

The Spirit of Sharing

An Interview with Julia Momose: Creative Director of Kumiko and Kikkō



Julia Momose, Creative Director of Kumiko and its 10-seater extension Kikkō

Garnering accolades like “Jean Banchet Mixologist of the Year,” “Food & Wine Best New Mixologist,” “Zagat 30 Under 30,” “Eater Young Gun,” and most recently “Food & Wine’s 10 Best New Restaurants of 2019,” Julia Momose (百瀬) owns the right to command the attention of a room like a celebrity. Speaking with her about Kumiko in Chicago’s West Loop neighborhood and its new 10-seater downstairs expansion Kikkō, however, feels more like catching up with a close friend.

A Warm Welcome

Kumiko staff receive us as soon as we walk in, lead us to the table, and set up water glasses even though the bar isn't actually open yet. During our interview, at least three different team members glide by to top off my glass while carrying out prep work. I suspect Julia herself would reach out and pour me a refill if I weren't keeping her so busy with my questions.

"Actually, people always seem to mistake me for a bar back or a server or a food runner," she jokes.

"Even here at Kumiko, guests will sit in front of me and ask our staff all about Julia. 'Is she here tonight? Does she work here during evenings?' and they have no idea that I'm standing in



Kumiko

front of them. And I like that." Julia seems eager to shrug off the title *startender* that is so often assigned to her, happier to share the spotlight with her team. "Here we all wear pretty much the same thing, like a uniform, so no one really stands out – our runners and servers and bartenders can all flow into one another's spaces and it wouldn't look odd. Everyone has their specialty but also supports each other."

Cocktails as Connections

As Julia speaks her hands move ceaselessly, sketching shapes in the air as she describes cocktails or ingredients, gesturing to enhance a story, or smoothing out the edges of a napkin. I can tell she is itching for another chance to move, to work, to create. Julia is soft-spoken and her words are carefully chosen, but ask her about her creations, or the people she shares them with, and she comes alive.

She goes into amazing detail about the *Falling Blossom* cocktail, pictured right, and the way she pours it in front of the guest, allowing the pickled *sakura* petals to slowly bloom and float to the bottom of the glass before their eyes as she tells the story of cherry blossoms and their strong significance in Japan. She chuckles as she explains



how the inspiration for her *New Wave* cocktail was actually Japanese curry rice, something that often surprises her guests. “I’ll talk about my own memories of eating it during the summertime. It’s kind of like opening up a door into my life for them to hear my story. And sometimes they’ll share their story back with me, maybe they always eat or drink something during hot weather. So the cocktail becomes the talking point that leads to a connection.”

Starting at Home

This sense of connection is a hallmark of Kumiko’s philosophy towards service, formed early on during Julia’s childhood in Japan. “I remember how much my mother would stress over every detail, down to something as simple as which design to use on the napkins at dinner. Or maybe one guest didn’t like bitter foods so we’d arrange the menu around that. And so from very early on I always had this drive to try and handle the needs of



Julia practicing Chado, traditional Japanese tea ceremony

many different people all coming to share a space, and how to best make that a good place to be for both the people working and the people joining.”

Julia smiles extra wide as she points out the drinks that she's designed specifically for her parents when they visit – *Fields of Green* for her mother, and *Hoji-cha Highball* for her father. Momose's parents don't drink alcohol, and in typical Momose fashion she's taken extra care to accommodate their palettes with a tantalizing array of her famous "spiritfree" cocktails featured on Kumiko's menu.



Kumiko

“In Japan if you go to a grocery there's a whole aisle for non-alcoholic beer. I like that in Japanese culture, drinking without alcohol is a choice, not a matter of 'settling' for something. Up until now, people have said a 'non-alcoholic old fashioned' or a 'virgin Daiquiri' and that's naming something by what it's not. The value of a drink isn't based off of how much alcohol is in it, so I want to bridge that gap and kind of celebrate people for who they are and just for being here.”

Room at the Table

It certainly sounds like an attitude her parents would be proud of. The theme we always return to is one of feeling compelled to create a space that feels actively hospitable – welcoming to each and every guest’s individual tastes, needs, and palette. A respect not only for the craft, but the consumer.

“Time is so valuable, and so the fact that people are coming to spend time with us is such a big deal. And on top of that, they’re spending money, so wanting everything to be perfect for them is such a vital element. I want to



do anything that needs to be done to make that happen. With Kumiko I really wanted to create a quiet, safe space where if people want to laugh and have a good time they

totally can but if people want to just sit back and learn something new they can do that too. And it’s an atmosphere where they can ask for what they want and not be judged and also ask questions and not be judged for not knowing the answer to what that random ingredient is. The idea of an inclusive space is very important to me.”

And that, truly, is the appeal of Kumiko. Blending the flexibility and ingenuity of American mixology with the sincerity and perfectionism of Japanese hospitality, Julia Momose has crafted a place that feels like home for everyone.

Julia Momose: [Website](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#)

Kumiko: [Website](#), [Instagram](#)

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