

# The Transference of Cuisine and Michelin Rated Restaurants: A Chef's Perspective of Japaneseness in Hong Kong

Watson M. Baldwin, DHTM \*

## Introduction

At present there has been research done with respect to the history of Japanese cuisine, the outlook of Hong Kong' restaurants as it relates to tourism, and its relationship to culinary tourism, and Michelin rated restaurants. However, there is a significant gap with the recent phenomenon of the rise of Japanese Michelin rated restaurants and their emergence into the Chinese market. For this market there are numerous opportunities and avenues because Hong Kong is the gateway into the China market and Asia. These restaurants bring a certain heir of class and respect to Hong Kong as a "Culinary Destination."

Like many countries, Japan has many different styles of cuisines through the various prefectures and regions of the country. Previous researchers have often times looked at the introduction of sushi and sashimi into other areas and cultures because of its lore of being raw and uncooked fish, mollusks or shellfish products. For most countries raw fish is not consumed so it is understandable why this would be such an important item and factor into transferring Japanese cuisine. It is because of this that this paper will not look at sushi in that same capacity of introduction but rather by technique and flavor composition. Moreover, this research will include a look at four other areas of Japanese cuisine that are just as important as sushi. The first being kaiseki or the most formal and seasonal of Japanese cuisines, second is yakitori/yakiniku or grilled chicken, beef and barbecue style restaurants that specialize in preparing all parts of the chicken or cow, thirdly is ramen, traditionally a spinoff of a Chinese noodle soup but has become a staple of recognizing Japanese food, lastly there are izakayas which are the Japanese version of pubs (Cwiertka, 2006; Ashkenazi & Jacob, 2000; Lee, 2009; Barber, 2009). These four areas were also chosen because they are found in Hong Kong's Michelin Guide 2014/2015 list with recognition varying from Bib Gourmande to having 3 stars. This research intended to discover what

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\* Correspondence to: Watson M. Baldwin, DHTM  
Instructor, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, School of Hotel and Tourism Management  
E-Mail: Watson.baldwin@polyu.edu.hk

challenges Michelin rated Japanese chefs encounter with regards to maintaining their culinary authenticity, identity, and integrity while maintaining their cuisine in Hong Kong. The goal being to further identify if there are any patterns or factors arise for the chefs and restaurants to ascertain a solution for the problems that arise.

The objectives that this research intended to answer are as follows:

1. What factors affect a Japanese chef's ability to transfer their cuisine into Hong Kong?
  - a. What cultural challenges exist?
  - b. What technical or skills based challenges exist?
  - c. Are their challenges with the local taste or palate in Hong Kong.
2. Are there any issues from the supply side/demand side/ or traditional methods of preparation?

## Review of Literature

Currently there are very few studies looking at the transference of cuisines from one place to Hong Kong, but there are several studies done from other countries around the world. Farrer's (2013) explanation of foreign foods that become localized and a part of a culture's heritage is a great example. He describes the Korean taco craze in Los Angeles, or Middle Eastern kebabs in Berlin as well as several instances in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Tokyo. He and many other researchers bring forth the idea of transference as listed below. The articles cited in the following section address the migration of food with examples from around the world. This is designed to give a better idea of what this study intends to examine.

### **The transference of cuisine from one place to another**

Food is one of the major elements that both moves the world and ties the world together. Regardless what country or culture, all people gather around a table or an area and share a meal together. The people of this world have moved around from place to place for a variety of reasons. It is this path of migration that has taken the people, their cultures and most importantly their foods to the ends of the earth (Pollmer, 2000; Nabhan, 2014). The spice trade is a perfect example of food transferring from place to place and without this there would not have been such a world-wide exposure and mixture of cultures and food. The Anglo-Europeans sought to find a new route to the new world and

happened upon the greatest culinary discovery of their time, Asia and Africa. Although this was meant to bring in more resources for the economy and infrastructure of the standing empires involved, this trade route would forever change and expose people to the types of ingredients, flavors and techniques for food in the centuries to come (Nabhan, 2014).

Fast forward to today's world where spices do not have the same monetary value that they once did, however they still hold high value in the culinary world. Chefs, cooks, and gastronomes alike look for new flavor combinations and experiences from trying out foods new and unknown to them. This is the very basis of culinary creativity, exploration and discovery. The foods and flavors that chefs become famous for preparing are their very own creation; via plate presentation and design as well texture and ingredient composition. Belasco (1999) discusses the interaction between globalization and the creation of "national" cuisine via Wilk's (1999) paper on Belizean cuisine and its identity and origin. Belasco praises Wilk to say that the food practices he describes could be applied not only to the Americas but most of the post-Columbian world. He emphasizes how as people relocate, their value of home cooking becomes more and more important regardless to where they go. Wilk's paper gives an excellent illustration of how a national cuisine can be altered, or in part destroyed, by globalization because of the requirement to meet or create a local identity within the area that the cuisine is now in. This also includes the aspect that ethnic purity of the cuisine is diluted for both need of the consumer's taste and overall acceptance (Alba, 1990). This is where the transference of cuisine comes into play.

### **The Global Movement of Japanese Cuisine and Restaurants**

The exodus of Japanese cuisine around the world can be traced back to the European trade routes circa the year 1500 (Cwiertka, 2001). Not many years later the Japanese closed their borders to almost all countries except the Dutch for a period of about 300+ years (Cwiertka, 2001 & 2006). Japan remained closed but towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Japanese began to emigrate to different parts of Europe. These new settlers of Japan brought their business expertise as well as Japanese food products to these unknown areas, with the pretence that the countries' foods would not be suitable for their diet and intake (Fukuzawa, 1934). At that time the immigrants from Japan were businessman, representatives of government, or tradesmen and during this transitional period struggled with adjusting to their new lifestyle (Cwiertka, 2006). The 1970s brought a large shift in dining around Europe and North America, especially in the areas where the Japanese lived. This was the time of the entrepreneur and restaurateur to shine as

there was a high demand for Japanese restaurants around the different regions (Milligan, 2006). Japanese restaurateurs began to build restaurants for the Japanese immigrants but the local population began to take a liking to their style of food as well (Cwiertka, 2006; Milligan 2006). In the Netherlands, Japanese cuisine and restaurants had become so popular that Amsterdam's Yamazato Japanese Kaiseki restaurant became the first Japanese restaurant (outside Japan) to obtain a Michelin star. The restaurant served formal, seasonal course-based Japanese cuisine kaiseki, which reflected the traditional European dining approach at that time (Cwiertka, 2006). Even cities like Los Angeles, New York and parts of South America had seen a rise in popularity of Japanese restaurants from the 1970s onward (Koyama, 1985; Mori, 2000). Later, in 2013 UNESCO bestowed "Washoku" an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (MAFF, 2013). This would help with the preservation, globalization, and standardization of Japanese cuisine.

### **The Michelin Guide and Perception of Culinary Quality and Satisfaction**

Culinary quality as defined by Chi, Chua, Othman & Karim (2013) is a measure of the experience of the cuisine consumed by guests or tourists to a foreign destination. The Michelin Guide is a rating system that was derived in France circa 1900 and is used to judge the quality of restaurants (Cotter & Synder, 1998). The Michelin Guide is revered by the culinary and food world as an influential taste making guide (Lane 2013). Its influence is powerful, symbolic and is seen as authoritative by top chefs and restaurants across the globe. The stars used in the rating system are only given out to a small percentage of restaurants. In 1995, France for instance, had upwards of 90,000 restaurants and from that group the Guide included 9000 of those restaurants. Over 600 of those restaurants were given stars. The rating system is as follows:

R- Good for the price

1 Star- "Very Good"

2 Star- "Worth a Detour"

3 Star- "Worth a Special Journey"

Bib Gourmande- Honorable Mention

The rating system carefully looks at overall restaurant ambiance, cuisine, and culinary quality in creating a dining experience (Michelin Guide, 2014). In the case of Hong Kong having an overwhelmingly high number of restaurants with various ethnic cuisines at the diner's choosing the question becomes that of what is the perceived value of these restaurants' culinary quality? For Hong Kong, these newly minted Japanese Michelin

rated restaurants are not restaurants that started in Hong Kong and nor have a history there. Rather, they became famous outside of Hong Kong and then were brought into the market. So for the diners of Hong Kong this should carry the weight of having higher pricing for perceived value of culinary quality.

### **The Michelin Guide and Hong Kong**

2015 in Hong Kong saw the newest edition of the Michelin Guide list being released and the newest restaurants to be given stars or be upgraded to a different star status. Hong Kong does not have as many Michelin rated restaurants, compared to Tokyo and Paris, but it does hold large amount of star-rated restaurants for various cuisines such as Cantonese, Japanese, Italian, French and Chinese cuisines (Michelin 2014). The cuisines of these restaurants are both representative of the chef, and the origin of the cuisine and other units of measurement found within the guide. In 2009, the Michelin Guide awarded restaurants in Tokyo, Japan with the most stars in the history of the rating system (Michelin Guide, 2009). This skyrocketed the popularity of Japanese cuisine and those Michelin rated restaurants around the globe. Two of those restaurants, Ryu-gin and Sushi Yoshitake, (both in Tokyo) have since been sought after to bring their famed cuisine to Hong Kong. With these top rated restaurants now in Hong Kong (Ryu-gin with 2 stars, and Sushi Shikon with 3 stars), the perception of quality in Japanese cuisine has changed dramatically.

## **Methodology**

For the methodology there was a focus on what steps chefs take from researching their market, developing food items, menus and the preparation of those items. An adaptation of Milligan's (2006) qualitative approach to the collection of data as the methodological approach to this thesis which involved semi-structured interviews, observations and data analysis. To be clear, only certain parts of Milligan's approach will be adopted for the reason that the prior sets of research sought to gain perspective from the consumer's point of view and this research does not. Rather this research focused on the chef's perspective and the factors that affect their cuisine's transference into another culture. A form of triangulation was used to observe the research from multiple points. This approach gave more of an understanding of the topic along with a description of the subject which will also include greater trustworthiness and validity (Flick, Von Kardoff & Steinke, 2004).

## Findings

Once all the interviews were completed, a thorough contextual analysis of the respondent feedback, observations and data collected was done to identify any and all emerging themes. Being that there were separate sets of interview questions asked for each group, the questions themselves were broken down into different groupings first. Each trade interviewee was asked 14 questions and each chef interviewee was asked 21 questions. Those groupings are listed below:

### Trade Interview Question Groupings

- Role in the Japanese Restaurant Community
- General Perception of Japanese Food in Hong Kong
- Authenticity and Representation of Japanese Food in Hong Kong
- History of Japanese Food in Hong Kong
- Infrastructure and Support for Michelin rated Japanese Restaurants
- Identity and Integrity of Japanese Cuisine- Flavors, Taste and Presentation
- Issues and Recommendations

### Chef Interview Question Groupings

- Demographics of Restaurant Clientele
- Compliments and Complaints
- Preparation of Cuisine
- Challenges with Preparing the Cuisine in Hong Kong
- Motivation and Inspiration
- Training- Chef and Staff
- Michelin Listing

To gain a scope of the restaurants' clientele, questions were asked with the demographic of customers that visited the restaurants in Hong Kong and Japan to understand the type of clientele the restaurants cater to in the table below.

**Current Restaurant and Guest Demographics**

Restaurant	Michelin Listing (2015)	Type of Restaurant	Hong Kong Guests	Mainland Chinese Guests	International (JP) or Foreign Guests	Restaurants Signature Dish
<i>Hong Kong Restaurants</i>						
Nishiki	B/G	Yakitori	80%	10%	10%	Grilled Skewers
Shugetsu	B/G	Ramen	70%	15%	>10%	Shugetsu Ramen
Sushi Ginza Iwa	*	Sushi	80%	10%	>10%	Omakase Sushi
Sushi Shikon	***	Sushi	90%	5%	5%	Steamed Abalone
Ryu Gin (HK)	**	Kaiseki	60%	25%	15%	Fruit Ice Cream
Wagyu Kaiseki Den	**	Kaiseki	80%	10%	10%	Wagyu Steak
Ta Vie	*	French	70%	>2%	28%	Botan Shrimp Jelly
<i>Tokyo Restaurants</i>						
Sushi Iwa	*	Sushi	>5%	>5%	90%	****
Sushi Yoshitake	***	Sushi	>5%	>5%	90%	****
Ryu Gin (TYO)	***	Kaiseki	>5%	>5%	90%	****

Table 1 Source: Japanese Chef Interviews. \*B/G- Bib Gourmande rating in the Michelin Guide

From a contextual analysis of all interviewee responses the following themes came to light:



Figure 1.

From the information gathered from the interviews with the chefs, trade organization members and observational data collected while dining at the restaurants in Hong Kong and Japan the question can be simply answered as, “Yes, there are differences and changes but they are not what I thought they would be.” After a thorough triangulation of the two sets of interviews and observation data the following issues arose from the research:

1. There is a need to change food for the Hong Kong palate with regards to taste and dining culture for some restaurants. Not all of them changed.
2. There are some issues with the supply chain with regards to freshness and quality of food products needed to produce Japanese cuisine in Michelin rated restaurants.
3. There are technical issues with regards to the chef's skills and execution of the food, as well as training of staff in Hong Kong.

## Discussion

The research presented has brought forth three main factors with regards to the transference of cuisine in Michelin rated Japanese restaurants, and a fourth factor that connects them all together:

- Elements affecting the Transference of Cuisine
- Non-generalizable Michelin rated Japanese restaurants
- The separation, specialization and differentiation of the restaurants
- The preservation of “Japaneseness” and its role in Michelin rated Japanese restaurants

In the case of the transference of cuisine in Michelin rated Japanese restaurants, with regards to technique and ingredients, this market does represent the notion of “Japaneseness” more so than the macro and micro markets as per the respondents of the interviewees. The term is previously seen in a thesis by Dr. Naomi Tanaka (2008) referenced from Prof. Bestor’s (2000 & 2001) papers on the outlook of Japanese cuisine in Toronto and a response to the globalization of sushi, respectively. The data gathered from both the trade and chef interviews shows a path of cultural dynamics and needs that have to be present for the food to be considered Japanese. While the market as a whole is seen as having very acceptable Japanese food, these restaurants that are pushing the boundaries of “New Japanese Cuisine” maintain their Japaneseness by keeping their core elements rooted in the traditional authentic ingredients and fundamentals. The issues that arise with transference and these restaurants are cultural, product and perception based. Those guests who already have their own opinion or view of what Japanese food is may have a different expectation than someone who is a part of the culture and completely versed in it; thus influencing the overall dining experience and outcome of the meal and how it is served. In that sense, Japaneseness is meant as being seen as what is “real”, and can be considered a form of measurement in the food authenticity of Japanese cuisine. As dictated by the trade specialists, this “New Japanese Cuisine” is the next phase in Japanese food. It’s not viewed as traditional Japanese because it involves ingredients and techniques that are not commonly used in traditional Japanese food. With its additional fusion and molecular gastronomic influences have put this cuisine in its own to category. Product availability was a major theory of research concern and proved to be not that big of an issue in day to day operations. But as far as the transferring of cuisine is concerned

there are changes made because of climate conditions and the palate of the local customers. This gave way to the respondents commenting on taste and whether or not the product or the chef was important to capture the right taste of the food. The trade experts all mentioned that in preparing Japanese food, there must be a Japanese chef who understands the palate and technique of the Japanese to be able to execute it properly.

The chefs that are preparing this cuisine see themselves as preparing their interpretation of what Japanese food is to them. Using time honored ingredients and techniques that are matched with new innovations on presentation and flavor dynamics to push the boundaries of the traditional methods. Whether it's the fusing of cuisines and cultures, or understanding the subtle nuances to preparing the perfect piece of sushi; the chefs are making their mark on Japanese food and giving Hong Kong diners a new experience. The chefs also indicated that there are various levels of acceptance for this style of cuisine in Hong Kong even though they feel that Hong Kong has the best representation of Japanese cuisine outside of Japan. In several restaurants like, Sushi Shikon and Ryu Gin, it can be seen that transferring the cuisine was important but not always necessary. It was also shown that Hong Kong people enjoy a higher level of sophistication with regards to Japanese food and its ingredients. Even with their unique palate they are able to accept most of the Michelin rated Japanese food that is offered. The acceptance level is not directly linked to the star rating of the restaurants but rather to the cuisine or cooking technique itself, from the data gathered. Several of the chefs even pointed out that there was a need to incorporate local foods into their cuisine as a way to bridge the gap and pay homage to where they are. Some even went as far to change the offerings that they have to give people choice of the original product or something more geared to the Hong Kong taste. Several of the chefs decided to stick to what they do best and power through until they found their market of people who really wanted their product. While most of the chefs did not strive for a Michelin rating, all of them felt that the rating they received help them to promote Japanese cuisine and helped to give people and understanding of where the food is going in the future.

From the factors presented by the research and reviewing all the data, the most reoccurring theme with the transference of Japanese cuisine in Michelin rated restaurants was the need to maintain the food's "Japaneseness." From the research and the data collected, Japaneseness is defined as the steps taken to ensure the cuisine prepared and dining elements related are the most Japanese they can be. This comes in a twofold approach which is capturing the essence of Japanese cuisine and food culture while also

honoring traditional methods of preparation and service (omotenashi). In this case capturing the essence of the food culture, Michelin rated restaurants are ensuring that their cuisine properly represents what Japanese food and food culture is through ingredients, flavors, and educating their clientele base. With that they also honor the traditional methods of both food preparation and omotenashi by transferring washoku, the culinary fundamentals of shojin ryori (Buddhist style) cooking and honzen ryori (tabled trays) service of meals. They have modernized Japanese cuisine by adding fusion elements of cooking and adapted different service styles to create the “New Japanese” cuisine, but in many ways it still pays homage to traditional Japanese food.

This leads directly into when speaking of “Japanese cuisine in Hong Kong” the restaurants on the Michelin list cannot be lumped together with, or generalized overall with most Japanese restaurants in Hong Kong as what applies to most Japanese restaurants in Hong Kong does not apply to them. Being Michelin by definition is enough to make this statement but each individual restaurant and its preservation of Japaneseness highlights its non-generalizable characteristics regardless of what style of Japanese food they serve. The restaurants that have been referred to as “New Japanese” are even further separated from this list as well. These restaurants are actively seeking to push the envelope and redefine Japanese cuisine as whole while preparing dining experiences that are acknowledged by the Michelin Guide for their excellence in cuisine and dining.

Furthermore, it is because of this modernization in the restaurants cuisine, the preservation of Japaneseness becomes more important. All respondents felt that there was a need for these restaurants to be run by Japanese chefs and staff or staff that is trained by the Japanese. From the data collected and the triangulation of that data, there is a direct relationship with the restaurants themselves, the chefs, and the overall Japaneseness of the dining experience. From talking with the chefs, their perspective of their cuisine is that what they serve, in their own style and unless otherwise specified like Ta Vie (Japanese French) and Tokuyoshi (Japanese Italian, whom was visiting Hong Kong from his 1 star Michelin restaurant in Italy), is authentic Japanese food. They incorporate other ingredients and cooking methods but to them their food is still Japanese. From the trade perspective, those individuals gave specific guidelines from an outside view of what it takes to be a Japanese restaurant i.e. having Japanese chefs, using all Japanese ingredients and understanding Japanese taste. However, in the realm of serving Japanese food in Hong Kong there are changes that are made that could be argued against as to

whether the food is still “Japanese” once it is served to the guests. The comments of properly making sushi rice, traditional seasoning and flavoring techniques for fish and vegetables was important to some chefs with concerns of Hong Kong drinking culture (with a preference for red wines) are good examples taken from the interviews. But that is very subjective in the realm of preparing food for customers and clientele. While some chefs stuck firmly to their tradition and cuisine, several of the chefs stated that there is no problem with changes to the food if it makes the customer happy.

### Limitations and Future Research

As the data was collected, it was important to acknowledge the limitations with conducting the research for this thesis. It is noted that chefs and managers from Takeya and Kazuo Okada were unavailable or declined to be interviewed. Of those that did take part there was no saturation point reached within the data collection as each interview exposed new information that contributed to the study. This is in part to the size of the nano market sample of restaurants and chefs. The trade interviews gave great insight to the macro view of Hong Kong’s Japanese restaurant market from the view of the Japanese as this was the focus of the research. Overall limitations to Michelin rated Japanese food in Hong Kong would need this research to continue examining the macro and micro restaurant environments for Japanese cuisine as well as looking at the consumer perspective of the macro, micro and nano markets. Each area offers a variety of factors that can contribute a more sound understanding of both the perception of Japanese cuisine and the overall transference of the cuisine at all levels in Hong Kong. This study can impact various areas of future research as well. In industry, this research will help identify reasons for recipe, cooking method and culinary technique modifications in for the Hong Kong palate. It will also help chefs to further acknowledge time honored and traditional methods of food production and why they must not be changed. For the Japanese restaurant community in Hong Kong, this research can raise awareness for those Japanese restaurants that are not employing techniques and cooking methods. It will also help their cuisine be more authentic within the lines of Japaneseness. With regards to academic scholarship, this research can demonstrate the variety of links that exist between industry and operational practices and the academic community. It can also help expand the knowledge base for those in culinary education for teaching, interpreting palate development, and cooking for other cultures. This will give culinary instructors a better

level of exposure and understanding of the traditional and authentic methods of food preparation for cuisines. It will also provide insight into how chefs innovate and maintain their level of status in the restaurant community. Educators will then be able to bring these and many other concepts into their culinary classrooms. This will also enlighten both students and instructors to the origins of these techniques for a better understanding of the culture and history for the specified regions that have been researched. In all, this research can be applied to any city that has a multicultural or ethnic restaurant base that is being or has been introduced to a new or existing populous.

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