessive care, while the presentation can be breathtaking, resembling flower-strewn medieval tapestries or the syncopated colour flecks of abstract painting.

At least another 14 "French" restaurants have opened in Paris since 2011 with Japanese chefs at the helm. And then there are the head and sous-chefs working for French employers, the bakers and the pastry chefs, and the restaurants beyond the *périphérique*, such as the much-lauded Takao Takano in Lyon. Mitsuru Yanase, current head chef at gluten-free restaurant and deli Noglu, reckons there are no fewer than 500 Japanese cooks in Paris.

Japanese chefs used to work in Paris as a rite of passage for promotion and plaudits back home. Now they are settling here and challenging their French peers. Sato notes: "Before, the Japanese never rose beyond commis chefs or chefs de partie. Now even in the 'palaces' [luxury hotels] you can find them as second or third chefs."

"It's a question of mentality. They work hard, they respect your philosophy, your technique," says Dominique Bouchet, who has employed many Japanese in his two-star restaurants in Paris and Tokyo. Sato puts it more bluntly: "Japanese chefs will turn up at 8am and leave at midnight." They're also not pushy about salaries: "We work and the employer decides." Kobayashi spent five years as second chef at the Plaza Athénée, helping oversee a team of 30 chefs working on 45 to 50 covers. In recent years many other "couldn't-be-more-French" establishments such as l'Agapé, Tante Louise and La Bigarrade have replaced departing French executive chefs with Japanese ones.

Bouchet, however, argues that the Japanese don't fully understand French taste. "French food is salty and rich," he declares. "In Japan the flavours are flatter." Then there's the Japanese focus on presentation: "Sometimes they place so much emphasis on refinement it can spoil a meal." Yet creativity is precisely what many of these chefs relish. "In Japan the kitchen culture is very strict," Yanase says. "It's like an illness – it's not a normal environment. French cooking is very creative."

In a cuisine that is traditionally enamoured of meat, these chefs' fondness for vegetables is notable. At Abri, a purée of artichoke and ceps might complement squid grilled with girolles. At Kei, a truffle-tinged salsify purée transforms a filet of sea bass. At Noglu, hake on a bed of lentils is complemented by sweet string beans cooked to perfection, while the dish is elevated by a cloud of truffle-scented cauliflower mousse.

Unsurprisingly, Japanese ingredients also feature, either as a deliberate fusion of the two cuisines, a signature of the cooking at Sola – or in more subtle ways. Parisians' knowledge of Japanese cuisine usually begins and ends with sushi, so when they encounter nutty kabocha squash instead of pumpkin, or delicate yuzu instead of lemon, the result is often beguiling.

Ironically, these chefs are quick to attribute the very qualities that seem so "Japanese" (their respect for ingredients, perfectionism and no-choice menus) to their French heroes like Alain Passard and Pascal Barbot, who work in the nouvelle cuisine tradition – which itself has a debt to Japan.

As for the chefs, what they'd like is recognition for what goes on the plate. As Kobayashi puts it, "I'm happy people are talking about us. But I'm not a Japanese chef, I'm chef Kei." **FT**



Takayuki Honjo

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