



Fuji-Ya, Second to None

Reiko Weston's Role in Reconnecting Minneapolis and the Mississippi River

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and Jonathan Moore**

More than two million people annually cross the Stone Arch Bridge over the Mississippi River at St. Anthony Falls, drawn to the history and vibrancy of the sublime setting. There is the roar of the falls that can be heard before it can be seen. There are the waves and white foam of the water as it passes over the spillway and crashes on the dissipaters below. There is the mineral smell of the mist that is thrust airborne, descending on visitors. And there is the elegant curve of the bridge itself, gradually revealing more and more of the panoramic scene as one moves across it. At the eastern

end of the bridge is a large boulder with a plaque affixed to it. The plaque recounts the discovery of St. Anthony Falls by a Franciscan priest, Father Louis Hennepin, who first viewed the falls in 1680 and named them for his patron saint, St. Anthony of Padua.¹

There is, of course, more to the story. People knew of the falls prior to Father Hennepin's visit, and it already had a name—several, in fact. To the Dakota, who had guided the priest to this location, it was called *Owamni Omni* (whirlpool). To the Ojibwe, it was *Gichi-gakaabikaa* (the great severed rock). So Father Hennepin's encounter with the falls that is glorified on this rock was not really a discovery at all, but more of a "rediscovery."²

Nearly three centuries later, another explorer would arrive at the opposite end of the bridge and behold the place with new eyes. Her name was Reiko Umetani Weston. While Weston introduced many Minnesotans to Japanese cuisine and culture for the first time through her Fuji-Ya restaurant, arguably her greatest influence was connecting a city to its river once again. The restaurant's physical embodiment—three solid walls to the city with one wall of windows to the river—forced the city to face the Mississippi in the most literal sense.

Fuji-Ya's northeast façade (facing the river) before the building's 2017 demolition.

SITE OF REDISCOVERY

The year was 1961. Reiko Weston was driving along a forlorn street in Minneapolis's milling district looking for a new location for her restaurant. It was perhaps an unlikely place to be looking. A century of lumber and flour milling had significantly altered the falls and denuded both riverbanks of their former natural beauty. More reliable sources of power had begun to draw many industries away from this locale. Enterprises that had grown up on the riverfront were leaving, headed to the suburbs or to other states. General Mills, for example, had moved its headquarters to the western suburb of Golden Valley three years earlier, and its Washburn-Crosby Mill would close in 1965.³

Trains were still rumbling over the Stone Arch Bridge, and significant swaths of real estate between downtown and the river were still devoted to railyards, though the area's reliance on rail for transport was declining. Two vestiges of natural landforms, Spirit Island and Upton Island, with their limestone outcrops, had been obliterated to make way for the construction of a planned lock and dam. (The Upper St. Anthony Falls Lock, completed in 1963, extended the reach of barge traffic above the falls.) The riverfront was becoming a collection of things that industry left behind—abandoned foundations, burned-out building shells, and contaminated soil. It was a scene to which the city was happy to turn its back. A 1972 report, produced by a committee made up of the Planning Department, the Housing and Redevelopment Authority, the Department of Public Works, and the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board referred to the area as “the backside of the City.”⁴

While the river's west-side milling district was indeed an unlikely place for a restaurant, one could also say

that Weston, a Japanese immigrant in her early thirties, was an unlikely explorer. Born in Japan in 1928, Weston had served as an interpreter during World War II. Following the war, she worked as a secretary in General Douglas MacArthur's Tokyo office, where she met her future husband, Norman Weston. In 1953, Norman—an Army Air Corps pilot—returned to his native Minnesota with Reiko. Weston's parents, Kaoru and Nobuko Umetani, came too, as a new start was in order for them as well. Her father, Kaoru, had been an admiral in the Japanese navy and suffered financial ruin following the war.⁵

Weston enrolled in math and psychology classes at the University

of Minnesota. Seeking something to keep her parents occupied, she opened a restaurant on Ninth Street and LaSalle Avenue in downtown Minneapolis in 1959. She named it Fuji-Ya, meaning “second to none.” Her mother's recipes for traditional Japanese dishes were at the heart of the menu. Her father greeted guests and delighted children with origami animals he folded for them. While it may have given her parents a new sense of purpose, it may not have fully restored their sense of pride. Weston's daughter, Carol Hanson, later recalled that when her grandfather was asked why he was doing janitor's work at the restaurant, he stated simply, “Because we lost the war.”⁶

THE HOUSE OF FUJI-YA WELCOMES YOU

To explain name we say . . . Fuji-Ya means “second to none.” So we are pleased to offer authentic Japanese dishes to those discriminating people who have sought our portals.

In Japanese homeland, those who partake of delicacies, make much comfort for themselves. You too, in the House of Fuji-Ya, make self relaxing-comfortable so to enjoy fine meal. Remove shoes, soothe hands in warm towel and assume position of comfort at table.

Helpful server will be soon here to convey your wishes to Honorable Chef.

FUJI-YA

814 LaSalle Avenue, Minneapolis

For Reservations—Federal 6-8781

A page from Fuji-Ya's menu at its first location on LaSalle Avenue in downtown Minneapolis.

The endeavor was likely a growing source of pride for Weston, however, as her new creation grossed \$50,000 in its first year, and its popularity quickly outgrew its 25 seats. Her parents and their seven employees had trouble keeping up with the demand, compelling Weston to put her education at the University of Minnesota on hold so that she could play a larger role, which included finding a larger space. The Westons concurrently tried a location at 29 East Fifth Street in downtown St. Paul, but the building was soon razed to make way for the Capital Centre building.⁷

Weston's two-year search for a larger location eventually led to the fateful meeting between her and the Mississippi River. At one point, she later recounted, she talked to officials of the Burlington Northern Railroad. "They told me I was ridiculous to ask for property. Then one day, while driving on E. 1st Street [sic] along the river bank, I saw a for-sale sign on a burned-down flour mill. I contacted the real-estate company and made an immediate offer. I hate to quote the price, it was such a steal."⁸

A SENSORY EXPERIENCE

Weston recounted many times over the years what drew her to the then-derelict site that fateful day, and at the center of every retelling was the river. The composition of elements revered by Japanese culture was also not lost on her. "The Japanese love rivers and bridges and waterfalls," she told the *Minneapolis Star*. "Under a bridge and overlooking a waterfall. It's the perfect setting for a Japanese teahouse." Weston's daughter and friends later recalled that she considered these features "good luck signs." It may have been those omens or just Weston's intuition that helped her see what others could not. In 1972 Weston said of the site, "I can't under-

While the river's west-side milling district was indeed an unlikely place for a restaurant, one could also say that Weston, a Japanese immigrant in her early thirties, was an unlikely explorer.

stand this. It's such a beautiful site. I think maybe American people are a little too busy to appreciate what they have. I think maybe we (Orientals) [sic] are a little bit more sensitive."⁹

It was not just from the river, the waterfall, and the bridges that Weston drew inspiration, however. She saw the ruins of the 1870 Bassett Sawmill and the 1882 Columbia Flour Mill not as elements to be discarded but as artifacts to be celebrated. Rather than erase all evidence of past use at the site and start over with a blank slate, she embraced the embodied energy of the three-foot-thick foundation walls and used these stereotomic (heavyweight stone mass) relics as the springboard for something new.

Weston sought the talent of Shinichi Okada, then a student of architecture. Like Weston, Okada was born in Japan in 1928 and studied at

the University of Minnesota. He went on to study at Yale University and would later win a public competition to design the Supreme Court of Japan, but that was still a decade away. To adapt and refine Okada's concepts, Weston hired local architect Newton Griffith. The University of Minnesota graduate had studied with Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer at Harvard University. He had recently completed the renovations of the lodges at Glacier National Park for the Great Northern Railway before agreeing to help Weston execute her vision.¹⁰

Together, the trio created something not yet seen in Minnesota, what *Skyway News* described as a "3,000 square-foot version of a Japanese home." They perched a square box on top of the historic foundations, not unlike how traditional Japanese structures are elevated off the ground,



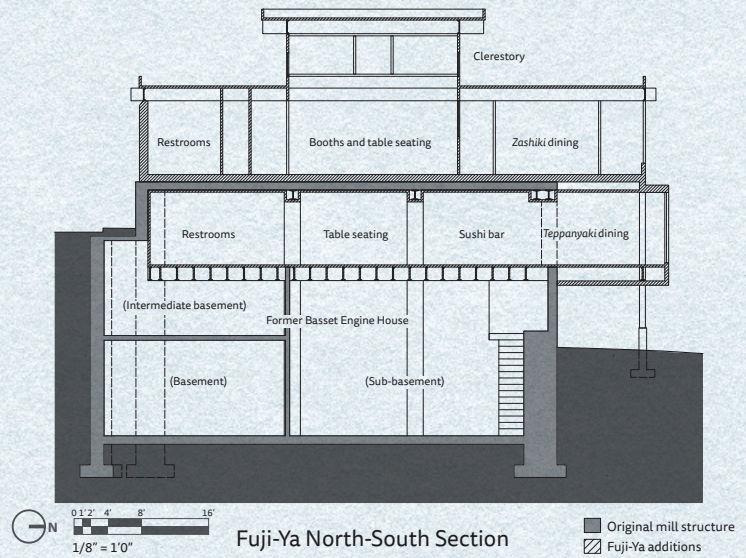
Entrance to Fuji Ya, reminiscent of a genkan in a traditional Japanese home.

Weston and her architects created something not yet seen in Minnesota, a version of a Japanese home perched on top of historic foundations.

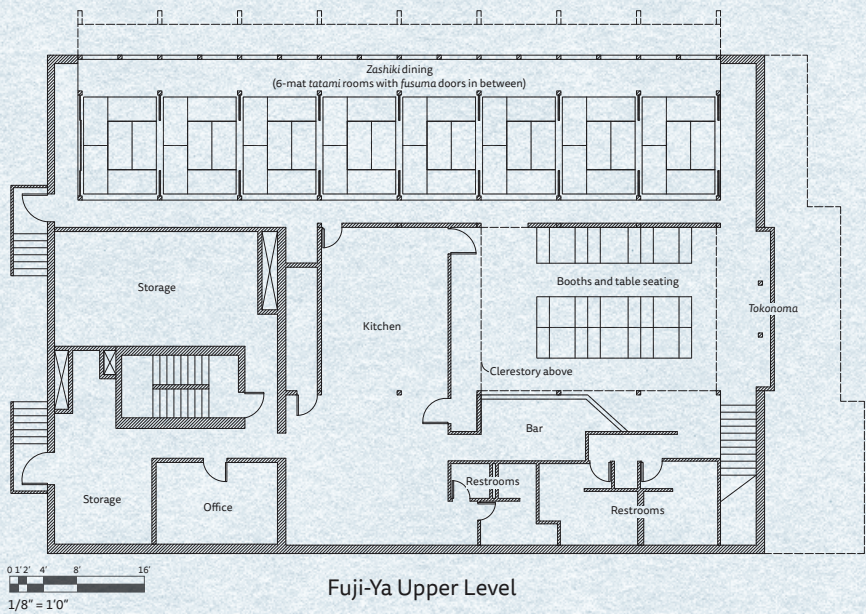
perfectly covering the former Bassett engine house and Columbia boiler room below. The three walls nearest downtown were covered in light colored stucco and were almost entirely opaque except for a narrow clerestory running along the top of the walls to let in light. The fourth wall on the river side was completely transparent with floor-to-ceiling glass. Here, the box extended out beyond the ruin walls, creating an overhang supported by wood columns spaced at regular intervals under the box.¹¹

When the new Fuji-Ya location opened in 1968, guests approached the building from the southeast, allowing the sound of the falls to drown out the noise of the city before they entered. Inside, this corner was one of the darkest areas of the building, creating a subdued effect and a counterpoint to the outdoors one had just left behind. The first space one encountered was a small room at the base of a staircase, reminiscent of a *genkan*, a sunken space in a traditional Japanese home where shoes were left to keep the living space clean. In the Minnesota climate, though, guests were allowed to keep their shoes as they climbed the stairs.

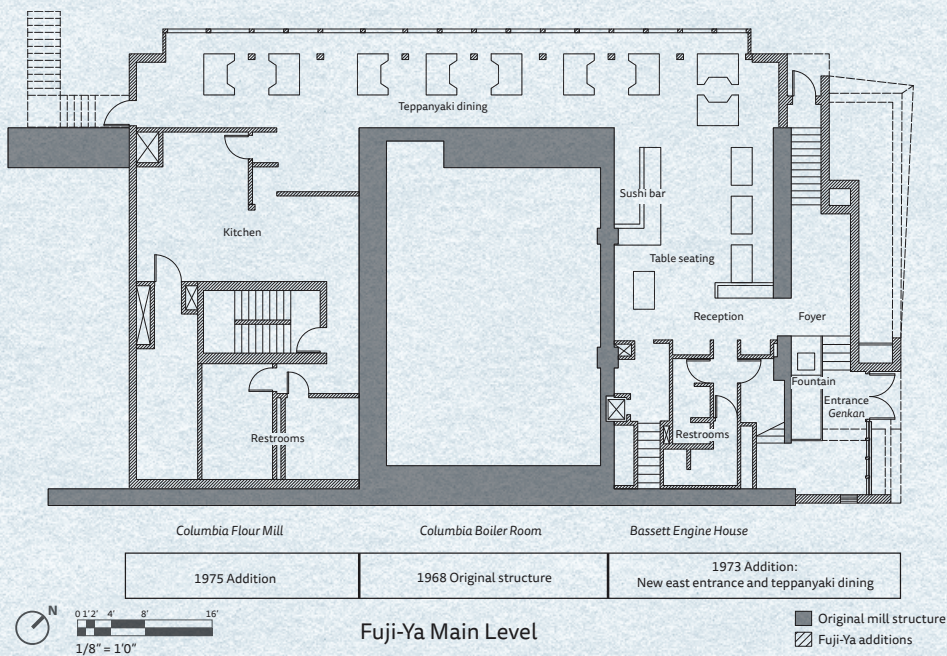
At the top of the staircase, a matrix of dark wood structural posts and beams subdivided the space. The exposed wooden structure and modular nature of the building recalled the craftsmanship of traditional Japanese architecture but with mid-century modern flourishes. The delicate structural elements supported large timber beams, running predominantly toward the river, the ends of which penetrated through the top of the walls to the exterior. A rectangular portion of the roof in the center of



Fuji-Ya North-South Section



Fuji-Ya Upper Level



Fuji-Ya Main Level

Columbia Flour Mill	Columbia Boiler Room	Bassett Engine House
1975 Addition	1968 Original structure	1973 Addition: New east entrance and teppanyaki dining



Reiko Weston in one of the zashiki dining rooms separated by fusuma screens.

the restaurant was raised up, allowing light to wash down from a second set of clerestory windows above. Continuing along the southeast corridor, visitors passed a *tokonoma*, a long, recessed niche for displaying Japanese art and textiles. To the left, conventional booths and tables filled a dining room, where guests could keep their shoes on. A partition that ran parallel to the glass wall facing the river was composed of wood slats, filtering the light that emanated from the river view.

On the other side of that partition, another realm began. Here, the grid of wood posts and beams created five separate dining bays. Because odd numbers are considered lucky in Japan, the number five was likely not an accident. Each bay, or *zashiki* (a traditional Japanese-style mat room for entertaining guests), was based on the scale and proportion of a *tatami* mat. *Tatami* are three-by-six-foot straw floor mats covered with woven rush grass on which people traditionally sat or slept. In Japan, room sizes are described by the number of *tatami* mats that can fit in them. Each *zashiki* was a six-mat room, separated one from another by a series of *fusuma* screens made from gilded rice paper mounted in wood-framed

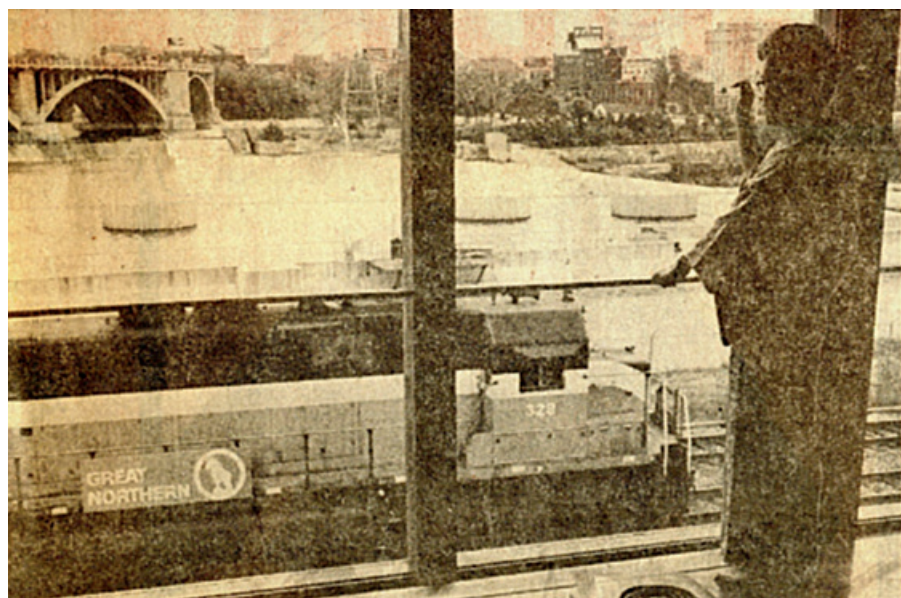


Diners sat on rattan *zaisu* chairs, legless seats that allow users to sit on the floor while still enjoying the comfort of a back, at low-slung tables.

panels. The *fusuma* helped define each *zashiki* and soften sound while creating a warm glow that emanated into the room.¹²

A server wearing a *kimono*, a colorful Japanese full-length robe, showed guests to their table. Diners in Fuji-Ya's *zashiki* were expected to follow Japanese culture and remove their shoes before stepping onto *tatami*. Not only did this signal entrance into a more intimate space, but also it was a foray into the exotic for Minnesota clientele. A longtime customer, John

Murphy, commented at the time the restaurant closed in 1990: "It's been like getting away to another country coming here." The practice also provided endless fodder for food critics who reviewed the restaurant over the years, reminding readers to "wear clean, matching socks at Fuji-Ya." Guests sat at low-slung tables on rattan *zaisu*, legless chairs for sitting on the floor with the comfort of a back support. Akari lanterns by Isamu Noguchi provided illumination overhead, while traditional Japanese



Weston waving at a locomotive, 1968. In describing the Fuji Ya experience, she told Minneapolis Star reporter Barbara Flanagan, "The trains should toot-toot every time they pass my place."

music played in the background. In the restaurant's early days, the menu largely consisted of variations on *sukiyaki*, a one-pot dish of thinly sliced meat and vegetables cooked tableside in a soy sauce-based broth. As the restaurant grew, its food offerings expanded, too.¹³

In 1973, Weston again enlisted the help of Japanese architects along with the assistance of a local architecture firm, Arthur Dickey Architects, to add another floor beneath the *zashiki* rooms to accommodate a new *teppanyaki* area. Here, diners sat around a table with a large integrated hotplate, while their chef cooked meat, fish, and vegetables right before their eyes. The artful tossing of knives, pepper mills, and food became part of the act and captivated diners as much as the food did. It was all part of the experience that Weston was trying to cultivate in addition to appetites.¹⁴

As part of the same building campaign, Weston added a new entryway on the southeast side, incorporating a pebble mosaic floor and a limestone water fountain complete with a rain chain. This extended the soothing



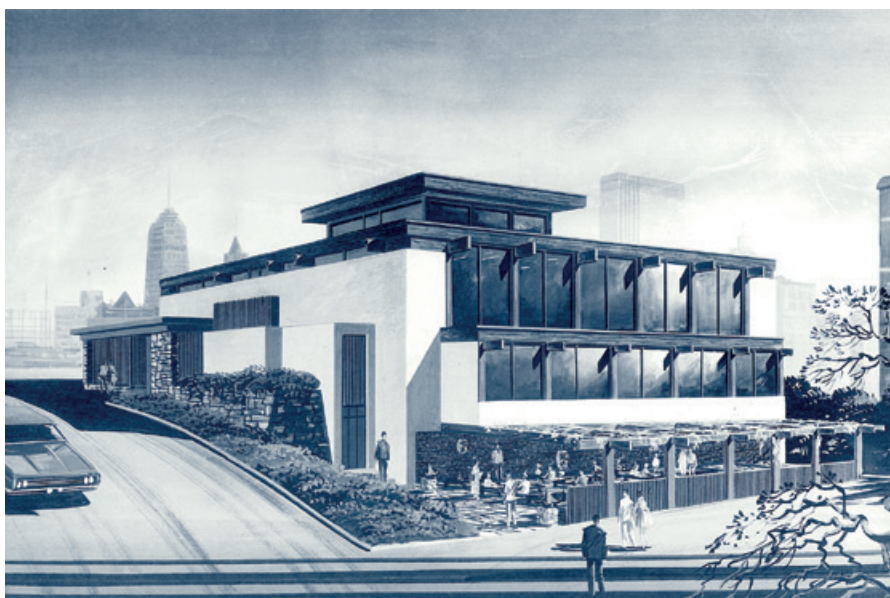
In 1981, Fuji Ya introduced the first sushi bar in the state.

sound of St. Anthony Falls farther into the entry sequence of the building. Pat Lindquist, a reporter for *Skyway News* was impressed, writing in her column, "Once inside you hear water again in her foyer's Japanese pond. A serene and comforting welcome to timeless dining." In 1975, Weston added onto Fuji-Ya again, this time building over a portion of the Columbia Flour Mill to the northwest.

This provided for three more *zashiki* rooms on the upper level and additional *teppanyaki* dining on the lower level. In 1981, a sushi bar was added on the lower level, the first of its kind in the state.¹⁵

Architecture was not the only way Weston reconnected people to the river: she also leveraged her gregarious spirit. She embraced and celebrated the particular moment of time and space that she occupied along the Mississippi with an enthusiasm that was infectious. As trains, including Amtrak's *Empire Builder* taking passengers to Glacier National Park and beyond, rolled past between Fuji-Ya and the river, Weston waved to the engineers. When describing the outdoor dining that she hoped to add, she asserted, "The trains should toot-toot every time they pass my place." Norman Weston later reminisced, "You could look out the windows and see the lock and dam and the falls and the railroad tracks." One day, he recalled, customers fixated out the window as the Westons' young children, Carol and Michael, raced pedal cars along the river: "Things like that were happening in that building. There was never a dull day!"¹⁶

With her entrepreneurial instincts, Weston opened Fuji International on the University of Minnesota's West Bank in 1971. Seven years later, she launched Minneapolis's first dim sum restaurant, Taiga, at St. Anthony Main, giving it a Chinese theme so as to not compete with Fuji-Ya across the river. In 1982, she opened Fuji Express in the skyway of the former Galaxy Building. That same year the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune* reported, "Today, her four operations do close to \$3 million a year in business. Her workforce, which initially consisted of herself, her parents and seven others, has grown to more than 100 employees."¹⁷



Weston's original aspirations included "a huge patio and beautiful setting outdoors to sit" as depicted in this 1973 rendering by Arthur Dickey Architects, Inc.

Weston demonstrated marketing prowess, as well. In 1981, she ran an advertisement in *Twin Cities* magazine that featured a photo of one of her teppanyaki chefs frying lobster tails with a view of the Third Avenue Bridge in the background. The ad read, "Owner Reiko Weston, 'the Twin Cities First Lady of Oriental Cuisine,' invites you to enjoy marvelously prepared traditional fare" along with "the Most Exciting View of the Mississippi River Plus the Ambience of a True Japanese Inn." At the bottom, it added, "Excellent parking." The next year, Weston extended her ad campaign to reach people from the land of lutefisk and herring. An advertisement in *Twin Cities Scandinavia Today* featured a portrait of Weston in a *sumi-e*-style Japanese ink painting with the words, "Reiko Weston says . . . Welcome, all Scandinavian visitors, to my four special Oriental restaurants! Look no further for the freshest and most exciting food in the Twin Cities, prepared by specially trained chefs."¹⁸

Weston had arrived, and people were taking notice. In her daughter's words, "She was the 'First Woman This', the 'First Woman That.' She got a lot of kudos. . . . She was way ahead of her time." In 1979, Mayor Al Hofstede declared January 28 "Reiko Weston Day" in Minneapolis,

An advertisement in *Twin Cities* magazine from 1981.

Advertisement in *Twin Cities Scandinavia Today* welcoming "all Scandinavian visitors" to Reiko Weston's four restaurants, 1982–83.

stating, "Weston makes great food and has contributed a lot to the city, especially the development of the riverfront area." That same year, she was named Minnesota's Small Businessperson of the Year by the US Small Business Administration. She was only the third woman to receive the award, which included an invitation to attend a reception at the White House. In 1980, she was inducted into the Minnesota Business Hall of Fame, the second woman to receive such an honor. Joan Siegel, a food critic, called her "a charter member of the gutsy restaurateur club." Hennepin County judge Neil Riley described her as "a fascinating study in what a woman in a man's world can make of it."¹⁹

Gutsy she was: Weston was not afraid to push the envelope. In 1977, the *Minneapolis Star* ran a story on "Miss Nakamura," whom Weston was training as one of the first female tep-

panyaki chefs in the country. Weston said at the time, "I wanted to experiment to see if a woman could do what was supposed to be a man's job." Weston also hired a woman, Takako "Tai-San" Jaeger, to be her head cook. The *Twin Cities Reader* reported, "Reiko hired a woman because men brought up in the Japanese culture found it demeaning to have a female boss."²⁰

THE PRICE OF SUCCESS

Reiko Weston's success is especially admirable considering the period in which it occurred. When Weston and her parents arrived in Minnesota in 1953, the mention of Japan was probably more likely to conjure the word *kamikaze* than *sukiyaki* in the minds of most Americans. It had been only a dozen years since the attack on Pearl Harbor that led to America's entry into World War II and eight years

since the war had ended. Wartime fear had fueled the unfounded suspicion that Japanese Americans posed a threat to the national security of the United States. In response, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 in February 1942, forcing nearly 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry, a majority of whom were US citizens, into 10 concentration camps, located in California, Idaho, Utah, Arizona, Wyoming, Colorado, and Arkansas.²¹

As thousands of people of Japanese ancestry were forcibly removed inland from the military-prescribed exclusion zones on the West Coast, the Military Intelligence Service Language School (MISLS), which had been established in San Francisco to train Japanese linguists to aid in the war effort, also relocated—first to Savage, Minnesota, and then to Fort Snelling. By the summer of 1942, the MISLS was



Masu Nakamura, whom Weston trained as one of the first woman teppanyaki chefs in the country.

half of Japanese Americans in the Twin Cities had either been a student at the MISLS or had a relative in the school. People of Japanese ancestry who secured employment or enrolled in universities outside of the exclusion zone were also permitted

The Japanese American population in the Twin Cities following the war was primarily made up of Military Intelligence Service Language school students and their family and friends.

recruiting volunteers from the concentration camps to enlist as students at the language school. The MISLS graduated more than 6,000 servicemen and -women between 1941 and 1946. The Japanese American population in the Twin Cities following the war was primarily made up of MISLS students, their relatives, friends, and significant others who resettled in the area. A 1968 survey showed that

release from camps under specific conditions, including completing a “loyalty questionnaire.” The Japanese American Student Relocation Council helped students enroll in college at Macalester, Hamline, Carleton, St. Catherine, St. Thomas, and St. Cloud State, adding to Minnesota’s Japanese American community.²²

The War Relocation Authority, the agency that oversaw the concentra-



Yasuko Gary with sukiyaki, a one-pot dish cooked at the table.

tion camps, encouraged resettlement of Japanese Americans to the Midwest, including Minnesota, where 1,292 had resettled (some temporarily) by January 1945. Resettlement efforts continued until 1948. According to census records, Minnesota’s Japanese American permanent population rose from 51 to 1,049 individuals between 1940 and 1950. Over the next decade, a 65 percent increase in the number of people of Japanese descent living in Minnesota brought the count up to 1,726. Of this number, 533 were foreign born, a statistic attributed to first-generation Japanese and to Japanese women, like Weston, who had married American servicemen following the war. As a result, the number of women of Japanese descent in the state outnumbered the men through the 1960s.²³

Despite the growing Japanese American community in Minnesota, there was likely lingering wartime animosity, as evidenced by a subtle, possibly unintentional,

A legacy of Japanese cuisine

THE FUJI-YA NAME

found a new life when Carol Hanson, daughter of Reiko Weston, revived the name and opened a new restaurant on 27th and Lyndale in Minneapolis's Uptown neighborhood in 1998. (It moved to its current location at 600 W. Lake in 2001.) While Hanson is no longer the proprietor, Fuji-Ya is still serving sushi, which its earlier namesake first introduced to Minnesota. It is part of a thriving Japanese restaurant scene throughout the Twin Cities. While there are too many to name, each of these restaurants likely contains some imprint from Minnesota's earliest pioneer of Japanese cuisine.

Miyoko Omori, a friend of Reiko Weston and a former employee of Fuji-Ya, would go on to open Kikugawa in Minneapolis in 1979 and Sakura in St. Paul in 1990. Kiminobu Ichikawa, who got his training as a teppanyaki chef at Fuji-Ya in the 1970s, partnered with Del Francis and Tatsuya Saji to open Origami in Minneapolis's former Market Hotel at 33 North First Avenue in 1990. Koshiki Yonemura Smith, who worked at Kikugawa and Origami, opened Tanpopo in Lowertown St. Paul in 2000.¹

Today, another generation of chefs is leading the next evolution of Japanese cuisine. In the past five years alone, four new Japanese restaurants have emerged in the Twin Cities. The baseball-themed Kyatchi in South Minneapolis, which specializes in sustainably sourced fish, opened its second location in December 2017 in St. Paul's old Tanpopo space. In Minneapolis, Kado no Mise and Kaiseki Furukawa opened their doors in spring

and summer of 2017 in the former Origami location. Sushi Takatsu, a small take-out spot in the skyway of Minneapolis's Baker Center, opened in 2014. Most recently, Ramen Kazama (also in South Minneapolis) has opened its second location in the old Obento-Ya bistro near Dinkytown off the University of Minnesota campus. All of these restaurants are under the leadership of chefs who trained at Fuji-Ya, Origami, or both.²

Weston would be proud. She once remarked, "I love food, I love to cook, I love feeding people." Of course, her aims ran deeper than food. In 1984, she told *Skyway News*, "So many people just live and die, and throughout their lives, they don't do anything. I would like to leave a legacy, do something good for the public. I don't want to be someone who just dies and is forgotten."

Weston's story is one of a dream realized. Her legacy continues to this day, writ large in the kitchens and dining

rooms of Japanese restaurants across the Twin Cities and on the banks and bridges and falls of the river she loved and brought us back to.

Notes

1. Phyllis Louise Harris and Raghavan Iyer, *Asian Flavors: Changing the Tastes of Minnesota since 1875* (St. Paul: MNHS Press, 2012), 67, 70, 76; Kiminobu Ichikawa, conversation with author, Feb. 19, 2017.

2. Jess Fleming, "Kyatchi, with Its Sustainable Sushi and More, Opens Friday in Lowertown," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Dec. 14, 2017, <https://www.twincities.com/2017/12/14/kyatchi-seafood-and-sushi-restaurant-opens-friday-in-lowertown/>; Stephanie March, "Now Open: Kado no Mise," *Mpls. St. Paul Magazine*, May 2, 2017, <http://mspmag.com/eat-and-drink/foodie/now-open-kado-no-mise/>; Dara Moskowitz Grumdahl, "Hidden Gems: Sushi Takatsu," *Mpls. St. Paul Magazine*, July 10, 2017, <http://mspmag.com/eat-and-drink/foodie/hidden-gems-sushi-takatsu/>; Mike Mullen, "Obento-Ya Closes; Will Be Replaced by a Ramen Kazama," *City Pages*, Sept. 18, 2017, <http://www.citypages.com/restaurants/obento-ya-closes-will-be-replaced-by-a-ramen-kazama/445427943>.

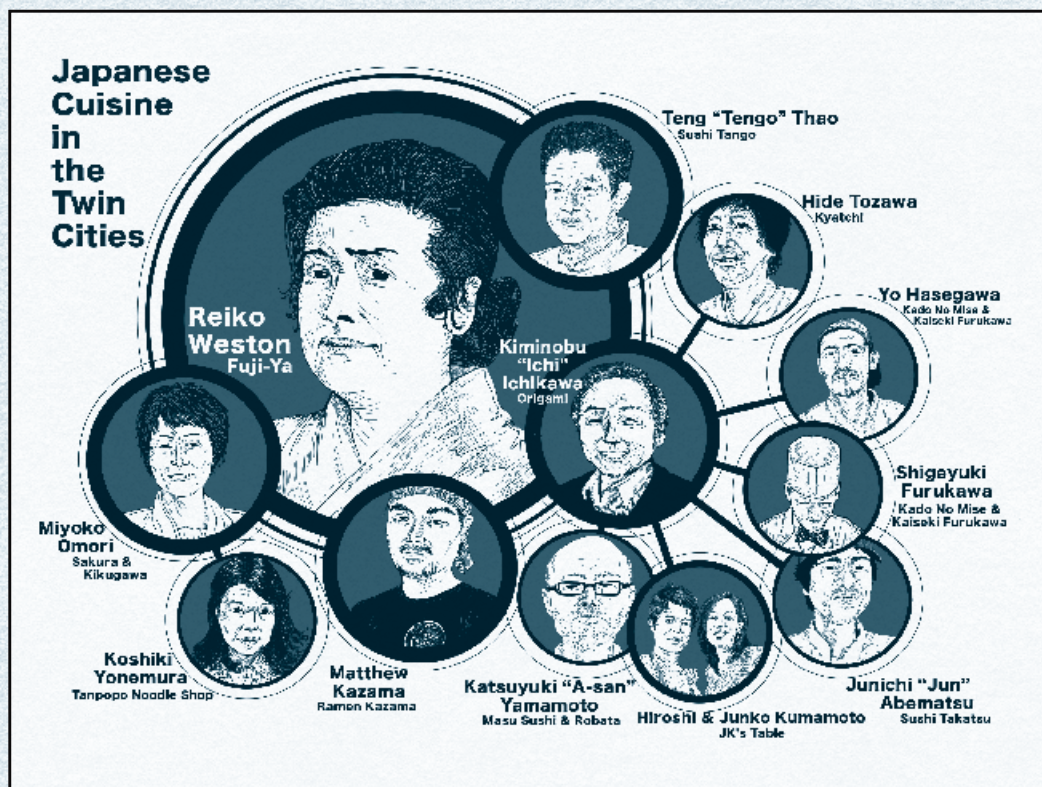


ILLUSTRATION BY ANTONIO PEREZ-CAJINA

racism that often hovered just beneath the surface. Examples include a 1959 newsreel about the new “Jap restaurant” downtown and a 1980s restaurant reviewer who was critical that the servers were not as “gracious” as he would have liked, not living up to the “courteous and attentive service” that he had come to expect from a Japanese establishment.²⁴

Words like “Jap” and “Oriental” were widely used in media during the era in which Weston grew as a successful businesswoman in the Twin Cities. Media portrayals of her as an “Oriental” or a proprietor of an “Oriental restaurant” were commonplace. These terms were used to stereotype and categorize Asian Americans as foreigners. According to scholar Karen Ishizuka, even though by the 1970s 80 percent of Japanese Americans and half of Chinese Americans and Filipino Americans had been born in the United States, they were often lumped together into the category of Orientals. This terminology, whether used intentionally or unintentionally, perpetuated Weston’s identity in the Twin Cities food scene as someone who was a foreigner or outsider—someone decidedly not of this place.²⁵

How Weston was portrayed in the media from the 1950s through the 1970s was consonant with changing attitudes toward Asian Americans. Prior to World War II, first- and second-generation Asian Americans had been thought to be “unassimilable” and denied many basic rights and opportunities, such as obtaining citizenship, owning land, and enjoying educational and occupational mobility. In the face of the emerging Cold War and civil rights movement, the United States struggled in the postwar era to create an image of a racially inclusive democracy. Out of this struggle, a new Asian American stereotype developed, “the model minority—a racial group distinct from the white majority, but lauded as well assimilated, upwardly mobile, politically non-threatening, and *definitely not-black.*”²⁶

Asian and Asian American women, notably war brides, played an important role in the making of the model minority. A crucial component of constructing a new image of Japanese Americans and a racially inclusive nation was to represent Japanese women as exhibiting the domestic qualities that were seen as key to an ideal American home



Ruth Tanbara, right, with husband Earl, sitting, and brother Howard Nomura, host Russell Fridley, director of the Minnesota Historical Society, 1956. In August 1942, Ruth and Earl Tanbara were the first Japanese Americans to resettle in St. Paul as a result of President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066.

life. A typical 1955 example from *Life* magazine told the story of Frank and Sachiko Pfeiffer, who were starting married life in a Chicago suburb. Frank described his wife as the “best housekeeper” who no longer cooks Japanese food because it is not to his liking. Over time, she is able to win the hearts of her mother-in-law and their suburban neighbors. The article ends with Sachiko stating, “I contend to lose my Japanese blood stream in America.” As Kathryn Tolbert, a scholar on Japanese war brides, wrote, war brides “either tried, or were pressured, to give up their Japanese identities to become more fully American.”²⁷

Examining Weston’s story through the lens of mid-century media portrayals of Asian Americans, particularly Asian women, lends new insights into her challenges and unique role as a Japanese immigrant entrepreneur. In some ways, she was fulfilling an image of the model minority: as the headline of one article read, “Her Japanese restaurant a true American dream.” On the



Chef Nobuyo Yokohama at the sushi bar, added to the main level in 1981.

other hand, she was breaking gender norms and challenging the image of a domestic Japanese wife who learned American ways to please her husband.²⁸

Some challenges were part of the business of running a Japanese restaurant, including the difficulty of getting liquor licenses from the city and barriers to bringing the talent and expertise that was needed from Japan. While another Japanese restaurant in town experienced a raid from immigration officials, Fuji-Ya suffered from ever-lengthening wait times for recruiting chefs. “How can you offer someone a job and then expect them to wait two years before they can get it?” she lamented to the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune* in 1982. “That leaves one experienced cook there. . . . The pressure and hours—it’s too much for just one person.”²⁹

Not unique to Weston’s story were the investment of time and energy required to make any business a success and the toll that can take on relationships, family, and health. Just as Fuji-Ya’s new river location was poised to open in 1968, Weston and her husband, Norman, divorced. In her daughter’s words, “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 . . . we didn’t see much of her. If we wanted to see her, we went to the restaurant.” Weston remarried food broker John Drummond in 1974. Four years later, she suffered a stroke that required her daughter to increase her involvement in the burgeoning restaurant operations, thereby cutting short her studies at the University of Minnesota—much as Weston had done for her own parents.³⁰

While Weston experienced some limitations after the stroke, it did not squelch her penchant to dream. She reached out to her first architect,

Shinichi Okada, about designing a spa and hotel to complement her restaurant along the river. In the words of the *North Hennepin Post*, “Weston still owns undeveloped land on the Mississippi River near Fuji-Ya and her greatest ambition is to see that land developed into a Japanese hotel, complete with Japanese shops and a Japanese-style spa.” Perhaps channeling her own fatigue, Weston observed, “The working woman needs somewhere to go to relax and forget her busy day.” Weston also spoke of designing a Japanese garden between the restaurant and the river. Hanson later recounted her mother’s aspirations for “a huge patio and beautiful setting outdoors to sit. That was her actual vision.”³¹

In addition to rekindling people’s interest in the Mississippi River, Weston’s efforts also helped other entrepreneurs see the neighborhood’s buildings as artifacts to be celebrated.

Unfortunately, that vision was not to be. In 1987, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) exercised eminent domain to acquire the land Weston owned between the restaurant and the river. The MPRB wanted Fuji-Ya’s parking lot to develop West River Parkway. The “excellent parking” that Weston had once touted was no more. While the initial acquisition did not include the building, it proved detrimental to the business’s future. Shortly thereafter, Weston died of a heart attack in May 1988 at the age of 59. Weston’s son, Michael, invoked the river in a eulogy at his mother’s memorial service, comparing her perseverance to that of a carp: “In Japan, the carp is a symbol of a strong fish with a fighting spirit. They have kites and graphic drawings of the carp everywhere. It also is a fish

which can fight the current and swim upstream, but is not always appreciated here in America.”³²

Hanson was left to lead the business, including resolving the ongoing dispute with the MPRB. In the 1989 litigation, attorneys for the plaintiff proved that the acquisition of the parking lot had been adversely impacting the establishment. The MPRB settled for \$3.5 million in exchange for the building and the roughly two acres of land, for which Weston had originally paid \$20,000. The restaurant was compelled to close by May 1990.³³

In Fuji-Ya’s final week, many tears were shed among Weston’s family, employees, and longtime customers. The *Star Tribune* spoke with one of those

customers: “Alex Canalino said she and a friend have gone to Fuji-Ya once a week, often when they’re depressed. ‘When it’s been a rough day, we say it’s going to be a Fuji-Ya day,’ she said. ‘And this is a Fuji-Ya day. We’re very disappointed.’”³⁴

Upon closing, Weston’s family donated some of the tatami mats and fusuma screens to the Japanese Garden at Como Park in St. Paul, which was undergoing an extensive renovation at the time. Several of the features from Fuji-Ya were integrated into the Japanese teahouse, where they remain in 2018.³⁵

PRESERVATION PIONEER

As far back as 1963, the *Minneapolis Tribune* articulated what it saw as a need: “Far too little has been

done to take advantage of the inherent romance of the Minneapolis riverfront.” Weston’s cutting-edge investment in Fuji-Ya, “the first public establishment built within view of St. Anthony Falls in more than 70 years,” seemed to be just the yeast that would stimulate the revival of the old flour-milling district. As columnist and civic booster Barbara Flanagan wrote in the *Minneapolis Star* in 1968, “Nobody looked twice at the riverbank site until Mrs. Weston got there. Leave it to a woman to show the way. Now everybody’s interested in the river. It’s about time.” Daughter Carol observed in 2009, “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.”³⁶

In addition to rekindling people’s interest in the Mississippi River, Weston’s efforts also helped other entrepreneurs see the neighborhood’s buildings as artifacts to be celebrated. After dining at Fuji-Ya in the early 1970s, James Howe noticed the 1914 engine house of the Minneapolis Eastern Railway across the street. He renovated it and opened First Street Station restaurant in 1975, the first example of an adaptive reuse of an intact building (as opposed to building on a burned-out ruin, as Weston had done) in the Central Riverfront District.³⁷

Across the river, other revitalization efforts followed Weston’s lead. A year after Fuji-Ya opened, Peter Nelson Hall purchased Pracna, an 1890 saloon, and opened it as a restaurant and bar of the same name in 1973. Between 1976 and 1985, Louis Zelle adaptively reused many of the buildings along the cobblestoned Main Street Southeast between Central and Third Avenues Southeast to create



Fuji-Ya site and surrounding area.

the St. Anthony Main complex. This included the former Salisbury and Satterlee mattress company building and Upton, Martin-Morrison, and Union Iron Works buildings, all dating to the mid- to late nineteenth century. It was in the Salisbury and Satterlee mattress building that Weston launched Taiga.³⁸

During the span of years that Weston was ambitiously opening restaurants, between 1959 and 1981, the historic preservation movement was coming into its own, both nationally and locally. The National Historic Preservation Act was passed in 1966. Among its provisions was creation of the National Register of Historic Places. The Pillsbury A Mill was designated a National Historic Landmark just a month later. In 1971, the St. Anthony Falls Historic District was listed in the National Register. A year later, the City of Minneapolis created a commission for historic preservation under the Municipal Heritage Preservation Act. In 1981, the Minneapolis Heritage Preservation Commission, as an advisory body to the city council, adopted the Central Riverfront Urban Design Guidelines. The Washburn-Crosby complex, now the Mill City Museum,

was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1983.³⁹

Other historic buildings were rehabilitated within sight of Fuji-Ya. The former Hall and Dann Barrel Company became Mill Place, an office complex, in the mid-1980s, rebranded as Barrel House in 2017. The Hayber Development Group renovated the Standard Mill into the Whitney Hotel (1985–86) and converted the Crown Roller Mill and Ceresota Elevator into offices. In the years since Fuji-Ya first appeared along the river, billions of public and private dollars have been invested in the Central Riverfront, \$1.6 billion in the past decade alone. In 1990, the population of the Downtown East neighborhood, which includes much of the west bank Mill District, was only 25 people. By 2015, it was estimated to have grown to nearly 1,700 people, a dramatic increase in 25 years. A similar trend has played out on the east bank of the river as well.⁴⁰

As for the restaurant that Weston created on the Mississippi River, given its significance as an early development among the riverfront revitalization, it was deemed eligible for the National Register in 2016, though formal listing did not occur.

Despite its historic status and many efforts to identify a re-use for the building, it ultimately succumbed to “demolition by neglect.” Deeming that its condition had deteriorated beyond repair, the MPRB conducted a selective demolition of the building in the fall of 2017. While the original mill ruin walls were retained, much of Weston’s intervention was razed. Some of Fuji-Ya’s architectural elements, such as the large beams of timber and glulam (glued, laminated timber), were salvaged in hopes that they can be incorporated

into Water Works, the MPRB’s new vision for the portion of the parkway that includes the Fuji-Ya site. The plan calls for a new park pavilion to be incorporated into the mill ruins, much as Weston’s building had done. A restaurant in the pavilion is slated to be run by the Sioux Chef, a.k.a. Sean Sherman, who works to revitalize Native American cuisine. Sherman has expressed interest in creating a venue for “a larger dialogue about Native American cultures, the river, and cuisine.” The café will be called *Owamni*, an ode to

the falls as they were known before their multiple rediscoveries.⁴¹

This next iteration of the downtown Minneapolis riverfront is perhaps one more development for which Weston deserves some credit. Perhaps it was inevitable that Minneapolis would return to the river where it got its start. But Weston hastened the return at a time and in a way that captured the spirit and integrity of the place before it could be further lost or destroyed and inspired the city to reconnect with the river she loved. ▣

Notes

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Photos on p. 98, 100, 111 by Kimmy Tanaka; p. 99, Hennepin County Library; p. 102, 103, 105, 107 (bottom) MNHS collections; p. 104, collection of Kimmy Tanaka; p. 107 (top), courtesy Judy Nomura Murakami. Architectural drawings on p. 101 by Kimmy Tanaka. Top and middle, based on drawings by Peterson, Clark and Griffith Architects (1967) and Arthur Dickey Architects (1975) from Northwest Architectural Archives; bottom, based on drawings from MacDonald and Mack Architects (January 25, 2017). Map on p. 109, Esri. "Street Map" [basemap]. Scale Not Given. "World Street Map," August 15, 2018; <http://www.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=3b93337983e9436f8db950e38a8629af>. Map created by Kimmy Tanaka using ArcGIS® software by Esri. ArcGIS® and ArcMap™ are the intellectual property of Esri and are used herein under license. Copyright © Esri. All rights reserved.



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