

Name: Boaz Tsairi

Age: 58

Place of Birth: Rehovot

Title: owner, manager

Establishments: Sakura restaurant, King George St. 79, Tel Aviv, (03) 621-2900; Sakura restaurant, Jaffa St. 31 (Feingold Courtyard), Jerusalem, (02) 623-5464; Sakura Products From Nature seaweed farm, Mahmoret; Sakura Ramen and Sakura Dim Sum factories, Tel Aviv.

How did you become involved with food preparation and Japanese cuisine?

I had been studying Urban Planning at Hebrew University, and I went to live in Canada for a while. I met my wife there – she's Japanese. I learned how to make Japanese food in the Eighties. Japanese CEO's would come to Vancouver to go fishing for salmon in the summer and the fall as a sport vacation. So we started to cook for them. That's how we got into the business.

When we moved back to Israel, we started doing Japanese-style catering for three years, and then the first restaurant opened in Jerusalem in 1994 – before then, there were no Japanese restaurants in Jerusalem. The second phase was to open a place in Tel Aviv.

Where were you trained?

I'm still learning. I've traveled to Japan and learned with many chefs there over the years. We have a great advantage in Tokyo when it comes to learning sushi. Being a foreigner, they don't even give us a second's thought. They don't see us as a threat to their business, so they have no problem sharing their knowledge. That's an advantage to being a *gaijin* [a derogatory Japanese term for a foreigner]. I still try to go at least once a year for more training. Whoever stops learning is dead – you can't rest on your laurels.

How have your businesses and Japanese food in Israel developed since you got started?

I got involved with other aspects of making authentic Japanese food in Israel. I became the first person to import Japanese *nori* [seaweed-based skins for rolling *maki*] and to import pickled ginger. I'm the first one to bring green *edamame* beans to Israel, to bring quality sake, good soy sauce, lots of stuff. In recent years, we've been importing loads of rice vinegar.

The awareness of sushi has gone up dramatically in recent years, and a lot of people use the Chinese equivalent of these products, because it's cheaper, but it's just not as good. For the discerning palette, there's a big difference – even though we have to charge the customer sometimes four times the price. There are many dimensions to the quality. Look at *nori*: There are different waves of the harvest; there are different regions of Japan where it's grown. It's like buying ground beef vs steak.

How do you hope to improve your kitchens in the future?

There are always ways to improve. You have the guidelines of tradition, but there are always new foods, new ways to get the ingredients fresher – it's very dynamic.

Sakura in Jerusalem was kosher at times, but without certification. Now I want to open a new place that will be kosher. I can't make Sakura kosher, because the rabbinate doesn't allow foreign workers to be running the kitchen. When I open it, it'll be 100 times easier for me than it was 10 years ago. Now I've personally arranged to *kasher* two factories in Japan and one in Korea. Now so many of these businesses are working with *kashrut* – mostly because of the growth of macrobiotic food.

What are some requirements to making quality sushi and Japanese food that people might not know about?

It's important that the rice vinegar be good and that the rice itself be of high quality. The rice has to be fluffy, not clumpy. It's gotten to the point now where the government of Japan is sending surveyors all over the world to make sure that people are up to standard with the sushi. In Paris recently, they did a lot of damage to the industry.

With sushi, the freshness of the fish is imperative. Where do you buy your fish?

We buy fish from all over the world. I buy Salmon from Norway. I ordered Tuna today from Spain, but last week I might've bought from New Zealand. Yellowtail is coming in from New Zealand now. Seabream ("*dennis*") comes in either domestically or from Greece. Some of the other fish come from France, some from Thailand. I have seafood that comes from Vietnam too. From the whole world. Nowadays, anything can be flown in. If you have money, you can buy it.

What will always be forbidden in your kitchens?

One of the central guiding concepts when it comes to Japanese food is, when in doubt, there's no doubt. If you think something may not be up to standard, then it's no good. Sushi has a lot of paranoia associated with it – if you're not paranoid when it comes to sushi, then there's a problem.

I'll never serve food that I wouldn't eat personally. My family eats in the restaurant all the time. I'll never serve dolphins and horses and things like that, like they have in Japan.

Does anything embarrassing ever happen in any of your restaurants?

Look, it's a business that's mature and established, so real fiascos don't come up. But for me, a major no-no is when there's a big rush and we run out of rice, which can actually happen.

What do you do in that case?

[Smiles]. We serve sashimi (plain, thinly sliced raw fish with a dipping sauce).