

CHEF'S CHOICE

22 Culinary Masters Tell How

JAPANESE

FOOD

CULTURE

*Influenced Their Careers
and Cuisine*



Photo credit: Nigel Parry

ERIC RIPERT

Chef/Co-Owner of Le Bernardin, New York City

Eric Ripert was born in Antibes, France and grew up in Andorra, a small country located in the eastern Pyrenees bordered by Spain and France. After attending culinary school in Perpignan, he moved to Paris and cooked at legendary La Tour D'Argent before taking a position at the Michelin three-starred Jamin. After fulfilling his military service, Eric Ripert returned to Jamin under Joël Robuchon to serve as Chef Poissonier, or Fish Cook.

In 1989, after working under Jean-Louis Palladin as Sous Chef at Jean Louis at the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C. Eric Ripert moved to New York in 1991, where Maguy and Gilbert Le Coze recruited him as Chef for Le Bernardin. In 1995, at just 29 years of age, Eric Ripert earned a four-star rating from *The New York Times*. Since then, Le Bernardin has maintained its superior status and has received universal critical acclaim for its food and service.

Eric Ripert is a frequent media guest, TV host, and the author of three award-winning cookbooks. He is president of the Jean-Louis Palladin Foundation and Chair of City Harvest's Food Council.

Influences

My first interaction with the Japanese culture was not only on the food level, but also with the service, the tableware, and the way Japanese cuisine differed from French cooking.

My first contact with Japanese cuisine was in 1984 at the first Japanese restaurant in Paris. I didn't know what sushi was. I went there because I'd heard about it, and I was curious. But I made a mistake. I thought wasabi was something sweet. The color looked so inoffensive that I ate a lot of it in one bite. Whew! That was my first contact with Japanese food! Although I was not accustomed to eating raw fish, I was fascinated by how they were preparing the rice and fish. And that incident with wasabi really made me curious about Japanese food. I also went to a yakitori restaurant in Paris. Although I couldn't see the staff grilling the yakitori, I knew they were doing it the traditional Japanese way. It felt as if this food was from another planet. I'd never seen anything like it.

The chef I worked for, Joël Robuchon, was a fanatic about Japanese food and culture. At that time in Paris, he was the first chef to go to Japan and immerse himself in the culture. And he was the first chef to bring Japanese influences into French cooking. Nobody before him had ever done that. So my first interaction with the Japanese culture was not only on the food level, but also with the service, the tableware, and the way Japanese cuisine differed from French cooking.

So while the French create sauce to hide the smell and to complement the fish, the Japanese do the opposite.

When I came to the U.S. in 1990, David Bouley took me to a Japanese restaurant, and explained the food to me, and taught me how to eat sushi and drink saké. Slowly, I developed a passion for sushi, and slowly, I absorbed it and began integrating Japanese ingredients into our cooking here at Le Bernardin. No one in the world has the reverence for fish and the knowledge about its preparation like the Japanese. Of course, the French cook fish well. However, the French invented sauce for fish a long time ago, when there was no ice or refrigeration, to hide its bad smell. So while the French create sauce to hide the smell and to complement the fish, the Japanese do the opposite. Their fish is so fresh and so beautiful that they hardly do anything to it. They find the perfect cut and add the perfect little touch that's going to elevate the fish to the next level.

Coming from a different background and discovering this philosophy has become very addictive. The more I know—and I know a little—the more I want to know. When I went to Masayoshi Takayama's restaurant in Los Angeles for the first time, it was a revelation. That guy is good! I finally went to Japan in November 2007. I ate in a lot of places where Mr. Robuchon sent me. "Go there! Go there! Go there!" I didn't even know the names of the places he referred me to because I couldn't read them. No one spoke English, and they didn't tell me the name of the restaurant. At one place there was a guy just doing tempura. And another was just doing sushi. I went to some places where they were creating food a little like the way Masa does by using tasting menus with interesting influences.

The only Japanese chef's name I remember is Jiro, because it sounded French to me. I was very impressed with his restaurant because the 78-year-old master, Chef Jiro Ono, said, "You come at 12:35 p.m., not 12:30 p.m., not 12:45 p.m., but 12:35 p.m. The rice is cooked for 12:35 p.m." When he gives it to you, you eat it immediately. The rice goes into your mouth and melts—it's extraordinary! Then you eat 20 pieces of sushi in 20 minutes—it's perfection. I was there the day they told Chef Ono that he had received three Michelin stars. He just said,

“Thank you. Eat your sushi.” I’m sure he was celebrating, but he had a very silent way of doing so. He wasn’t jumping up and down on his table or shaking his knives. But I knew he was happy, because he smiled.

Cuisine

When I look back and compare my cuisine today with what it was 15 years ago as it relates to Japanese food, I can see how my approach to cooking has evolved, no question.

I have a better understanding of cooking and a better sense of harmony because of my experiences with Japanese cuisine. But when I traveled to Japan, I experienced an avalanche of influence. I’m still digesting what I learned there. There is so much to learn. One Japanese chef studies tempura for 15 years. Another one is a sushi master, and another does just rice for 10 years. You can imagine their level of mastery! So for me, when I go to Japan and I see everything so quickly, it’s hard to digest. It’s like when you eat a beautiful chocolate cake—you have to pace yourself.

Japanese cooking is highly ritualistic. Everything is sacred, and there are certain traditional ways of doing things. This is similar to French cooking in some respects. But Japanese chefs don’t have the ego, and they don’t promote themselves like western chefs. It’s not about money—it’s not about glory. It’s about the craft, the respect for the culture, for life, the seasons, and the connection. So sharing all this is fantastic.

I have also been exposed to cooked Japanese food, and it is very different from the raw fish in sushi restaurants. All of that experience is channeled here to Le Bernardin. Now I sometimes restrain myself,

because I discover that 90 percent of the menu has a Japanese influence. Then we have to go back to French cuisine—at least a little bit! I love the idea of the exchange of culture, because it's going to create a generation of chefs who will benefit from the best of my culture as well as the best of Japanese culture. You can imagine what it's going to be in the future—it's going to be genius! I want to see the next generation. Chefs cooking today are the pioneers for the next generation of chefs, and what we will have built is a solid bridge upon which they can create even better cuisine.

It would be totally crazy to be in New York City and cook like a chef in the middle of Brittany. It would mean that we are not open to what we see around us.

Of course, there will always be traditional French cuisine, and there will always be traditional Japanese cuisine. For example, imagine you are a chef who has never been exposed to the outside world—and I'm thinking France now. If you live in the heart of Brittany and you don't have exposure to other cultures, what you do is a very traditional French cooking from Brittany, because you're inspired by your world—your neighbor, the next village, and the fishermen. So as artists, chefs are inspired by what surrounds them.

However, you cannot stop the future. And you cannot stop the fact that artists are going to be inspired by what they see and what they experience. People who are exposed to other cultures, especially in a city like New York, experience exactly the same artistic process as chefs in Brittany. We chefs are inspired by what we see and what we taste. Our cooking is fusion because cooking this way is logical and normal for us, and because we're seeing things that inspire us. It would be totally crazy to be in New York City and cook like a chef in the middle of Brittany. It would mean that we are not open to what we see around us. It's a lost battle to think that traditional is going to stay

traditional. Chefs coming here are going to see something inspiring, and they're going to want to integrate that inspiration into their cooking. So the future is fusion, no doubt.

But fusion can go too far. It's our responsibility to mentor and to educate the younger chefs to be creative without being disrespectful of tradition. And it's our role to help them understand other food cultures. If we do that, we won't see excess, but if we bring food cultures together without any guidance, we're going to see some dreadful combinations.

The French and the Japanese have strong food cultures and are respectful of their traditions, so it's very hard for them to be creative like the American chefs.

There are no boundaries here in the U.S., so we are open to anything and everything. Sometimes it's great and sometimes it's not, but in the end, I think it's positive.

Now the French are slowly looking at what the Spaniards are doing, and they're saying "Oh my God, it's great what they're doing!" It took the French 20 years! They're slow, but when they get something, with all of their culture, they're going to do something fantastic. That's progress! It's the same for the Japanese cooking culture. I think chefs in both cultures need to be shocked a little bit.

I think that Japanese food is going to be even more influential here than in the past. I think we're going to see more and more influence here and more of our ingredients over there, too. Already the French are exporting foie gras and truffles to Japan. Today, you go into a restaurant like Jiro, and they use black truffles for sushi. You go to Masa, and he uses everything. He's one of the greatest masters, and he's using white truffles from Italy, black truffles from France, foie gras—it's already fusion. The French like the Japanese a lot. The cultures are very similar—but I think the French are more grumpy.

Ingredients

Today, French chefs use many ingredients from Japan, but it wasn't always like that.

I remember cooking in France in the 1980s. If you talked about ginger, you were the “anti-Christ” of cooking! People would look at you and whisper, “That guy doesn’t know anything. He’s stupid!” In fact, at that time most chefs in France didn’t even know what ginger was. They had no clue! Maybe one chef said something bad about ginger because he didn’t know how to use it, and then every chef in France was anti-ginger. And anyone who used ginger—that guy was a clown! But no more!

As far as other Japanese ingredients go, *yuzu* goes well with French food, especially fish. This ingredient is so magical. We have never had anything like it in France. Of course, we had regular lemons, but even 15 years ago a lime was considered exotic. Today, I use *yuzu* a lot. And *miso*! I love *miso*, and we use it here at Le Bernardin in many different ways. Sometimes it’s subtle and sometimes it’s more prominent. For instance, we have a mahi mahi recipe with mushroom broth. We mix *miso*, *mirin*, and *yuzu* to make a thin paste that is the consistency of sauce. We put the mahi mahi and paste in the middle of the plate. Then we pour the broth on top, and the paste dissolves into the broth. Some guests may not necessarily know what *miso* tastes like, but I think they enjoy the broth mixed together with the sauce, because we sell it a lot.

I think one of the challenges that western chefs have when using Japanese ingredients is that we don't have the right guidance.

Sometimes, we go shopping at the Japanese grocery stores and we buy things. Sometimes, a distributor sends us ingredients or products,

but a distributor may not necessarily know enough about a product to help us use it. Then we just experiment with it. When we find an ingredient that we love, we look at it, taste it, play with it, and we then try to integrate it and use it in many different ways. But we don't have anyone who comes into the restaurant and says, "In my city in Japan, we prepare it like this and that." That would be a big help.

For instance, in one dish we used white soy sauce from Japan, and it was good. A day later, the soy sauce didn't taste as good. The next day, it became darker and changed in flavor and lost its freshness. It was the same recipe and the same soy sauce. What we didn't know was that white soy sauce oxidizes in the bottle. It would have been helpful if the rep or someone who uses this soy sauce had told me, "Watch out for this." Instead, it took us six months to figure it out. We kept wondering, "Why isn't it the same?" I'd like a shortcut to know exactly what's supposed to be done with particular Japanese ingredients and products. Of course, we can find out on our own, but it can take months of effort to understand them.

Training

When I left school, I was very proud of my certificate, but when I went into the restaurant kitchen, it was a cultural shock to find out that I was basically incompetent.

A lot of new chefs fresh out of culinary school who work in restaurants at the entry level are surprised or probably disappointed because they think they will be the next Thomas Keller. Instead, they're peeling carrots and turnips—and they still struggle to do that right! I see this a lot, but it usually doesn't take chefs long to realize that basically what the school gave them is a passport to enter a restaurant.

When I hire a cook to work at Le Bernardin, I want a person who is passionate, has good knife skills, is clean, and has a good attitude. Being a team player is important, too. A cook has to work as part of a team. For many, there's a struggle at first and an adjustment period. Then most of them understand the situation, start learning, and begin moving up. But their expectation of becoming instantly famous and making money right out of culinary school is something that really scares me. Even students graduating from the "Harvards" of the culinary world are going to get a restaurant job at the entry level, because they are really apprentices who need to spend many more years learning their trade.

When it comes to on-the-job training at Le Bernardin, we have a big team and what amounts to a mentoring program, where we have many stations around the stove and many different tasks. The first and most important task is to become a saucier, and then a sous chef. But the sous chef's job is more like a management position. It's not necessarily a cooking role, although sous chefs do cook. The saucier is the highest position, and it takes about three to four years to get there. A chef has to stay with us for at least three years or there is no hope of learning the sauce.

The sauce is the most esoteric and magical work that you can do in our kitchen, because you cannot measure flavor.

There's no such thing as "metrics of flavors" or a recipe to "add three inches of that flavor." You cannot weigh it, because you don't have "ounces of flavor." There's no way of measuring flavor—someone has to teach you or mentor you. I think it's very exciting for us to share that with the cooks. And the cooks know that the learning process of becoming an associate is something very special. That's the excitement of becoming an associate, and for us it's a way of keeping them on board and really mentoring them on good practices.

Everyone has a different palate and a different level of sensitivity. Although some chefs have better and more sensitive palates than others, chefs need to be trained in tasting. As a chef, you have to be exposed to different flavors and different products to create references in your mind. Then when you cook and you say, “I’ll put in garlic,” your mind will taste garlic exactly like a painter who imagines a color and says, “I’m going to use that red.” By storing a library of flavors in your mind, you can use those different flavors to create something harmonious, which is the final dish. And for that, you have to be trained and taught by someone who has also been taught, because you just can’t out of the blue invent a dish like that.

Sure, you can be lucky and one day make a great sauce, but tomorrow it’ll be a bad sauce, and you’ll have no idea why. It’s very important for restaurants to have consistency. You want to be good today, and you want to be good tomorrow, and in one month, with the same product. You can’t say to clients, “Sorry guys, today I was lousy, but yesterday I was a genius!”

The biggest problem I see in restaurant kitchens I’ve visited around the world is that the cooks are too busy to taste the food.

So how do we train chefs to be consistent with flavor? By tasting. Too often they do everything but taste the food! So here at Le Bernardin, we have boxes of biodegradable plastic spoons, and the chefs, including myself, constantly taste the food. And I mean constantly. We taste the food all the time. I learned that from my mentor, Joël Robuchon, who always insisted, “Taste the food! Taste the food! Taste the food!” We make sure everyone tastes.

There’s something else about flavors and taste that chefs need to know. Let’s suppose you are cooking some broth—and broth is very delicate. Water doesn’t catch flavor in the same way that fats catch flavor. Oil, animal fat, and butter retain flavor. Flavor in water is much

more volatile, and it's very different. For example, when you make tea at home, it has a certain flavor when it's first made. An hour later, it has another flavor. The tea you make in the morning—will you drink it at night? Probably not.

Sauce is the same. Broth is the same. They evolve. If the tea evolves in a cup or in a pot, just imagine how garlic and spices evolve. When you have acidity, it basically eats everything—destroys everything. But if you add it to your recipe at the last moment, it elevates the flavor. Spices—some of them evolve and expand, and some die. Garlic, depending on how you use it, sometimes brings out sweetness or sometimes the pungent flavors. If nobody tells you these things, it will take you 30 years to figure them out. That's why it's so important to teach new chefs and cooks about flavors, because they don't know if the sage in the broth is going to expand or die. Only the guy who's been trained knows.

If a dish looks beautiful and is cooked beautifully but has one little detail wrong—like the salt—the dish is dead.

Timing is essential, too. Sometimes you want to have everything infusing for a long time—like a meat stew. If you serve it right away, it's not the same today as it will be tomorrow, and the day after it may be fantastic, and sometimes three days later, it's even better. But some cooking has to be done at the last second because if you let flavors develop together, you kill everything. But if you don't taste your food and you don't know what you're serving, then whatever you've done is meaningless. If a dish looks beautiful and is cooked beautifully but has one little detail wrong—like the salt—the dish is dead. No salt, it's bland. Too much salt, it's disgusting. So every detail, every aspect of the cooking, is linked together.

This is how we train our new chefs. It is a process, and nothing can replace time. Nobody learns in an instant. It takes a lot of practice, a lot

of repetition, and it's a long process. This is the key to achieving the level of cuisine we want. There's no doubt about it—it takes time.

There is one more thing that is important in training new chefs. We cannot have someone in the kitchen who does not speak English. It's too hard to manage. For example, one time we hired a lady from Korea who was fantastic and sweet. She said, "Yes" to everything, but she didn't do anything right. We would say, "Can you do that?" She said, "Yes." We asked, "Do you understand?" She said, "Yes," and then she did it completely the opposite! This makes it very difficult for us. Cooks don't have to be experts in English, but they need to understand and be able to communicate with others in the kitchen.

I would love to learn the Japanese way of making dashi and cutting fish.

Chefs have a lot to learn from one another. I would like a Japanese chef to teach me how to make dashi. I have my own way of making dashi. Mine is much stronger, with much more intense flavors, because I think now with an American chef's mind—flavors and contrasts. Contrast to me, most of the time, elevates the main product. The biggest example of this is the use of lemon juice. It cuts the richness and gives an illusion of lightness to the fatty ingredients. That's the contrast. I notice in Japan that dashi is extremely light, and the flavors are very subtle. I love it, but I don't know how to make it harmonious so that the flavors are not spiky. I think I do a good job, and I think what we do is right for the fish, but again, I would love to learn the Japanese way of making dashi.

I also want to learn more about cutting fish. First of all, it's essential in a restaurant like Le Bernardin. And Japanese chefs are masters at cutting fish because they know the right thickness for that fish. If it's cut too thin, you lose the crunch, or if it's too thick, it's mushy in your

mouth. That's very important. And we can learn that from Japanese chefs.

When you talk to good cooks, you will find in Japan that you have good cooks and bad cooks, just as you find in France, in Italy, in Spain, and in America—worldwide. The bad cooks are the bad cooks—they don't know. But the good cooks create harmony. They understand their craft, and they understand their flavors and how to balance them. These principles are universal.

Tools

To me, cooking starts with the two most essential kitchen tools: the knife and fire or heat.

To cook, you have to learn how to domesticate fire, and then you have to learn good knife skills. There is no cooking without knives—period—because the knives give you the precision that you need to create delicacy and harmony in dishes. If I said to you, “I’m going to use ginger,” and I cut my ginger very precisely, then I’m going to be able to add exactly the amount of ginger flavor that I want to my broths. If I don’t know how to cut the ginger, I’m going to add something chunky, something big, and it’s going to totally change the dynamic of the broth. Or if I cut vegetables too thin, I can’t taste them. If they’re too big, they’re gross. So knives are at the core of cooking—I cannot cook without a good knife.

My relationship with my Japanese knives is an extension of how I approach cooking, my customers, and everything else in the restaurant—they’re all connected.

The following is an analogy between cars and Japanese knives. Let's compare driving a Ford Taurus with driving a Ferrari. The Taurus is easy—you just put it in your garage at the end of the day. A Ferrari always needs little things here and there, but the pleasure of having a Ferrari is obviously another experience. Japanese knives, for me, are Ferraris. I don't know any chef who doesn't have a sentimental relationship with his or her Japanese knives. But you must give those knives constant attention. For example, you need to sharpen them in the proper way, or you can ruin the edge. Also, you're not going to dump your Japanese knife in the water and wash it quickly. That could break or scratch the handle or blade, and you don't want the blade to be scratched—you want it to be perfect.

A Japanese knife is a beautiful but very demanding object. What I've learned about Japanese knives is that you have relationships with them, and they are temperamental and demanding because of the quality of the steel. And two things—the knife and fire—are the two most essential tools for cooking. If you haven't mastered both of these, then go make sandwiches at Wendy's.

A Day in the Life

One of the worst days of my life was my first day entering a professional kitchen—it was La Tour d'Argent in Paris—and realizing that basically I was a loser at cooking.

I was 17. First the chef said, “Cut some shallots,” and I cut myself in 10 seconds! So then he said, “Okay, go do Hollandaise sauce. I need 32 yolks.” So I start in on it, and then I told the chef that the stove was too hot. He asked, “Are you crazy?” And then I fixed too many egg

yolks and it wasn't strong enough, so he said, "Okay, go pick chervil." And I said, "What's chervil?" Then he just shook his head and said, "Where are you from? How did you end up here?"

That day I couldn't use my knives because I didn't have knife skills. I couldn't do carrot julienne. Basically, I was useless. And I realized I was useless, and I really thought I was going to be fired. That was a horrific feeling. La Tour d'Argent in the 1980s was still a very prestigious and classic restaurant and an institution in France. So I didn't want to lose that opportunity, but at the same time, I did not have the level of skill necessary for working there.

How did I survive? I worked hard. I had to learn. There was no choice. I put in very long days, but not only that, I didn't have many days off. And the kitchen—it was a very, very hot kitchen. So physically, it was very difficult to be a cook in that kitchen. But when you're 17, 18, 19, or 20, you recover.

Dominique Bouchet was the chef of La Tour d'Argent, and he's the one who kept me on board, so I'm thankful to him. After about 19 months, the biggest gift he gave me after training me was to send me to Joël Robuchon.

