

TASTE

## Fuji Ya: a tale of changing tastes

Fifty years ago, a Japanese restaurant in Minneapolis was considered exotic. The co-owner of the reincarnated Fuji Ya looks back at her family's half-century of hospitality.

By Rick Nelson (<http://www.startribune.com/rick-nelson/10645521/>) Star Tribune

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When Fuji Ya opened in meat-and-potatoes downtown Minneapolis in December 1959, the city's first Japanese restaurant must have seemed wildly exotic. By the late 1960s, owner Reiko Weston moved her business to a derelict stretch of the Mississippi riverfront -- proximity to water and a bridge were Japanese good-luck signs -- and in the process made an indelible mark on the local restaurant scene. Weston's daughter Carol Hanson, co-owner of the reincarnated Fuji Ya, looks back at her family's half-century of hospitality. (The restaurant name started out with a hyphen that was later dropped.)

**Q** Do you have any memories of the first Fuji Ya at 9th and LaSalle?

**A** I was born in 1961, so I don't, no. I've always said that the restaurant was my mom's first baby, but I was her first child. Mom and Dad divorced when I was 6 or 7, and as kids [Hanson's brother Michael is two years younger], we didn't see much of her. If we wanted to see her, we went to the restaurant. When I got older -- by that time, the restaurant had moved to the river -- my memories are about working, all the time. That's something my kids don't know anything about. To our children, going into the restaurant means, "Hey, let's eat." They think it's fun. I worked a lot. I started as a busboy and a dishwasher, and I worked my way up.

**Q** Did your parents ever tell you how they met?

**A** I'm told it was in Gen. MacArthur's office. My father was [an American] soldier and my mother was a secretary. She spoke English. They got married in 1954, and they came here in 1956. Before the war, my mom had an easy life. She was the daughter of an admiral; she had tutors and maids. After the war, she learned what it meant to starve. They had nothing. Right up to the day she died, she would hoard corned beef or canned ham in the basement. I asked her why, and she said, "Because I never want you to know what it means to starve."

**Q** No one in your family had food service in their backgrounds, so why a restaurant?

**A** My mom and dad needed to find something for my grandma and grandpa to do. Mom was at the University of Minnesota, getting her degree in math and psychology, and Dad worked for a computer company. But the restaurant -- even as a 25-seater in the basement, next to the old YMCA -- got so big so fast that Mom had to quit school because they needed the help. My grandfather would seat people, and he would make little origami animals for the children.

About 15 years ago I got a box in the mail. It was from an old customer, and it contained two of my grandfather's little origami animals. That was nice. He had been an admiral in the Japanese Navy, a high muckety-muck. At the restaurant he would also do the janitor's work.

My father told me that he asked my grandfather why he was doing the janitor's work, and he said, 'Because we lost the war.' He died in 1963. His name was Kaoru Umetani. My grandmother's name was Nobuko Umetani. She cooked. She spoke no English. "Holy cow" and "holy mackerel" was the only English my grandmother knew.

**Q** By the late 1960s your mother traded up to a much larger, far more elegant space on the riverfront. It was really something, wasn't it?

**A** When she moved the restaurant in 1967, I mean, there was nothing there. It wasn't a nice neighborhood. We had a wishing well downstairs, and bums would sneak in and



(<http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/4rn0122.jpg>)

Reiko Weston, owner of Fuji Ya and her daughter Carol Weston Hanson

fish coins out of the water. We'd have to yell, "Get out of here." Mom chose it because it was on the river -- that was a good luck sign -- and you could see a bridge from there, which was another good luck sign.

Mom asked a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, Shinichi Okada, to put something [an architectural drawing] on paper. He became a famous architect in Japan. It was built on the foundation of a flour mill. You could go all the way downstairs to where the big old turbines were, and there were tunnels that went to the old Crown Mill. The things we did were unbelievable. It's plain stupid now that I think about it, the way we would go through all those underground ruins, with the river rats. I probably should have been an archaeologist.

**Q** That restaurant was the home for a lot of firsts, wasn't it?

**A** We were the first restaurant in Minneapolis to do sushi. That was in the early 1980s. We hired an absolutely fabulous sushi chef from Tokyo. His name was Nobuya Yokoyama, but we called him Bu-Chan. He was very talented, and very temperamental, more than normal for a sushi chef. If he didn't like you, he just wouldn't serve you. We would have to sneak people around and seat them in the zashiki rooms.

Because it was the first sushi bar in the Twin Cities, we had the Health Department on our butt all the time. Sometimes they were there twice a week, checking us out to make sure that the fish was OK. I think the Health Department still has their high standards today because of that. We were also the first Twin Cities restaurant to offer teppanyaki. That's why Benihana wouldn't come here right away, because we had already cornered the market.

**Q** When did the restaurant close?

**A** Mom died in May of 1988, and the restaurant closed in 1990. Ten years prior to Mom's death, she had a stroke. I learned a lot about my mom and about the restaurant in those 10 years, from when I was 16 to when I was 26. She couldn't speak well because of the stroke, so I was her spokesperson. If she decided she wanted to do a cooking demonstration at Dayton's, she would bring me. She would cook, and I would do all the talking.

**Q** Your mother owned a number of restaurants, didn't she?

**A** There was Taiga. My mom loved that restaurant. She put her heart and soul into it. We did Indonesian buffets on Sunday. We used to do dim sum; it was wonderful. My mom put a half-million dollars into that place; that was a lot of money at that time.

At Fuji International, my mom wanted to create a place for students. It was a cafeteria on the West Bank. The food was inexpensive and it was good: noodle dishes, soups, a salad bar. Then there was Fuji Express, on the skyway level downtown. It was open from 11 to 2 on weekdays.

**Q** It sounds as if the word "visionary" best describes your mother. True?

**A** She was the "First Woman This," the "First Woman That." She got a lot of kudos. I can't fill those shoes, I couldn't keep up [laughs]. She was way ahead of her time. Look at the riverfront now, compared to what it was in 1967. Forty years ago, my mom was there, and people thought she was crazy. She wasn't. She really paved the way for new things coming down to that area. She really loved that river.

**Q** You got back into the business and revived the Fuji Ya name. Why?

**A** We opened in 1997, after a six-year hiatus. I went back to college, I got married, we had a couple of kids. I realized I needed to do more, and my husband needed to do more. There was a German restaurant at 27th and Lyndale, Mitterhauser. He wanted to sell, and we liked the location, so we thought, "Why not?"

What I didn't realize is that I was fighting my own history. We didn't want to do sushi, but my mom had set the bar high, and now all Japanese restaurants in the Twin Cities need to have a sushi bar. So we added one a year later. I haven't been in the restaurant business for a couple of years now. My husband, Tom, is doing it, and I've been doing

the three children. That's a full-time job, and then some. Sometimes I wish I was at work and Tom was at home with the kids [laughs]. I go to the restaurant to eat. It's very novel [laughs].

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