

BEHIND THE BLOG: IDEAS IN FOOD

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For the past four years, the chefs Alex Talbot and Aki Kamozaawa have catalogued their kitchen experiments—which often involve chemicals unfamiliar to most home cooks—on their blog, [Ideas in Food](#). Providing full recipes and detailed yet engaging descriptions of the thought processes behind each dish, the blog has developed a following among chefs and amateur food lovers alike.

Talbot and Kamozaawa, a husband-and-wife team, started out in the kitchen at Restaurant Clio in Boston; after working for four years as co-executive chefs at the Keyah Grande resort in Colorado, they moved to New York City, where they now teach cooking classes and cater private events. *Gourmet*'s Christy Harrison spoke to Talbot about the blog, the allure of [hydrocolloids](#), and the frustrations of cooking for a New York audience.

Q. So how did you guys decide to start Ideas in Food?

A. We got started when we were out in Colorado, and a friend of ours who was the general manager of Keyah Grande had his own blog. We didn't really know what the heck a blog was. That was a quieter time, and we were out in the middle of nowhere. We talked about it and figured [a blog] was a good way to catalog our information, so we signed up with Typepad. We just started writing. And we didn't really know where we were going with it or what it was going to do; if you look back at the archives, you can see the culinary evolution, the voice that develops as we got comfortable with things.

Originally we had planned on having one person writing in italics and one person writing in a regular font, but that just seemed silly. Our voices became apparent, for the most part—you can tell something written by me from something written by Aki,

especially if you read the website on a regular basis.

Q. It's sort of rare in food blogs to have two people collaborating like this.

A. Certainly. And I guess that's what's really exciting. We've cooked together for years now, and we've always been co-chefs.

Q. Did you meet in culinary school?

A. We actually met in Boston, at Clio, where we worked together. So we don't know anything else, besides working with each other. And what's great is that we both have different approaches to food, so at day's end it gets filtered by both of us. We are editors for each other, and we can really grow and get better because of that.

Q. When you first started out, were you doing a lot of writing about the chemicals and technologies that you work with now?

A. I think that kind of developed over time. We started out just working with ingredients, but ingredients like hydrocolloids are looked at as something different—something strange and odd that needs to be defined, as opposed to just being another ingredient. And that's where we were as chefs—how do you integrate something new into a cuisine? Or rather how do you integrate something old, because it's been around for years, it just has a bad name.

Q. Well, it's been industrialized—it's been a part of industry and not a part of home cooking.

A. Right. To put it simply—and we talk about this in our class on hydrocolloids—as chefs and cooks, our job is to source great ingredients and to highlight them. The hydrocolloids used in the industrial sense were designed to make it so that you could start off with a poor ingredient and try to extend its shelf life and change its texture. If you start off with something like that—if you start off with shit, basically—and you try to extend its shelf life, you've just got extended junk. But if we start off with an impeccable ingredient—a beautiful pumpkin, or a lovely apple, or a roasted beet—and then we use these ingredients to highlight its flavor or accent its texture or improve upon it, then we're just elevating the food.

Take a parsley puree, for example. If you puree parsley and strain it, you basically just have parsley water. So to thicken it, you're going to have to add something: olive oil, butter. And those ingredients have flavors that don't taste like parsley. They taste delicious, but they don't taste like parsley. So what if you could add an ingredient that would give you the structure and mouthfeel that you're looking for, without taking away flavor?

Q. Basically creating an essence of parsley.

A. Right! One that has body and structure and character. But you have to be careful, because just like you can add too much butter to something, you can add too much xanthan gum, or too much carrageenan. And that throws things off. As a cook, you know that if you add too much flour to a sauce it becomes gummy and pasty, right? So you know how to fix it. We're just learning how to fix things. We're learning that hydrocolloids are very powerful, so you have to use just a very small amount. You have to be more precise.

So the blog really helps us catalog our information. We call it our digital notebook. It's interesting for us because we really put everything out there. We kind of wear our passion on our sleeve.

Q. And your secrets, too—it seems like you give some pretty detailed recipes and notes about what you're making.

A. We give everything away. Besides what we do on the main part of the website, if you look at the PDFs on the sidebar, those are thousands of pages of notes from us. A new PDF notebook goes up every couple months or so, depending on how prolific we are in our notes. We write about every idea, and we've had people say 'holy cow, how are you guys giving away all this information?' Eventually we'll get something out of it. If you don't give it away, you're not going to get anything back.

Q. You mentioned when I spoke to you last summer that you were looking to open a restaurant in New York. Are you still?

A. We have been, but not to great success. So currently we're doing some small, intimate catering gigs, and we're doing these cooking classes and looking at opportunities. And of course we're doing the website.

Q. Who are some chefs that inspire you?

A. Anyone who's really passionate. I certainly have a lot of admiration for what Thomas Keller has done. Wylie [Dufresne] has been a friend of ours for a number of years, and we've been pleased with what Grant Achatz has been able to achieve in Chicago. I think Chicago has been good to him; they're focused on ingredients. I think New York is very much about labeling people and things, and so here you have to define what someone is cooking. You can't just serve "food;" you can't just cook with "ingredients"—that would be silly!

And in the same sense New Yorkers, while they like to define everything, couldn't give a rat's ass. Do people really want to know the hows and whys of how food is prepared—from the long, slow braise to the use of an artisanal olive oil from the far reaches of wherever? At day's end, no, they don't. It takes however long to describe a dish, and then the food's cold. It doesn't really matter the steps that were taken to make it; is it tasty or not tasty?

Q. There's something to be said for good sourcing, though.

A. Sure, but do you have to put it out there? It should just be expected.

Q. But you pay for great ingredients—there's a lot of expense, time, and labor involved.

A. Very much so, but that's where you get into attention to detail. And attention to detail swings back to the website—because when you get into writing about the food, and photographing and tasting it, you can really start to fine-tune what you do, if you're willing to analyze the process.

INTERVIEW BY CHRISTY HARRISON
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