

Interview with H. Alexander Talbot and Aki Kamoza

Keyah Grande, Pagosa Springs, CO

What's your favorite new ingredient?

ALEX: We love freeze-dried ingredients. Freeze-dried pineapple has a great crispy texture; we sprinkle it on chunks of beautiful raw tuna. We love freeze-dried coconut powder too. We purchase them from Terra Spice. We also love sake-cured trout roe from Steve Stallard [of Blis Caviar] in Michigan. He cures wild brook trout roe, char roe and king salmon roe. At first he cured the roe with smoked salt. Now he's curing it with sake, and also with Tahitian vanilla.

What's the most versatile spice?

ALEX: Salt. There are eight million types of salt out there. We like to mix pollen with fleur de sel. Most recently, we mixed salt with Tahitian vanilla bean to use on shellfish and carpaccio. We also mix Maldon salt and Valrhona chocolate. We use it on lobster, foie gras, sweetbreads and also on desserts like roasted-banana tart.

What's the most underused spice?

AKI: Cardamom. I really like it as a background note for meat in rubs and marinades. It goes really well with pork, beef and especially lamb.

What items should be in every pantry?

ALEX: You have to have great olive oil. We use a lot of different olive oils. We love Armando Manni's olive oils, the ones called Per Me and Per Mio Figlio. He's based in Italy. We also use Spanish, French and California olive oils.

AKI: I'd say citrus. I really like lime juice. It adds more of a rounded flavor than vinegar, which can be a bit one-dimensional.

What's your favorite knife?

ALEX: An ebony-handled Japanese knife from Korin. I use it for fine herbs and fish, things that require precision. I also use my serrated knife from Forschner for slicing onions, bread, braised meat.

AKI: A Victorinox paring knife. You can do anything with it.

What's your favorite pan?

ALEX: We have a cast-iron pan we got from a flea market in Pagosa Springs. It has a little lip on it. We use it for everything from pancakes to roasted sweetbreads and scallops.

AKI: I like my medium-size Lodge cast-iron skillet.

What's your favorite place to buy equipment?

ALEX: JB Prince [jbprince.com]. That's where I first started buying equipment. The last thing I bought there was an immersion circulator. We have two of them. For knives, I go there or to Korin [korin.com].

What's your favorite mail-order source?

ALEX: We get our butter from Diane St. Clair [animalfarmvt.com] in Orwell, Vermont. The fact that you can pick up the phone or go online and order is brilliant! Because in Pagosa Springs, our local season is, like, two days. Without mail order, we wouldn't be able to exist.

AKI: We get cheese from Tomales Bay Foods [whose retail arm is Cowgirl Creamery, cowgirlcreamery.com] in California and Formaggio Kitchen [formaggiokitchen.com] [in Boston].

If you could design one piece of serving equipment, what would it be?

AKI: I'd like to make a shallow bowl with a clear glass cloche (a domed cover), so servers can see what's happening on the plate so they won't mess anything up.

What's your favorite sushi place?

ALEX: Sushi Yasuda [in New York City]. You get what the chef thinks is best.

If you were going to open a fast-food place, what kind of food would you serve?

ALEX: We would open a rib shack and call it Rib Shack. We take Saint Louis-cut spareribs, season them with salt and Crystal hot sauce from Louisiana, wrap them in plastic wrap two times and once in aluminum foil, then put them in the oven for five hours at 250°. Then brush them in ginger-ketchup sauce. They're so tender.

AKI: Or we'd open a fried fish shack with belly clams and fish-and-chips.

A lot of chefs are getting into making things completely from scratch, like cheese. What would you like to make from scratch?

ALEX: We make our own vinegar. We call it "everywine" vinegar because we use all the leftover wines from the restaurant. We're really excited about our tequila vinegar; it has tequila characteristics, like pepperiness.

AKI: Right now we're playing around with making cheese, but it's not going so well. So I'd like to be able to make better cheese, like homemade mozzarella and cheddar.

On a scale of one to 10, with one representing an emphasis on using in-season ingredients as simply as possible and 10 championing high-tech, scientific cooking, where do you rank yourself?

ALEX: The dilemma in the food world today is science versus nature. But you need to have both. I'd say we're at a five. I love the idea of science and Aki likes the simpler approach, and because we edit each other, we find a balance. Sous vide cooking is great; it allows for precision and a broader range. We're using methylcellulose to make hot ice creams. Cooking is an art. So we're mixing art and science.

AKI: I believe you can marry the two approaches. A really good restaurant is going to get the best possible ingredients. People need to stop talking about the technology in their kitchen. You don't need to talk about it so much.

If you could upgrade one piece of equipment in your kitchen, what would it be?

ALEX: I'd do our stove. We have a Wolf, which has individual burners. I'm a big fan of French flattops, but Aki likes individual burners.

AKI: I'd like to have a convection oven where you can turn the fan off, and also with a steamer function.

Which newfangled piece of equipment (i.e., sous vide equipment, the Pacojet, the Thermomix or a dehydrator) do you think will gain a real place in home kitchens?

ALEX: A Thermomix should be in home kitchens already, but it's crazy expensive. It can play the role of seven devices. You can scramble eggs in a Thermomix. You can also make soup and steam things.