

Immigration Law \approx Foodservice

Immigrant Profile: Kaz Okochi

by Becki L. Young

This month I spoke with Kaz Okochi, the well-known DC chef and proprietor of Kaz Sushi Bistro in DC's Foggy Bottom neighborhood.

Kaz has spent more than two decades in the DC restaurant world; he shared his unique insights into the local Japanese culinary scene as well as his personal experience as an immigrant from Japan.

Inspired by cooking shows on Japanese TV that he watched as a child, Kaz always knew he would grow up to be a chef. After spending 3 years as an art student in Oklahoma in the early 80's, he returned to Japan to complete a culinary degree at the prestigious Tsuji Culinary School in Osaka. There his studies focused on European (specifically French) cuisine, which is what

he thought he would eventually end up cooking.

But his fate took a different turn when a Tsuji career counselor suggested he get a job as a sushi chef – it was the mid 80's and the sushi craze was just starting to take hold in the US. Kaz responded to an ad placed by fellow Tsuji-graduate Kojiro Inoue, the proprietor of DC's first sushi bar, Sushi-Ko on Wisconsin Avenue. Inoue was interesting in hiring Kaz, but suggested he gain some practical experience in Japan prior to coming to the US.

A year later Kaz applied for a visa to work for Sushi-Ko, but his application was denied. He spent another four years working in Japan, during which time Sushi-Ko sponsored him for a green card (so when he



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finally returned to the US, it was as a permanent resident).

As an immigration lawyer I found this part of Kaz's story most interesting. The green card process, which takes many years, is designed to offer future employment – the employer must be willing to employ the sponsored worker after they become a permanent resident, and there is no requirement for the sponsored worker to be employed by the sponsor during the process. Yet, because of the high cost and long duration of the process, most employers are not willing to undertake it for someone who does not already work for them. Kaz is a rare exception to this rule.

Kaz entered the US in 1988 to work at Sushi-Ko, and within a year became head chef as well as manager of the restaurant. Other local Japanese restaurants at the time included Matuba, Mikado, and Japan Inn.

These early restaurants were mostly owned by Japanese immigrants and staffed by Japanese workers, and many served very traditional Japanese dishes (such as teriyaki, tempura, and nabeyaki udon).

Over the next decade the number of sushi restaurants increased exponentially (according to Food & Wine magazine the number of sushi bars in the US quintupled between 1988 and 1998, and has kept on growing) and Japanese cuisine evolved dramatically. Sushi pioneers like Nobu Matsuhisa began integrating other cuisines in what has come to be known as the fusion movement; although he shirks from the term "fusion" Kaz was a leader in this movement in the DC area. New restaurants like Sushi Taro and Makoto came on the scene. The ownership and staffing of Japanese restaurants began to change, with more Korean, Chinese, and Thai immigrants joining the field.

And sushi began appearing in local supermarkets – in no small part thanks to Kaz, who brokered a deal with Whole Foods to place Sushi-Ko chefs in their markets to prepare sushi to go (Kaz described some of the challenges of this effort, such as sourcing anti-fog boxes for the sushi, so that customers could actually see what they were

buying). Although supermarket sushi is de rigueur these days, at the time it was a relatively new concept with many logistical challenges to be worked out.

In 1999, after a decade at Sushi-ko, Kaz opened his namesake restaurant Kaz Sushi Bistro. Although he already had nearly a decade of experience managing Sushi-Ko, Kaz says that the restaurant opening was still the biggest challenge of his life. He relied on the help and support of his restaurant industry friends; ten years later Kaz Sushi Bistro has received widespread critical acclaim and is one of DC's favorite Japanese eateries.

Kaz is very positive about his experience as an immigrant restaurateur; as he says "This country is treating me pretty well." He has great empathy for fellow immigrants and is generous in his willingness to sponsor talented chefs from abroad, although he cautions that if you want to come to the US, "you should really have a strong passion – it's not as easy as you think – if you want comfort, you should stay in Japan."

Kaz would like to see more visa options for restaurant workers, particularly chefs; he observes that the number of young Japanese sushi chefs in US has dwindled over the years as the visa situation has toughened. He is devoted to preserving the authenticity of Japanese cuisine in the US, and hopes that someday someone "who has power and loves Japanese food" will help make it easier to bring Japanese chefs to the US.

We hope so too!



Kaz Okochi

Becki L. Young has been working in the field of immigration law since 1995. Ms. Young's practice focuses on employment-based immigration law. She has represented employers in a variety of industries, including investment banking and securities, information technology, health care, and hospitality, providing advice on work permits and related immigration issues, and is the co-editor of *Immigration Options for Essential Workers* published by the American Immigration Lawyers Association. To learn more or to schedule a personal consultation, call 202-232-0983 or e-mail becki_young@blylaw.com.

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