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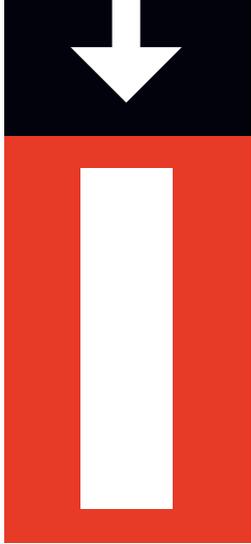
TOTORAKU has no Web site. The name on the sign belongs to a place that closed years ago. Reservations? More power to you, because unless you know **KAZ**, the chef-owner, or someone who does, you're not getting in

BY DAVID HOCHMAN



IN THE FLESH

Kaz Oyama in his cramped kitchen; the steak tartare (opposite)



IN THE WINTER OF 1999, Kaz Oyama was driving along Pico Boulevard in Cheviot Hills when he noticed a man—“Old guy, Jewish guy,” he says—putting up a FOR LEASE sign in the window of a taco and burger joint. Something made Oyama do a U-turn and park, though he admits he was in no posi-

tion to be shopping for real estate at the time. “I didn’t have any money, but it was my last chance,” he says. “There was no other way out for me.” ¶ A few years earlier Oyama, a Japanese-born chef, had lost roughly his entire shirt on a restaurant venture gone bad. He was working at Hide Sushi on Sawtelle Boulevard when a customer persuaded him to open a place of his own.

“I was stupid,” he says, shaking his head. “I believed him. I believed that lawyer. He ran away with all my assets.”

The restaurant on Pico was not much to look at. It was narrow and dark, smelled of ancient grease, and had zero atmosphere, but Oyama wanted in. He had a wife and son to feed and “my big ego, too,” he says with a laugh. Oyama pooled resources from friends and signed the lease. “I had no money left to decorate it, but it didn’t need to be fancy,” he says. “Clean. Nice table. Not too comfortable. Not too uncomfortable.”

Oyama did manage to put up a sign outside—bright yellow with green palm trees flanking the words THE TERIYAKI HOUSE PICO. Because that’s what was on the menu back then: teriyaki beef, teriyaki chicken, vegetables. It was the sort of cheap lunch place you might find in central Osaka or Tokyo. Except this wasn’t Osaka or Tokyo. It wasn’t even Sawtelle.

“Very quickly,” Oyama says, “we realized there were no customers. None. Next door, guys were laughing at me every day: ‘Why’d you start this kind of business?’”

A month and a half in, the Teriyaki House Pico shut its doors.

TODAY AT 55, Oyama still has the flowing jet black mane (it’s a mullet, honestly) and trim physique of a much younger man, not to mention the energy.

He speaks in uninterrupted sentences and laughs loudly at his own jokes when he isn’t misting up over how quickly life is passing. “My son is 29!” he says, his eyes growing wide. Kenichi Oyama is his father’s kitchen assistant. “In Japanese we say ‘*ichi-go ichi-e!*’ One chance, one meeting. We are here for this time only.” His mood brightens suddenly. “So we better be nice to each other!”

A reservation at Oyama’s restaurant on Pico is now among the toughest to land in Los Angeles (see sidebar). Not that the place looks much different than it did originally—before Oyama changed course and reinvented everything but the decor in the weeks after the Teriyaki House Pico closed. The dining area remains so tight that when a customer walks to the restroom, Oyama’s wife, Shizumi, who doubles as maître d’ and waiter, must do an airplane-aisle side turn to let the person pass. Two fluorescent tubes hang from grotty chains on the ceiling, though one light is eternally burned out. The art on the walls brings to mind junior college: framed posters of James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Bob Marley. The only nod to fine dining is the lineup of impressive wine empties (1992 Colgin, 1961 Mouton Rothschild, 1945 Petrus) on a ledge that runs the length of the place.

Out front the Teriyaki House Pico sign endures as both artifact and decoy. Totoraku, as Oyama renamed the restaurant—the word means “lucky dad” in archaic

Japanese—now serves a ten-plus-course *kaiseki* meal of beef, a third of it raw, the rest cooked *yakiniku* style, a conventionally Korean way of grilling meat at the table that’s popular in Japan. The set menu begins at \$140 per person, but there are no actual menus or prices to be seen. The obscurity is all part of the allure. In an L.A. dining world where kitchens are judged by the number of *Top Chef* stars on the line plating foraged petrified yams, Totoraku does everything it can to avoid attention. The restaurant is not on Twitter, Facebook, or Open Table, and Oyama does not have a Web site or accept e-mail bookings or walk-ins (a sunny but firm “So sorry! Fully booked tonight” is what you’ll get if you are not expected, even if nobody’s in the house). For all these reasons, Totoraku—or “Toto” to invited regulars—is



known in certain circles around town as “the secret beef restaurant,” although it’s hardly a secret anymore.

The only way to eat at Totoraku is to call the handwritten cell number on Oyama’s flimsy business card. But the only way to get Oyama’s card is to eat at Totoraku. This Zen-koan reservations policy has thwarted neither patrons—the restaurant is busy every night—nor passionate



THE INVISIBLE PLACE

Oyama modeled Totoraku, which hides in plain view on Pico, after the secret spots he explored with his dad in Japan; the seasonal appetizer known as *iro-iro* (opposite)

Yelp reviewers, most of whom give five stars. Officially Totoraku is unlicensed to serve alcohol, but bottle-toting regulars make it one of the top wine scenes in L.A., partly because there's no corkage fee. Customers range from the merely loyal, like chefs Ludo Lefebvre, José Andrés, Nobu Matsuhisa, and actor Benicio Del Toro, to the supremely obsessive. When Ichiro Suzuki, the Japanese-born New York Yankee outfielder, was visiting Los Angeles in 2001, he ate at Totoraku five nights in one week, Oyama says.

"Every element conspires against Toto's success," says Andy Gavin, a video game entrepreneur and food blogger who has been eating there for more than a decade. "The place looks like hell, the menu is always exactly the same, they're understaffed, they don't want new customers, they don't do social media. And yet, hands down, it's the best beef place of its kind in L.A. and there's no place more fun or impressive to take your friends who've seen and done and eaten it all."

OYAMA WAS BORN in 1957 in Kanazawa, the second-largest city in Japan to escape the bombing during World War II. It is a town where centuries-old architecture and Japanese tradition, culinary and otherwise, have survived more or less intact. At home he learned to cook from his mother and grandmother ("First time I made a sushi plate, I was 12," he says). Oyama's father—a restaurant wholesaler—and paternal grandfather, who was a charismatic politician and wheeler-dealer, showed him how to get the most from a night dining out on the town.

"There were restaurants most people knew and restaurants my family knew," Oyama says. Mostly they were private clubs. "No sign, no reservation," he says, "but incredible *omotenashi*"—hospitality. Oyama speaks with pride about venturing along on these outings. "As a kid, it was very interesting. A different world. You would open a door and it was like a jack-in-the-box. Performers, geishas, gambling, kaiseki meals. You were part of something exciting, something fascinating. It was the happiest life." Oyama remembers his father plunking down more than \$3,000 for dinner with six colleagues. "This was 1967," he says. "At that time you could buy a nice car for that. It made me want to become a chef."

Oyama came to Los Angeles in 1976 as a tourist and decided to stay. "I was a little punk and drank too much and needed a job," he says, amused. A friend of his father's got him work preparing kaiseki meals for first-class passengers on Japan Airlines, which led to employment on the kaiseki team at Kawafuku, the landmark Little Tokyo restaurant, since closed, that introduced the concept of the sushi bar to the Unit- (CONTINUED ON PAGE 202)

ANATOMY OF A TOTORAKU RESERVATION



(OR HOW I GOT MY SECRET BEEF)*

- Overhear friend of a friend at a party mention a "secret Japanese steak house" on Pico Boulevard that's open by invitation only.
- E-mail friend of friend for details. FOF promises to e-mail her brother-in-law, who has the "prized business card" for making reservations. Never hear back.
- Contact several Yelp reviewers who've bragged about being Totoraku regulars and ask their advice on getting in. No responses.
- Contact the blogger known as Kevin Eats, who was one of the first to write about Totoraku. "I know people who've cold-called their way in," he replies, "but you'll need to make a good impression." Translation: "Promise Chef Oyama-san old [think pre-1990] bordeaux, burgundy, and champagne."
- Stymied when I see that pre-1990 vintages like these can run upwards of \$800 a bottle.
- Cold-call Totoraku number found on Google (310-838-9881), and leave message promising to share a good bottle of wine. No response.
- Leave second message. No response.
- Have my wife leave message. No response.
- Have a friend leave message. No response.
- Leave another message. Two weeks later receive call from
- Chef Oyama-san. "Do I know you?" he asks when I say hello. I say no. "Oh, then I cannot let you come. But maybe you can find someone who knows me."
- Post notes on Twitter and Facebook asking, "Can ANYONE in this town get me into Totoraku?"
- Two days later a Facebook friend writes to say she's eaten there. But only with her ex-boyfriend, who has the card. She shares his e-mail address. I write asking if I can join him there one night. No response.
- Two days later same Facebook friend writes to say she remembered that she has a card with the reservation number! She agrees to make a reservation for herself, my wife, and me. Chef Oyama-san does not respond to her for five days.
- Success! Reservation for three is booked. I rush to Wine Expo in Santa Monica and tell the clerk I need wine for a famous wine snob. He asks which snob. I tell him it's for the secret beef place. He says, "Oh, I know that guy. Here's what you get him." He takes me to a 2004 Montefalco Cappelletto Macchie.
- Double success! Dinner is life changing (as much as raw and grilled meat can do such a thing). At meal's end Chef Oyama-san presents me with his famous business card. Handwritten in the upper right corner is the private number for booking a table.

* (No journalistic strings were pulled to get this reservation.)



Zen Master of Beef

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 151

ed States. Oyama moved his way up from steaming rice and prepping vegetables to making sauces and tempura for 300 customers a night. On the side he learned about wine from watching what labels impressed the top clientele. “This was a place where the Japanese prime minister would eat when he came to town,” he says. “You had to understand how to serve at the highest level.”

In the 1980s, Oyama traveled back and forth between Japan and L.A. He got married, had a son, and did the yeoman work of slicing California rolls for packs of drunken roommates on Sawtelle. But the memory of those unmarked eateries of his youth lingered. Oyama reinvented the Teriyaki House Pico as Totoraku to bring some of that magic to Los Angeles.

“I like the idea, as in geisha houses, of selecting your own customers,” he says. “No reservations. Instead, invitations. No menus. Instead, surprise people each night with your talent and skill. I didn’t know if it would work in Los Angeles, but I didn’t care. I could not resist trying. Many people say, ‘Are you crazy?’ Maybe I am crazy, but it’s the only way.”

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SOME OF THE most intriguing Japanese cultural experiences in Los Angeles are out of sight. Sequestered at the sleepy end of Centinela Boulevard near Playa del Rey, the Venice Japanese Community Center has been quietly celebrating Japanese heritage since 1921 with classes on *shodo* calligraphy, *ikebana* flower arranging, *taiko* drumming, *sumi-e* ink painting, and classical *odori* dance, among others. The center supports a Boy Scout troop, a ballroom dancing association, a Japanese harp club, and a bonsai gardening club. Founded by Japanese Americans, the Venice Fishing Club trolled the waters of Santa Monica Bay, disbanding in 2006 with one final Fishing Club Chicken Wing fund-raiser.

Across Southern California more than 10,000 children, teenagers, and adults play in Japanese American basketball leagues, some dating back to the 1930s. A few, like the Yonsei Basketball Association, have strict entry requirements (students must maintain high grades and participate in cultural activities) and are as much about instilling traditional Japanese values as they are about three-point jump shots.

Then there are the secret gardens. Concealed to passersby on San Pedro Street downtown since the 1970s, the James Irvine Garden has a 170-foot brook and waterfalls in a grove of rare Japanese black pines. Several avenues over, the Hilton DoubleTree, formerly the Kyoto Grand, still has the half-acre rooftop Japanese garden created there when the place opened as the new Otani Hotel & Garden in 1977. The Japanese Garden at the Donald C. Tillman Water Reclamation Plant, on six-and-a-half acres in Van Nuys, is so inconspicuous, many neighbors are unaware of the refuge with its replica of a nobleman’s house on the lake.

While secret restaurants are suddenly as common in Los Angeles as self-righteous locavores, Totoraku is not an underground venue in the style of, say, pHeast, Wolvesmouth (arguably L.A.’s other toughest reservation), or Chicks with Knives. What Oyama is doing at Totoraku is distinctly Japanese and tied to the archetype in that country’s culture of the invisible place. “In Japan there’s beauty in what’s just out of view and of the spaces in between,” says Hirokazu Kosaka, artistic director of the Japanese American Cultural & Community Center. “The most important ceremonies, like tea ceremonies, often take place in a location we call the *engawa*—the veranda—that is neither interior nor exterior, neither public nor private. There’s fascination in the buffer zone. Spaces like these hint at a hidden dimension.”

Kosaka himself oversees a veiled outpost—a dojo, or school, for Japanese *kyudo* archery on the Palos Verdes peninsula. The center is nearly 100 years old, but few would be able to place it on a map. Kosaka is an ordained Shingon Buddhist priest and master of Japanese archery, and he chooses his students the way Oyama chooses his customers. For him, archery is a form of standing meditation. “In Japanese archery the focus is not a bull’s-eye but something called the ‘hazy target,’” he says. “From a distance you see a full moon with a cloud obscuring it. As with so many experiences in Japanese culture, it’s what is clouded that’s most special. It’s a place to contemplate the infinite shades of gray.”

IT DID NOT take long for word to spread about Totoraku. For six months at the beginning, Oyama might fill seven tables one night, two the next, but then the restaurant took off. “It was all Japanese friends, Japanese trading guys, airline guys, Toyota guys,” he says of his original clientele. Things changed when “the first foreigner,” as Oyama calls him, knocked at the door. “I didn’t know what to do,” he says. By “foreigner” Oyama means Chinese, and by “didn’t know what to do” he means “I told him, ‘Who the hell are you? Go away. Can’t you see I’m busy?’” The man did not back down. He left his information and said he would keep trying.

The intrepid customer was Raymond Chow, the Hong Kong film producer who helped launch the careers of Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and many others. He had heard about Totoraku from Japanese friends in the movie industry and was tipped off to Oyama’s love of good wine. Oyama says, “He came back with 12 people and three bottles of Chateau Latour, 1959, and gave me one.” The temptation was too rich to pass up.

The wine trick became something of a tradition as news about a secret beef restaurant whirled through Hollywood. Whoopi Goldberg brought a vintage magnum of Chateau Margaux. The PR agent Bob Gold showed up with bottles of Screaming Eagle and Petrus. Sharon Stone came with some friends from the entertainment industry. Next the chefs arrived: Gino Angelini, Anthony Bourdain, José Andrés. “What’s not to love about Totoraku?” Andrés says. “It has mystique. A chef with a great personality. I love Kaz’s smile. You can bring your own wines. And really, the food is delicious. The only question becomes, How many beef dishes can you eat in one night?”

Andy Gavin was introduced to Totoraku 13 years ago by his friend and boss at the time, Shuhei Yoshida, a top Sony executive who helped bring the PlayStation to market. Gavin, who blogs about his nights out at All Things Andy Gavin, says, “My first time I thought, ‘Is this really a restaurant? It looked closed. I think the door might have been locked. It was like a beef speakeasy.’” Again it was the liberal BYOB policy—and Oyama’s shining eyes when a good bottle was being uncorked (“I’ve never known Oyama-san not to partake,” Gavin says)—that kicked off the meal and many since. One night last November Gavin took over Toto with a members-only dining club called the Hedonists. The buy-in for guests: one or two extraordinary bottles of wine each. Over four hours “Oyama-san helped us through the top of the wine

pyramid,” says Gavin, citing a 1980 Penfolds Grange, a 1986 Chateau Margaux, a 2003 Châteauneuf-du-Pape Cuvée da Capo, a 2007 Colgin syrah, and so much more to stumble home about. “What’s amazing is that you don’t wake up thinking about the wine,” Gavin says. “You wake up thinking about the beef.”

Right. The beef.

It begins, after an *amuse-bouche* assortment, with beef carpaccio flecked with “special” salt and tiny edible flowers. Beef rib eye and beef throat sashimi come next, accompanied by a Korean-style hot sauce that’s intense with ginger and garlic. There is steak tartare, prepared in the Korean style, with raw quail egg, cucumber, daikon, and pine nuts. That’s followed by the *gyu* portion of the evening: Shizumi, Oyama’s wife, walks over with a battered tabletop grill and a heaping plate of beef tongue. Salt, scallions, a side of lemon juice for dipping. It’s perfection. If there’s a God moment, it’s the filet mignon with bell peppers, onions, and *shiso* peppers. Or maybe it’s not a meat dish at all but the extraordinary *momotaro* tomatoes that are somehow as succulent as the beef that does not stop arriving: outside rib eye, inside rib eye, *kal-bi* short ribs, skirt steak. “At a certain point you have to yell ‘uncle,’” Gavin says. “That’s usually when I see Oyama-san with a great big smile, bringing one final, unbelievable course. It’s a very satisfying experience.”

Late one afternoon last winter, Oyama sat in semidarkness at Totoraku, allowing a rare moment to acknowledge his own satisfaction. “I could say it’s been a great adventure,” he says as a warm expression comes over his face. He has an ongoing debate with Nobu Matsuhisa about who has the happier life. Nobu has the restaurant empire, but Oyama gets to handpick his customers. Nobu has celebrity investors and fame around the world, but Oyama has time to golf and recently bought the one toy he wanted—an attention-grabbing Nissan GT-R sports car. Nobu has a full house almost every night, but so does Oyama.

“Neither of us ever wins this argument,” Oyama says. “We both end up laughing. We’re doing what we want, and our customers keep coming back. That’s the chef’s dream. Little by little, course by course, mouth by mouth, we do what we love, and customers keep coming back. It’s the life of a happy chef. A little happy, a little lucky—and, OK, so maybe a little crazy.” ■

David Hochman has written for The New York Times, Esquire, and Forbes. This is his first piece for Los Angeles.

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