

RAKUTENKAI DAYS

Wisdom Found in Chinatown: The Wok Apprentice's Story

By Lee Ordeman

LEANING OVER THE STOVE in the dimly lit kitchen, his head and hands appear to glow, illumined by a little overhead work light as he handles a blazing hot wok. He pays little attention to the growing din of partygoers crowding the space. Beers are offered and wine glasses clink amid relaxed and happy conversation, the kind that follows a good gasshuku – this time in Quebec last September.

Yet the sound that communicates most to the hungry gathering is the steely clattering of the wok as it skips and bangs over a high blue flame. The cook whips his left wrist and a shower of rice, diced carrots, scallions, and pork rises above the stovetop. Heads turn to watch as the mix falls miraculously back into the deftly positioned pan.

“*Tamago!*” he calls out, demanding the next ingredient. A sloshing *donburi* full of whisked eggs arrives as he pushes the steaming rice mix aside. The cook splashes the bowl's contents across the pan. The eggs sear and sigh and soon solidify enough to be scrambled and chopped into bits by a bamboo rice paddle.

The eggs then join the waiting rice mix for a final toss. Their bright glints of yellow complement flecks of scallion green and carrot orange throughout the toasty-brown rice. Scents of soy, pepper, and turmeric rise and tease the waiting dinner guests.



They watch the pan's contents move to a large bowl and then onto a round white table that occupies the center of the kitchen. Plates and bowls, spoons and chopsticks are issued, and the guests line up to taste what their other senses have been telling them for the last 10 minutes: this rice is

delicious and this guy – the leader of the weekend's gasshuku, Master H.F. Ito – knows how to cook.

He joins them at the table and smiles as they eat and then reach for seconds. He sits and sips a small glass of umeshu on the rocks, enjoying the site of happy people eating *chahan*, as it is called in Japan.

On that fall evening in Quebec, few of those enjoying the fried rice knew the story behind their teacher's kitchen skills, that before Ito left Japan to share Shintaido overseas, he was a cook at a Chinese restaurant.

In 1965 Haruyoshi Fugaku Ito graduated from Chuo University in Tokyo with a college degree and a 5th dan in karate but without a job. He needed to make a living while he continued to practice and do research with Aoki Sensei. So Aoki Sensei connected him with a former student and Chuo karate club alum, Eizo Cho, who was now running his family's Cantonese restaurant in Yokohama's Chinatown, a family-style *chukaya* called "Ei Anro".

The idea of learning to cook appealed to Ito. And the restaurant offered young apprentices room and board, which would allow him to save money while living close to Aoki Sensei's house and Nogeyama Park, where Rakutenkai keiko were regularly held. He moved into the dorm, put on the white cook's uniform, and threw himself into his apprenticeship. "I really wanted to study how to cook, how to run the business," he recalls, speaking from his home in Maslives, France.

He spent the first six months washing dishes and chopping vegetables. Undiscouraged by the hard work, he looked for opportunities to learn. His new coworkers were unimpressed. "People were kind of nasty. They didn't want to teach me anything, they were waiting for the chance that I make a mistake – like *ijime*, you know *ijime*?" The word translates as "bullying", and in Japanese society it can be darkly brutal.

He explains that most of the younger workers at the restaurant were hired through connections with the chefs, shared their Chinese descent, and spoke Cantonese. Ito, on the other hand, was hired directly by the boss and so thrown into a coolly suspicious kitchen, full of competitive tensions and distrust of management. "For a long time many of my colleagues thought I was a spy, a spy from the boss," he says with more amusement than his younger self might have appreciated.

"Watch out for this guy," he said, imagining their gossip. "You never know how much he is betraying (us), giving information to the boss!" But finally, Ito says, he got through it: "I became good friends with the chef. I kept studying."

This was, after all, the guy who first left Japan to live abroad and teach Shintaido: "You know me, I can go any way; I can get along with anyone. So I think it took me six months, or just about, for me to get along with all the staff members, the young guys working in the kitchen."

Even through the bullying, Ito counted his blessings. "I was lucky – I could stay in a small crummy dormitory. I could save money, and while I worked as a chef's assistant, they provided clothes – you know, all white clothes. And so for two and a half years I

only wore those clothes. I hardly wore my own.” He laughs. “And once a week they’d send the dirty one’s to the cleaner. At the beginning of the week, I’d wear something new, a newly washed one.



It was a simple time: “I was *genki* (healthy and full of life), and so even in the winter time I’d just wear these white clothes. Other recent college grads usually worked at companies and would have to go buy nice suits and ties; so I saved a lot of money. And the boss I was working for was very generous, and so he paid me (the equivalent of) five hundred (dollars) a

month, while most other university graduates were making two or three hundred maximum.”

“He was generous,” Ito remembers, “but I worked hard too. Twelve-hour days.”

As the *jjime* subsided, Ito was promoted to wok chef’s assistant, and that’s when he learned how to make fried rice. “When you become a wok apprentice, that is the first lesson,” he says. “And so when I became good enough and the chef was very busy making some other nice dish, making fried rice or *tanmen* (vegetable ramen) was my job. And while I was making it, I would be able to watch him making some other dish to see how he was making it: that was a kind of *mitorigeiko* (practice through watching).”

After those 12-hour days on most weeknights, Ito would walk 3 km up a steep hill to the Nogeyama heights to meet Aoki Sensei and anyone else available for keiko. “Aoki Sensei would come back (home from work) at midnight, and we’d practice after midnight till about 2 or 3. And then around 4 o’clock, I’d go back to Chinatown and the dormitory and sleep 3 or 4 hours, and then I start working again.” Back at work at 10 a.m., then a 1- or 2-hour nap in his room during a break after the lunchtime rush. He’d then work the dinner rush till 10, when he’d grab his gi and climb the hill again to meet with Aoki Sensei.

At the time Aoki Sensei was working afternoons and evenings as an instructor at the Tokyu Karate Dojo in western suburban Tokyo. To capitalize on the booming popularity of karate at the time, the Tokyu commuter train line built a large dojo under

a newly constructed tennis stadium. Egami Sensei was hired as chief instructor, and Aoki Sensei came on as assistant and essentially ran the dojo and taught full time.

Ito recalls that many small karate dojo were popping up around this time, but this place was unusually large and well equipped thanks to its corporate backing: “Tokyu Karate Dojo was quite a well established karate school.”

Monday through Thursday, Ito kept to the routine – long days of work, then keiko, little sleep. “But on the weekend we were super busy, so no nap.”

Yokohama’s Chinatown, a tourist attraction still today, was particularly crowded on the weekends, he recalls. “If you wanted to eat good Chinese food, Tokyo people always went to Yokohama.”

So weekends meant no nap, and no keiko either. “I could hardly attend (any) Rakutenkai events because most of the time the gasshukus were on the weekends.”

Despite the hard work and schedule, nothing was harder for Ito to endure than missing those keiko. He squeezes his eyes shut and grimaces, fists clutched to his chest like an anxious little boy. “Oh, it was... oooo!” He opens his eyes searching for the words: “Anxiety always – Oh!” He was constantly afraid he’d fall behind his fellow Rakutenkei members. He pictures it now as he did then on those difficult weekends: “Okada, Hokari, or whoever – training like this...” – he pantomimes them doing *tsuki*, making little karate punches in the air.

That motivated him, he says, “That was one of the reasons – Monday through – not Friday – Friday I had to save my energy – but through Thursday, I went to Aoki Sensei always after work.”

It was hard to know what to expect at those midnight keiko: “At that time Aoki Sensei was always full of energy, full of inspiration, and so he always wanted to do the new idea – to experiment.” It was a heady time, perhaps the peak of Rakutenkai creativity. “We were like guinea pigs – he used our bodies like guinea pigs to test his technique.”

At the restaurant things were going well. Over time Ito became close to his young boss, and Cho started grooming Ito for bigger responsibilities. “He liked me,” he says, but explains, “He wanted me to take over the restaurant business so that he could fool around.”

The restaurant was successful, and Cho had many good qualities as a boss, but – as Ito eventually found out – the boss was a serious gambler. “He was really good at delegating to people, but from my point of view he wasn’t serious enough. So I thought I cannot bet my life on this guy. And in a way, I had studied enough from him, not (only) how to cook, but business arrangements – many things. Because I wasn’t just working in the kitchen.”

Ito eventually said goodbye to Cho and his workmates, taking a construction job that would finally allow him to attend gasshuku on the weekends. Working at the restaurant, however, remained an important experience on which to build: “Mr. Cho, he told me like this: at a good restaurant (...) everyone wins. The chef is happy to cook, the owner is happy to host customers and the customers are happy to eat. So, win-win-win – nobody loses.”

He describes how customers can come to a Chinese restaurant in a group: they can eat freely and as much or little as they want by just ordering a few large dishes. Everyone is fed, food is not wasted – and it is easy for the restaurant staff to prepare and serve, and so it's profitable.

“At a Japanese restaurant,” he says, “everything is individual. So the way you serve – there's a lot of effort. There's effort for each serving, say, of tempura. But in a Chinese restaurant – with a bunch of tempura...” – his hands move as if he's serving the customers – “boom, on a big plate. And people pick up. And some people can eat more, but other people can – maybe two pieces is enough. But they (each) pay the same amount of money. Everyone's happy.”

This insight changed the way he worked in Shintaido. “That became my basic philosophy: Making Aoki Sensei happy and making the students happy, and then the organizers of the gasshuku ... That's the idea I came to.”



And when he instructs groups of students how to run a gasshuku, he hopes they can understand the inclusivity and fun of this approach. He observes that one of the reasons for the success of September's gasshuku in Quebec was that the organizers adopted this approach, learned from a Chinatown chef's apprentice. “Strictly speaking, I only worked (there) for two and a half years, but what I learned

at the Chinese restaurant was a lifetime of wisdom.”

This is the first of two articles. The second, to appear in the next Newsletter, will feature Ito Sensei's recipe for chahan and explain how a simple dish of fried rice can tell you all you need to know about a Chinese restaurant.