

Yes, Chef
By Raymond Dinh

Copyright © 2023 Raymond Henry Dinh. All rights reserved. This article may not be reproduced, distributed, displayed, or transmitted without written permission from the author. To safeguard privacy, pseudonyms have been utilized to alter the identities of the individuals involved.

- I. When One Door Closes,
- II. Inextinguishable Flames
- III. The Menu
- IV. Mama Cozza's
- V. The Girl Who Dreamed of Stardom
- VI. A Man-Made Empire
- VII. Irasshaimase
- VIII. A Match Made in Hell
- IX. The Neverending Wheel
- X. The Glitz and Glam of Hollywood
- XI. Nobu
- XII. Another One Opens.

A thriving restaurant is founded on three fundamental pillars: respect, discipline, and hierarchy. At the core of these pillars is a reverential phrase, uttered with a sense of obedience and submission – “Yes, Chef.” These two words represent the idea that in the food service industry, the chef is the paramount figure of authority in the kitchen. The chef commands the respect and compliance of their subordinates who are expected to dutifully fulfill every given command or request.

The “Yes, Chef” culture is reminiscent of the culture of discipline and hierarchy that characterizes Japanese society, where the concept of “dō” (the way) holds great significance. This cultural philosophy places a strong emphasis on gratitude that comes with mastering a craft through unwavering dedication, practice, and persistence. Similarly, the principle is reflected in the customs of the traditional Japanese kitchen, where strict hierarchy and stations with their unique responsibilities are emphasized. The chef is held in high regard for their ability to master the craft of cooking through intense training and ambitiousness.

To illustrate, the relationship between a chef and their subordinate can be viewed as that of a mentor and their trainee. The “Yes, Chef” phrase represents submission and compliance to one's authoritative presence. This interpretation underscores the importance of discipline, attention to detail, diligence, and the willingness to invest time and effort in perfecting one's craft. Originally, the culture was based on the traditional French brigade system, renowned for the way it divides the kitchen into hierarchical stations, each with their respective set of duties and a chain of command.

Indisputably, the “Yes, Chef” culture is a deep facet in the world of culinary arts and extends to even broader spectrums as well — the idea of a chef is not necessarily something that has to be physically manifested to project some rule or authority. It exists symbolically as a microcosm to one's own passion for cooking, their yearning to be something greater or the sole reason why they are where they are. The presence of a chef could exist on many different planes, for example, in the reputation of one's working environment like a looming shadow watching over every minor slip-up. Or perhaps the deep subconscious guilt of a trainee who wants to impress and preserve the image of their highly esteemed superior. Maybe it's the love of the chef imbued in the generations-long recipes. Or the obligatory nature of a family-owned business. A combination of some, or a combination of all.

TWO DREAMS. ONE LOCATION. ONE FAMILY.

There's no love like a mother's love.

Perhaps that was the realization that dawned on Frank Cozza before he took a leap of faith that changed the rest of his life. When Frank embarked on his first endeavor in the culinary world, he birthed a legacy that would remain for decades: a quaint family-owned Italian restaurant located in the bustling streets of Anaheim. Nestled snugly between a post office and a gas station, Mama Cozza's has now garnered a reputation as a must-visit destination for tourists exploring Anaheim. But what's on the menu for these visiting tourists and generations of future diners lies something far more valuable than cookie-cutter Italian recipes. The heart of Mama Cozza's success entails a

rich history of familial traditions, with a lineup of carefully preserved family recipes that has essentially become the restaurant's hallmark. The journey of how Mama Cozza's came to be is a story that stretches back in time, starting with a vigilant city cop who always had his finger on the pulse.

I. When One Door Closes,

In the early 1950s, Frank Cozza devoted the majority of his time to keep the city of Anaheim safe from the clutches of crime. He was a busy man, but in his spare moments, Frank would frequent a restaurant called Costello's, relishing in its tasty food and tranquil ambience. However, fate intervened in the 60s and stripped Frank of his go-to place of solitude when Costello's was forced to relocate. The only thing left behind was a desolate beer and pool hall that struggled to gain traction and never saw the day of light. But when the establishment failed to thrive, it became an empty shell of its former self, a vacant area that brimmed with opportunity.

It only took two words to spark a glimmer of hope in Frank's heart, a message relayed to him by his wife: "For Lease." Ever since he was a kid, Frank had always yearned to make a bigger impact in the world. That was what essentially drove him to becoming one of the city's most beloved beat-cop, but Frank dreamed bigger dreams. He wanted to leave a lasting legacy beyond his time as a beat-cop. Though he relished the opportunity to serve his community and protect them from harm, he also longed to bring immense joy and happiness to their lives of the people he protected. These two desires co-existed at the same time, and the fire that burned within him flickered within each hour he spent with the monotony of desk work and mundane phone calls. But the opportunity to create something truly remarkable and unforgettable appeared at this door, it reignited that flame within him, and Frank seized it with both hands.

II. Inextinguishable Flames

Frank's quiet nights were haunted by an inexplicable yearning, an unquenchable thirst that refused to be satiated. Was it the vibrant pulse of the city he protected, the energy of the city's bustling businesses that fueled this insatiable desire? With years as a beat-cop under his belt, Frank had a vast knowledge of every corner, every twist and turn of Anaheim, and perhaps it was this familiarity with the city and its booming economy that nurtured his budding aspirations. It is not so astonishing that a man who spent his days patrolling the streets went on to found a family-owned pizzeria. And so it came to pass, in the wakeful year of 1965, that Frank took the courageous leap and became the proud proprietor of Mama Cozza's Italian Restaurant.

In the latter half of the 19th century, a wave of Italian immigrants braved the tumultuous oceans to reach the sun-drenched shores of Southern California. Drawn by the promise of emerging economic opportunities, these hopeful individuals searched tirelessly for places that would welcome them with open arms and offer them a chance at a stable life. As they settled in small, diminutive enclaves scattered throughout the state, these immigrants clung steadfastly to the cultural traditions that weaved fabrics of their own identity. In this dynamic environment, it was those esteemed establishments and restaurants like Mama Cozza's that showcased these traditions and became significant cultural landmarks, a beacon of hope shining light on these

treasured customs. Years after years, Mama Cozza's later emerged as a significant cultural landmark, a sanctuary for Italian immigrants that once sought a sense of community and belonging. Steeped in history, the restaurant was and is a bastion of Italian traditions, a melting pot of rich culinary heritage that was passed down reverentially from generation to generation.

However, just as Rome was not built in one day, neither was Mama Cozza's.

The first couple of years were full of nothing but unwavering dedication and practice. Assisted by his beloved wife, Frank deftly curated an unforgettable menu of cherished Italian recipes from his memory, launching into the endeavor with unwavering determination. However, it wasn't until three solid years following its opening that Mama Cozza's truly came into its own, with Frank's mother flying in from New York to inspect her son's burgeoning success. During this period, the restaurant lacked a unique and memorable name, likely bearing the straightforward moniker "Cozza's" prior to the arrival of Frank's mother. Upon sampling her son's offerings, Frank's mother was instantly underwhelmed, finding fault with the recipes that she harshly deemed to be inauthentic, shallow and void of any soul. Beyond that, these dishes lacked the vital spices and ingredients that truly brought those Italian flavors to life, but more importantly, they lacked the fundamental ingredient to every family dish: love.

III. The Menu

It was a monumental moment that day when Frank's mother revised the heart and soul of the restaurant. When Frank's mother added her personal touch to the restaurant's menu, she did much more than just modify the food — she left an indelible mark of affection on her son's greatest aspirations. It was in that moment that Mama Cozza's underwent a transformation, becoming more than just a restaurant, but a symbol of a beloved mother's legacy. The iconic image of an Italian woman with pearl earrings, a bun of frizzy hair, and a kind smile behind cat-eye glasses soon became the face of the restaurant's brand. After the menu was overhauled to embody the cuisine of an Italian's reverie, the business took off with fervor. Situated just two miles to the west of Disneyland, Mama Cozza's attracted droves of visitors who sought the solace of Italian comfort food.

Throughout the years, Mama Cozza's restaurant's greatest feat has been their steadfast commitment to preserving the traditional recipes that have made them a beloved culinary institution. Despite a few minor changes that have been implemented over time, at large, the menu has remained unchanged. Even today, the culinary offerings of Mama Cozza's are a delight to any regular and newcomers with its menu serving a tantalizing selection of Italian delicacies that have been thoughtfully crafted to delight even the most discerning palates. The starters evoke classic flavors typically found in Italian cuisine, such as the crispiness of bruschetta, the succulence of fried calamari, and the heartiness of minestrone soup. But the main courses are the real stars of the show, transporting diners to the sun-kissed shores of Italy, with dishes like the savory linguine with clams, the indulgent chicken parmesan, the clement linguine pasta and the fragrant shrimp scampi. Mama Cozza's also serves an array of pizzas, baked to crispy perfection and cheesy goodness. Diners seeking vegetarian options will be tempted by the aromatic eggplant parmesan, supplemented by the creamy portobello mushroom ravioli. And, to conclude

one's meal at Mama Cozza's on a sweet note, Mama Cozza's offers a luscious dessert selection that includes the velvety tiramisu, the flaky cannoli, and the rich cheesecake.

To the ordinary person seeking a hearty meal, Mama Cozza's is a haven of culinary delight. Yet to the Italian epicure, this restaurant is nothing short of their idyllic visions, a sublime harmony of flavors and impeccably the restaurant of their dreams.

IV. Mama Cozza's

The day I first dined at Mama Cozza's was a day I had been anticipating for months. I had spent the entire quarter researching the place without ever getting the chance to visit it in person. In my mind, it was almost like a celebrity; you knew a lot about the person through the internet and gossip but didn't know them personally. It was February 14th, the day love was in the air. But when I arrived on Ball street and Magnolia, the scene was rather deceiving and love was nowhere to be found in the air. Instead, I had parked on a stretch of concrete that had divots full of water. The dark clouds made for a rather depressing and melancholic mood, and a fishy odor that came from the rainwater lingered in the air.

The day of my inaugural visit to Mama Cozza's was one I had fervently awaited for months. Throughout the quarter, I had invested myself fully in the study of this establishment, and until then, it was a fabricated place that had only existed in my mind's eye until then. It was somewhat akin to a celebrity, a figure whose entire life story was well-known through gossip and online forums, yet whose true essence remained shrouded in mystery. The date was February 14th, a day imbued with romantic fervor and the promise of passion. However, upon my arrival on the streets of Ball and Brookhurst, I was confronted with a scene that belied the amorous spirit of the occasion. The concrete expanse where I parked was riddled with divots pocketing dirt and rainwater, and the dark clouds cast a pall of melancholy over the surroundings. To make matters worse, a distinctly pungent odor redolent of seafood permeated the atmosphere of the parking lot, likely emanating from the crevices in the darkened concrete. The scene was nothing like I had imagined it to be and barely lived up to my idyllic fantasies. Over the past few weeks, the sunny weather of California has been hit with an unexpected era of heavy rain. Knowing this prior, I would have paid the place a visit in the earlier months where the skies were blue and the sun was out. But I had made an amateurish mistake, a common misfortune of a reporter who had prioritized preparation and research over visiting the goddamn place myself. But here I was nonetheless, with open arms and an open mouth for a classic hearty meal at Mama Cozza's.

As I got closer to Mama Cozza's, the exterior of the establishment evoked a sense of nostalgia within me, like a distant memory from my childhood. It resembled a weathered castle or rustic tavern from the medieval era. I assumed it was the faded paintings of the grapes and vines adorning the beige walls that elicited this feeling. But the doors themselves were reminiscent of a time long ago, when knights and royalty made their grand entrances through towering oak portals, replete with square wooden panels and dark gray metallic accents.

I crossed the threshold into a vastly unknown world and almost immediately, the warmth of the tavern enveloped me like a cozy blanket. The first room I encountered featured a bustling bar

and several occupied dining booths, filled to the brim with diners seeking respite from the outside world. Although I had anticipated a warm welcome from a waiter, I was instead met with quizzical glances and an uneasy silence. Undeterred, I pressed on through the throngs of diners, shooting a glance at a group of middle-aged men savoring their cold beers.

The second room provided a brief respite from the clamor of the first, its narrow confines bathed in a warm, ambient glow. My only threat then wasn't a real threat at all; an elderly couple were seated against the wall, enjoying their meals in quiet companionship. I initially didn't want to disturb their quiet afternoon, and still feeling somewhat disoriented, I continued my exploration into the third room. This was the room I had studied in the pictures. Greeted by familiar red-and-white picnic coverings adorning the tables, I noted the ghostly presence of this room. As I gazed upon the hanging family portraits and stood in the utter silence of the empty space, I felt like a kid entering a forbidden room so I retraced my steps back into the second room and finally settled into a cozy booth. Above me stood a wooden shelf adorned with three mug-sized miniature statues of seafarers, hinting at the culinary delights that awaited me.

I reached for my phone in a poor attempt to seem preoccupied. Shortly after, my attention was captured by the entrance of a waitress named Alana. She was around my age, slightly younger with long, brown hair and a bright, inviting smile. Dressed in a classic black apron and carrying a notepad, she welcomed me to the restaurant and asked for my order. My stomach growled with hunger and knowing that I had to savor every bite, I opted for the Mama Cozza's special pizza, a decadent angel hair pasta smothered in alfredo sauce, all accompanied by a side of crispy fried calamari. I knew it was more than I could handle, but I was determined to fully immerse myself in the dining experience here at Mama Cozza's, and what better way to start than with her classic signature pizza?

As I waited for my meal, I couldn't help but marvel at the elegant atmosphere that surrounded me. It seemed that even the interior of Mama Cozza's had its warm touch that never seemed to fade over time — the decor was slightly dated, but that was all part of the charm. Mama Cozza's existed in a time capsule from the very day Frank's mother stepped into town. Everything looked the exact same as it did in the pictures that dated back years and years ago, and I got a sense that the place didn't look that different when the establishment was first introduced as well. The walls boasted fragmented pieces of brown bricks that were carefully scattered across the room, arranged in a way to accent the décor. The hanging lamps were a sight to behold with its basking warm lights, adorned with delicate glass cup shades and complemented by wooden fan blades, though the center lamp inexplicably lacked its blades for a reason I could not fathom. In the far reaches of the room, a verdant booth captured my attention with its dim illumination drawing me even closer. Tucked away in its own secret corner, there was a framed black-and-white photograph of Frank Cozza during his time as a beat-cop, dressed in his recognizable police uniform. The picture was also accompanied by framed props like his trusty revolver and documents detailing his life as an officer. It was clear that the family's rich history permeated every corner of this establishment, with the third dining room dedicated entirely to the Cozza family's portraits, awards, and commendations. To the casual diner, the minutiae of such embellishments might seem trivial and irrelevant. But for those highly acquainted with the Cozza family's narrative, each element of embellishment held its own significant, personal resonance.

As Alana returned with my order and placed my meal before me, my senses were immediately stimulated by the sight and aroma of these savory dishes. The signature pizza from Mama Cozza's kitchen arrived on a silver platter with a small pizza cutter on the side, inviting me to delve into its rich flavors. I decided to salvage more room in my stomach by opting for the pizza in its smaller size, unaware of the challenge that lay ahead — with each bite, the toppings of juicy sausage, tangy anchovies, and diced vegetables tumbled over the crust. Shortly after pulling away each slice from my teeth, the structure of the dish threatened to crumble beneath them. Still, I relished the experience as the delectable cheese perfectly harmonized the creamy alfredo sauce smothering the long, rolled-up strands of pasta on my fork. The crispy texture of the fried calamari also added its own unique touch of oceanic goodness to my taste buds, perfectly replacing the crispiness that was never achieved with the pizza's soft exterior.

Suddenly, I was somehow enveloped by a unique sense of unfamiliar familiarity. Despite the atmosphere's inviting nature, there was a whimsical quality to the interior that transported me to a place of childhood memories. For a lack of better words, I felt like I was dining at an Italian restaurant at Disneyland. Italian classics like "Funiculi, Funicula" that played in the background only added to this feeling of nostalgia, reminding me of the stereotypes and tropes found in films that depict cookie-cutter Italian culture. But I knew deep down that this restaurant was the real deal, far more superior in authenticity to the cheap carbon-copy imitations found at places like Disneyland. As I observed the intricate details of the interior, I began to recognize the danger in failing to distinguish between true authenticity and its artificial replicas. While restaurants at Disneyland are similar with their specifically crafted props and set pieces, I felt that they could never have truly captured the magic of a place that authentically borne all the rich Italian traditions in its interior design.

V. The Girl Who Dreamed of Stardom

After I finished my meal, I requested a styrofoam box to store my leftovers in. By this time, the lunch hour was over, and the restaurant was a lot less crowded now. The rainy skies had lifted, and I walked over to Alana and thanked her. I asked her if she would be comfortable with an interview, and given that the restaurant was practically empty and other workers were present at the bar, she decided that she had the time for an interview.

The great-great-great-great granddaughter of Frank Cozza's, Alana Cozza was always a dreamer. But she had always had a different dream than the one he had. Now at the age of 19, Alana longs for the day when she could trade in her apron and serving tray for the bright lights of Hollywood as a famous actress or singer. But she had already spent ten years working at Mama Cozza's, and it all came with a cost.

"Not a lot of people have something like this," she told me. Alana hinted at her family's business, a family-owned restaurant that has been kept on its legs for generations and generations. In a way, this was her second home. But it all came with a cost. Alana often wonders what it's like to be in the limelight and adored by the rest of the world. When she washes the dishes and cleans the kitchen, she quietly hums to herself. She was known as the singer of the family, a running joke that her aunts and uncles would tease about her. After all, Alana's dreams never seemed too far-fetched or too complex; she just never knew how to make

them a reality. She joined talent shows and school plays whenever she got the chance and became a well-loved member of her theater troupe at Loara high school. Still, she was nowhere near the height of fame she wanted to reach, and her time at the restaurant sometimes felt like a joke of mockery.

The customers came and went, each with their own stories. Some worked in the movie industry while others worked as cast members at Disneyland. The quaint location of Mama Cozza's also made it a hidden gem to celebrities seeking an Italian meal away from the paparazzi. It wasn't uncommon either to see a famous actor or musician dining at Mama Cozza's. The most noteworthy visitors have been Gwen Stefani, Frank Sinatra, Quentin Tarantino and other figures who have had a glimpse of a lifestyle Alana has forever yearned for.

"You work at the restaurant, Cam. Not in Hollywood," her mother told her during her junior year of high school. Earlier that week, Alana had found information about some acting camp in the paper. At the time, it was all she could think about. Was this her golden ticket to fame? When Alana finally mustered the courage to ask her mother about it, her mother had told her that it was too expensive, and she would be more successful by putting her mind into other things. Education was never something that was urgently emphasized either; every family member of the Cozza's family had a guaranteed lifetime job at the restaurant anyway.

"At first, I really enjoyed it. I mean, I was just a kid, you know? I didn't know what I wanted to be yet, and I wanted to help my family out as much as I can," Alana says, reflecting on the summers she spent there as a kid. Since she was the age of nine, Alana had grown up working at her family's restaurant. Her work there entailed small tasks like wiping down the tables and windows, washing the dishes and sweeping the floors. During the summer, she remembers feeling differently and reminisces on her past when her dreams and reality didn't feel so far away as they do now.

"Sometimes, my friend's families would visit and dine there for the night. I don't remember how old I was, maybe I was ten, but I remember joining them once, and it was like I was finally seeing things from their point of view," Alana took a deep breath before continuing. "Besides the fries and onion rings and little snacks, I don't think I really ate at the restaurant a lot so trying our food was something new to me. [It] also felt awkward, you know? It felt weird seeing my family members doing their jobs and feeling like I wasn't part of that, like I was just a normal diner at the restaurant."

That day felt like a whirlwind of emotions for a young girl to experience, but even to this day, Alana often reflects on what it was that stirred such a disoriented feeling.

"I was born to uplift my family's legacy. It was just kinda something that I was always meant to do," Alana said, brushing her long brown hair away from her face. The image of a damsel in distress, like the Disney princess Rapunzel, came to mind, as she recounted her tale of being torn between her familial duties and her aspirations for a different future. I noticed a fleeting look of sadness in her eyes. She glanced away.

"Is this what you want to be doing?" I asked her.

“It’s hard. That’s all I can really say about it. I love my family. I love working here. I love helping them and bringing a smile to our customers. It’s what I do best. This place is like my second home, you know? I’m expected to be here, always. The last thing I want to do is seem selfish or make it look like I don’t care about the restaurant. But sometimes, I can’t imagine myself being anywhere else. But I know that deep down, I have other things that I want to do when I’m older too.”

I returned home later that day with a delectable souvenir of my first experience dining at Mama Cozza’s, a box of leftovers. My heart, too, was filled with a deeper appreciation for the restaurant’s genuine homage to Italian culture, and my mind lingered on the stories of Alana’s tale. As I revisited our interview, I contemplated the long history of Mama Cozza’s and the Cozza family, the rich tapestry of their family’s heritage. Yet, my thoughts inevitably returned to the youthful, starry-eyed Alana, who was caught between the timeless traditions of her family’s legacy and her own desires to bask in the limelight of stardom. I wondered whether she would remain at Mama Cozza’s forevermore, or whether she would one day have the opportunity to pursue her dreams and achieve the heights of fame and fortune.

TWO DREAMS. FORTY-SEVEN LOCATIONS. ONE MAN.

Behold the opulence of the Nobu franchise, the epitome of Japanese culinary mastery and a longstanding beacon of Hollywood’s glitz and glamor. Amidst this world of Nobu at Newport Beach, the tides are higher, and the sea is bluer than ever, as the waterfront at Lido Marina Village stands witness to one of the 47 distinctive locations spanning the five continents. The elaborate menu of fusion Japanese cuisine offered at Nobu is complemented by its serene coastal location, offering the perfect blend of tranquility and elegance to its diners.

The menu itself is a vast expanse of fine dining delicacies for society’s upper crust, offering traditional Japanese sushi such as California rolls and thinly-sliced Niguri, as well as "Nobu-style" sashimi tacos and other exquisite fusion dishes. Since its first opening, Nobu has been well known for blending traditional Japanese dishes with the bold flavors of Peruvian ingredients. The intricately cooked and expertly presented array of dishes are sights to behold for each and every guest.

Inside, the indoor dining area is a sleek and modern masterpiece, featuring contemporary furnishings, low ambient lighting, and wood accents that create a sophisticated atmosphere. The coastal setting of the location, combined with Nobu’s unparalleled attention to detail and emphasis on quality, results in a dining experience that is all the more inviting and refined.

The very first Nobu restaurant of the franchise, and indeed the inaugural culinary establishment of a franchise that master chef Matsuhisa could truly call his own, was established amidst the sun-kissed streets of Los Angeles in 1987. Perched tantalizingly close to the boundaries of opulent Beverly Hills and just south of the Sunset Strip, the first incarnation of Matsuhisa’s gastronomic masterpiece was humble in its origins. At first, the restaurant boasted nothing more than a diminutive sushi bar with a mere thirty-eight seats. However, as the word of Nobu began

to spread, so too did the establishment grow in both grandeur and size, expanding to accommodate an additional twenty-seven diners in its midst.

Still, whether it be a solitary guest or a bustling congregation of sixty-five, Nobu Matsuhisa's greatest honor as chef was always to bring joy and contentment to those who seek out his artful cuisine. Fueled by his own history of struggle and error, as well as the devastating loss of his father, it was this altruistic goal that has driven Matsuhisa out the darkest days of his life and towards culinary excellence.

Far from being another culinary powerhouse amongst others in the Japanese sushi food industry, this ever-evolving and endlessly captivating franchise harkens back to the tumultuous past of a wise man. A wise man who dared to dream and searched the ends of the earth to make his dreams a reality.

VI. A Man-Made Empire

Nobuyuki Matsuhisa, the indomitable embodiment of what a chef can achieve when they stay true to their dreams, stands tall as an inspiration to many. Nevertheless, the celebrated chef had to face a great deal of hardship in his formative years.

At the tender age of eight, Matsuhisa lost his father. His recollections of his childhood remain fragmented, save for the vivid image of his father, whom he cherished deeply. It always seemed that this one man in his life was always on the go. He was a busy man who ran a lumber business in Sugito that often required him to travel overseas alone. On rare and special occasions, he would sometimes take Matsuhisa along with him on his motorcycle when the trips were smaller and they had time to traverse the countryside. But at large, his demanding schedule left little time for his four children.

On a fateful day, Matsuhisa returned from school and implored his father to take him along to work. After some coaxing, his father finally relented and drove them a few blocks down the street before deciding that his scheduled trip was too far this time. As he continued to go alone and faded into the distance, Matsuhisa watched on, wrestling a profound sense of abandonment that continued to haunt him to this day. Weeks later, his father was found dead in a fatal car crash, leaving a deep and lasting scar on the young chef. Though Matsuhisa often found it frustrating and difficult to recall his memories of his father in this fragmented manner, he always found solace in reminiscing his father's constant movement as a busy working man. Instead of blaming the universe and harboring resentment towards his father's work ethic, Matsuhisa had actually grown to admire his father's fearless pursuit of uncharted territories and his unwavering determination to succeed. So there it was.

Nobu Matsuhisa's first dream was to travel overseas, just like his father.

VII. Irasshaimase

But at the age of 17, Matsuhisa hit a wall. After a reckless night of drinking and driving, it was nothing short of a miracle when Matsuhisa himself survived a car accident. Due to his harmful

and inconsiderate behavior, the school had no choice but to expel him in the following days, and the court ordered him to be placed under probation until he turned 20. To this day, Matsuhisa believed that it was the spirit of his father that protected him that night in the car.

Deep inside Matsuhisa's memory, there was one moment in time that had forever left an indelible mark on the chef's life. It was a time later that year when his eldest brother Noboru took him to dine at Uokou, a quaint sushi bar located in front of the local train station. During that time, sushi had been a delicacy out of reach for Matsuhisa, and the conveyor belt sushi had not yet been invented. Sushi restaurants were rare, and it was unlikely for him to step foot into one.

“Irasshaimase!” (meaning “Welcome!”) The warm welcome from the staff reverberated through his being as he ducked under the noren (shop curtain) and stepped into the vast world of sushi cuisine. It was his first time eating it, and his experience was one to remember. Matsuhisa's recollection of this scene later became a testament to his keen senses: the fluid-like movement of the chefs, the joyful smiles and conversations shared by customers, the glistening sheen of the sushi toppings and the aroma of the sushi rice. It was a world that Matsuhisa had never experienced before that day, but in that moment, the young aspiring chef realized that he had not one, but two, dreams to chase after.

From that day on, Matsuhisa realized that he wanted to do two things. Like his father, he wanted to travel overseas. But after that day, Mastuhisa wanted to become a sushi chef.

As he matured, Matsuhisa's wanderlust grew, and his travels brought him to many kitchens across various parts of Japan. Perhaps this was a way for him to accomplish both of his dreams — it was hard to say that Nobu had found a place to call home as he was always on the move. He often found it harder to differentiate the places where he slept and the places where he worked. On nights when the day's work had been complete, Nobu's place of rest was almost always located above the restaurant itself. By the time he had reached the age of 18, he had honed his craft at various restaurants through a myriad of different working positions. Sometimes he worked as an early trainee who was never promoted while other times, he cooked and worked as a mentor. Slowly but surely, Matsuhisa began mastering the intricacies of cooking through his apprenticeships. With each passing day, Matsuhisa's passion for cooking sushi intensified, driving him further in his quest to achieve culinary perfection. It felt as though two worlds of his were merging into one; Matsuhisa was all over the place, quitting one job just to work another as if he were running down a list of process and elimination. But it was truly through his trials and tribulations of each apprenticeship that led Nobu to absorb the customs and traditions of Japanese cuisine. And he knew it, Nobu had embraced the hierarchical elements that defined the kitchen.

VIII. A Match Made in Hell

When one door closes, another one opens. This productive and on-moving lifestyle of his seemed to define the many arcs in Matsuhisa's life. But he wasn't completely alone in this sporadic journey; Matsuhisa married a woman named Yoko after catering to her as a server at one of his apprenticeships. While he keeps this part of his story rather private, Yoko's supportive presence in his life brought him the immense confidence that he needed as the journey intensified.

Wanting to expand his culinary horizons, Matsuhisa made the decision to leave his hometown of Saitama in Japan and venture off to the lands of Peru where he was offered a job by a Peruvian businessman named “Don Lucho.” It was his time in this country that truly opened his eyes to the culinary arts, and it was the sole ingredient of cilantro that forever changed his world. Here, Matsuhisa learned to not shun ingredients that he initially found intimidating to try as it later became one of the signature ingredients of many Nobu dishes. After witnessing his passion in Japan apprenticeships, Lucho was drawn to Matsuhisa’s skills and the two became a dream-team, renovating one of Lucho’s former establishments where lived to become Matsuhisa’s first owned restaurant. He named his restaurant Matsuei-sushi and catered to nearly a hundred guests with a twelve-seat sushi bar on the first floor and dining tables on the second floor. Old behaviors became a force of habit as Yoko and her husband slept on the third floor above the restaurant.

This stable life, however, only lasted a mere three years before it all came crashing down. Due to laws that prevented foreigners from holding a majority stake, Lucho owned 51% of the shares in their business while Matsuhisa owned 49%. During this time, Matsuhisa had focused on implementing quality ingredients from the market into their menu, but this clashed with Lucho’s goals as he emphasized that the profit always came before the quality of their food. In a heated conversation with Lucho, Matsuhisa felt his dreams all slowly falling apart. The once dream-team was no longer working harmoniously together, and Lucho’s infatuation with the money began to frustrate Matsuhisa. In a hasty split-second, Matsuhisa announced that he was quitting.

Although he was only still in his twenties, Matsuhisa felt that he was living the life of a retiree. His wife had given birth to their firstborn and unemployed with nowhere to run, Matsuhisa and his wife made the decision to return to Japan, a decision that forever haunted him as it reminded him of his failure; he hated himself for not being able to provide for his family.

When Matsuhisa left his hometown, he left with a dream. But when he returned, he was disillusioned and lost.

IX. The Neverending Wheel

As one door closed, miraculously, another one opened. If it was one saving grace that always had Matsuhisa’s back, it was always going to be all the connections and networking he did throughout his lifetime. Restaurants were a chance for him to meet people of all different walks of life, and one of his friends, Nobuo Kaneko was opening his own establishment in Alaska. So then again, Matsuhisa left Japan with his dream.

He was determined this time to make things work. Matsuhisa had already sacrificed his time with his newborn child and his wife, both whom he had left back in Japan while he worked to earn the money to support them. With another baby on board, the pressure for him was at an all-time high. Kioi, the Japanese restaurant of Kaneko, was still under construction when he first arrived in Alaska, so Matsuhisa replaced his kitchen knife with a saw and hammer and helped them build Kaneko’s establishment. A few months later, the restaurant finally opened. Business was brisk, and for a moment, Matsuhisa sighed in relief.

For fifty days, Kioi was Matsuhisa's saving grace during a desperate time in his life. He thought it was his escape, but later one night, Matsuhisa received an ominous call from his partner at the restaurant. Kioi had burned down in flames.

Matsuhisa entered the darkest era of his life. He spent countless nights drinking and when he slept, he dreamed of dreams where he threw himself into the ocean before letting the tides swallow him. It was an unforgettably dark time in his life that felt like it had lasted for eternity; the only cure for Matsuhisa was hearing his own children's laughter. Their innocence and purity sparked an immense sense of joy within him and slowly drew him back to reality. Here, Matsuhisa decided to revise his pursuit. This was the story of his life — one day, he'd fall off the spinning wheel. The next day, he was back on his feet.

This time, he wanted to be patient in his approach, carefully relishing every moment he had with his wife and their children. He had tried his best and gave life his best shot. But he was still alive, and his family was still there. For the first time in his life, Matsuhisa lived his life without the suffocating ambition of his own dreams.

One millimeter a day.

X. The Glitz and Glam of Hollywood

The journey that marked the beginning of Matsuhisa's emergence from the depths of obscurity led him to the picturesque country of Argentina. Here, he immersed himself in the culinary arts as a sushi chef, delving into a realm of experimentation that would soon ignite his passion for blending Japanese and South American flavors and techniques. Matsuhisa's meticulous approach was evident as he carefully crafted dishes to incorporate unfamiliar ingredients like Argentine beef, which he had never used before in Japanese cuisine.

This marked the first stepping-stones of a journey that would later come to define his skillful mastery of fusion cuisine. Driven by a burning desire to reignite old experiences, Matsuhisa made the bold decision to journey to Peru, the place where he was once exposed to new and daunting flavors. Shortly after, he launched another restaurant, "El Pacifico," where he seamlessly fused his Japanese cooking techniques with the ingredients and flavors of Peru. After years of honing his craft in Peru, Matsuhisa later opened his next restaurant, Matsue, in the enchanting city of Buenos Aires. In 1987, Matsuhisa ventured to Los Angeles in 1987, and opened Matsuhisa Restaurant followed by another establishment named Matsu in Beverly Hills. It would have been impossible for the chef to maintain each independent restaurant; before moving onto another establishment, Matsuhisa would have to shut down one establishment. When one door closes, another one opens — that seems to be the motto of Matsuhisa's life.

Despite the high successes of these restaurants, Matsuhisa's breakthrough came with the opening of Nobu in 1994. Partnering with Robert De Niro and other investors, Nobu quickly became the talk of the town thanks to its innovative fusion of Japanese and Peruvian cuisine, solidifying Matsuhisa's place as a master of culinary creativity.

Nobu later evolved to becoming a franchise and the ultimatum of Matsuhisa's greatest wishes and dreams. Nobu restaurants were launched in several parts of the world like New York, Las Vegas, London, Hong Kong and Malibu, amounting to a total of 47 different locations. Still, Matsuhisa tends to each one of them like they were his own children and frequently travels to each one, providing new feedback with each visit. By doing so, Matsuhisa is able to ensure that each location adheres to the same high standards and provides the same level of quality and service that customers have come to expect from the Nobu brand.

Nobu's magnetic charm has attracted countless celebrities for romantic dinners, establishing itself as a hotbed for A-listers. From Beyonce and Jay-Z to George Clooney and Amal Alamuddin, Nobu's enchanting environment has entranced some of the biggest names in Hollywood. Nevertheless, the restaurant's food and service quality are just as integral to its appeal as its celebrity clientele. Over the years, Nobu has built a reputation for itself thanks to its culinary artistry and infallible duty to provide patrons with a divine dining experience that is beyond compare.

XI. Nobu

As I arrived at the gates of Lindo Marina Village in Newport Beach, I was already filled with anticipation for what my night at Nobu would entail. A \$35 parking fee and a \$60 reservation fee were a few of the small prices I had to pay when it came to my first dining experience here. Among a sea of picturesque shops and restaurants at the plaza, Nobu was truly the belle of the ball. It was the busiest hour of the day, and I had arrived at the perfect time. Determined to experience every facet of the magical dining experience that Nobu promised, I checked in with an employee outside the restaurant before briskly walking towards the entrance. The sun was beginning to set, casting a warm orange glow over the elegant wooden doors and lush green foliage surrounding the entrance. The metallic letters "Nobu" stood out against the wooden door and the dark, black exterior of the establishment. As I admired the minimalistic desire of the exterior, a woman and her boyfriend walked past me, holding each other's arms as they graced through the large oak doors. She wore a dark red velvet dress and platform heels while her boyfriend sported a Hawaiian button-up shirt and loafers.

By the time I made my way inside, I had already lost sight of the pair and was immediately starstruck in an exquisite lobby that took my breath away. The soft light from a circular skylight illuminated the lobby, casting a soft glow over the entire space. An array of lightbulbs were suspended from the ceiling, nestled within textured, woven white fabric. The lobby was tastefully decorated with a comfortable lounge area, featuring a long curved couch that was surrounded by vibrant green shrubs and plants.

On the side of the lobby was a grand winding staircase, with dark grey metallic handles that glistened in the soft light. Its majestic design resembled an exquisite ballroom, the elegant kind featured in a Disney film as the princess made her way down to greet her dashing beast. The staircase was guarded by glass panels that added to the elegance of the space, its transparent and clear texture adding texture to an already visually stunning palace. Against the wall was a panel of wooden sticks that were arranged in a unique pattern, resembling alternating wooden ladders, somewhat reminiscent of the architecture of a shoji. The soft orange light that illuminated the space perfectly to highlight the calculated shapes of the square wooden panels.

As I made my way further into the restaurant, I couldn't help but feel overwhelmed by the beauty and opulence of the space. Matsuhisa's attention to detail and their commitment to creating a luxurious dining experience was truly unparalleled. The first floor expanded into a long hallway of dining tables and chairs, all sporadically placed with no rooms or structures to create any division in the space, making it all the more anxiety-inducing to navigate this world. I was escorted by a waitress to my seat, a lonely table with one chair near the glass window overlooking the balcony. I sat down and immersed myself in this environment.

The first thing I noticed was the amount of couples here. They were all dressed in fancy attire; I don't think I saw one cotton t-shirt making an appearance at Nobu. Whether it was a structural cocktail dress or a classic button up, the patrons here knew how to dress for the occasion. Of course, there was the one guy with the Hawaiian shirt, but the attempt was still there. Suddenly, I felt a little foolish with my outfit choice. Knowing that I wanted to dress the part, I opted for a black slick designer suit. The designer brand Dickson Lim was known for its innovative, deconstructed designs, and my blazer really emulated that sentiment with its bodice featuring two sharp buttoned cutouts that resembled two crossed swords. I completed the ensemble with my black pleated slacks and leather Prada loafers. I had parted my hair down the middle, letting the dark brown tousled waves frame my face. My mom always liked my hair that way. That's the But somehow, I managed to still be overdressed, even when dining with society's upper crust.

When it came time to order my meals, I ordered periodically. I quickly came to realize that I had prepared myself with the knowledge and history of Nobu's upbringing, yet I knew very little of what the food was actually like. I made an effort to choose a combination of dishes that I knew of, dishes that featured familiar ingredients and unfamiliar dishes that I had an inkling that I would come to enjoy.

1. Yellow Tail Sashimi with Jalapeños

Immediately, I was held back by the stunning presentation of the dish. It was a rather small dish that could barely satiate one's appetite fully, but the intricate arrangement of the ingredients were visually impeccable. Six thinly sliced sheets of yellowtail fish circled the dish, paired with a thin slice of fresh jalapeño at the end of each tail. And in the center of this beautiful arrangement: cilantro.

The composition of the slices resembled a fan with blades, drenched in a light, delicate brown sauce. My first taste of Nobu was an unforgettable balance between savory and sweet; the thinly sliced fish was coated in a subtle buttery shell, complementing the sweetness of the sauce. The jalapeños and cilantro added a nice texture to the wet delicacy of the dish. The sauce itself featured an elaborate concoction of soy sauce, yuzu juice and olive oil, all making for a rich and flavorful dip that had hints of umami savory goodness.

2. Black Cod with Miso

My next dish consisted of flaky black cod filets. In terms of visual presentation, the dish was elegant and clean but ultimately forgettable. What ultimately caught my eye was its rich and dreamy colors: the fish filet, marinated in a sweet and savory miso sauce and

caramelized to golden brown perfection, rested on a bed of thinly sliced scallions and fried vegetables. The slightly charred edges of the filet contrasted beautifully with its warm, rich colors of brown, beige and orange.

The fish fell apart delicately upon contact with the fork and slipped into my mouth. Suddenly, I had an intense craving to pair this dish with white rice. The juicy and tender fish had a complex flavor that tantalized my taste buds with every bite, melting to pieces as I enjoyed my second dish.

3. Tuna Tataki with Ponzu Sauce

Bearing a similar presentation to the Yellowtail dish, the Tuna Tataki dish featured thinly sliced pink tuna, all elaborately arranged in a circular pattern with some slices overlapping each other. Garnished with grated daikon radish, sliced scallions and microgreens, the vivid arrangement of colors rendered this dish as one of the most unforgettable ones of the night.

Topped off with a green herbal leaf in the center known as shiso, the plate was a beautiful delight for seafood enjoyers. The tender texture of the tuna contrasted richly with the tangy flavors of the Ponzu sauce, all culminating in a tart and refreshing taste. The tuna was exceptionally fresh and bold with its rich flavors, transporting me to the calm tides of the shore outside. Matsuhisa's attention to high-quality ingredients evidently shone in this piece.

4. Wagyu Beef with Anticucho Sauce

My last and favorite dish at Nobu featured succulent pieces of premium Wagyu beef, elevated to new heights through an expert blend of spices and seasonings. The grilled meat was the real showstopper of the night with its crispy exterior and an alluring smoky aroma. The Anticucho sauce that accompanied it was a revelation, a perfect harmony of soy sauce, minced garlic, ginger, and fiery Peruvian Aji Amarillo peppers.

With each bite, the bold and unforgettable burn of the sauce mingled with the buttery, rich texture of the beef. I was struck by the dish's complex notes of savory and sweetness, which played off each other in perfect balance. The symphony of flavors was truly nothing short of a culinary masterpiece.

As the night wind gently brushed past my skin when I headed to the car, I felt the warmth of satisfaction emanating from deep within. It was my first memory dining here at Nobu, yet its flavors lingered on my taste buds, tantalizing and exquisite, like a lingering perfume. From the succulent pieces of Wagyu beef to the delicate, melt-in-your-mouth slices of Yellowtail fish, every bite had been a memorable experience of pure indulgence.

XII. Another One Opens.

A week after, I had gotten the chance to share my experience with a current Nobu employee. Nora is a 23 year-old woman with a fierce passion for culinary artistry. In 1999, Nora was born in Kyoto, Japan where she grew up with her parents, grandparents and younger brother. Her grandma was a talented home cook who taught Nora the art of traditional Japanese cuisine, and Nora quickly developed a passion for cooking at a young age.

“Sometimes, I think about the days I spent in the kitchen with my grandma. When I was ten, I think that was when I [truly] discovered my love of cooking. I probably enjoyed making something with my own hands as any kid would. But [even as a child,] I was drawn to the colors, and the textures, and the different flavors of food. I was definitely a foodie.”

Nora learned the craft of making sushi at a young age thanks to her late grandmother, and the interactive and meticulous process was something that greatly appealed to her. She loved following the procedure, the delicacy of each step. To her, it felt like food was a game of assembling pieces to create something substantial and meaningful.

Now at 23, her talent for creating exceptional dishes for Nobu customers has sparked her inner creativity. From home, Nora also works as a graphic designer for a boutique business in Yorba Linda. Blending her passion for art in different ways has kept the young artist content with her life, but Ren's first journey into the world of fine dining was initiated by an intense desire to explore and discover her creative potential. It was the fine-tuning of her skills, gained by nothing other than meticulous and persistent practice over the years that allowed her to land the job in the first place.

Being part of the Nobu team was nothing short of a dream come true for Nora. On a personal level, it offered her the platform to showcase her skills to a sophisticated and selective audience whose orders consisted of meticulously crafted plates. With each dish she creates, she takes immense pride in upholding the revered reputation of Nobu Matsuhisa, infusing her passion and zeal into every aspect of her work.

“That’s the part that I value the most about my job. Even though I’m just one Nobu employee, it still feels like I get to make a difference. Like I get my own say when I’m making these dishes for our customers. Even though they’re all under Nobu’s vision, I feel like I still play a part in his legacy.”

Nora doesn't consider her job at Nobu as mere employment; rather, it is simply her calling. Each day presents an opportunity for her to explore, experiment, and create new flavors, techniques, and combinations, relentlessly striving to push the boundaries of her craft. Her greatest source of inspiration traced back to the man who made all of this a possibility in the first place.

“I feel a lot of pride being able to work for Nobu. I’ve met him countless times before, and I think he’s a very humble and generous man. I’ve thought of him as someone who was very inspirational to me because he basically started from scraps and worked his way up.”

With her unwavering dedication and fervor, Nora feels destined to carve a permanent niche in the world of fine dining, leaving her own personal mark in a legacy of culinary perfection.

“The hardest part about my job is making sure that each dish I send out is perfect. It all has to be perfect. It’s the kind of working under pressure that pushes me to be the best version of myself. I’m a 5’2 girl working in a kitchen of tall angry men, and everyone’s always running around. So it’s a lot of pressure,” Nora laughs. “But at the end of the day, it’s a very rewarding process.”

“Is this what you want to be doing?” I asked her.

“Yeah, I feel like this is where I’m meant to be,” said the Nobu employee.

Works Cited

- French, Sally. "Mama Cozza's Celebrates 45 Years." *Orange County Register*, Orange County Register, 13 July 2010, <https://www.ocregister.com/2010/07/13/mama-cozzas-celebrates-45-years/>.
- Friend, Nina. "How Chef Nobuyuki Matsuhisa Turned Nobu into a Culinary Powerhouse." *Food & Wine*, Food & Wine, 28 Apr. 2022, <https://www.foodandwine.com/chefs/chef-nobuyuki-matsuhisa-nobu-empire>.
- Hynum, Rick. "How an Ex-Beat Cop Founded a Pizza Institution in L.A." *PMQ Pizza Magazine*, 26 Feb. 2023, <https://www.pmq.com/mama-cozzas/>.
- "Kitchen Culture: The End of 'Yes, Chef?'" *Institute of Culinary Education*, 1 Jan. 1970, <https://www.ice.edu/blog/kitchen-culture-end-yes-chef>.
- Matsuhisa, Nobuyuki. *Nobu: A Memoir*. Emily Bestler Books/Atria, 2019.
- Rao, Tejal. "At Nobu Malibu, Dream Time with the Famous and Almost Famous." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 28 June 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/28/dining/nobu-malibu-review.html>.
- Special To The Orange County Register. "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives Loves Anaheim Italian Eatery." *Orange County Register*, Orange County Register, 31 Aug. 2010, <https://www.ocregister.com/2010/08/31/diners-drive-ins-and-dives-loves-anaheim-italian-eatery/>.
- Vora, Shivani. "Nobu Matsuhisa's Hospitality Empire Expands into Tequila." *Barron's*, Barrons, 10 Mar. 2023, <https://www.barrons.com/articles/nobu-matsuhisas-hospitality-empire-expands-into-tequila-5fd16299>.