

2016 Interview with Mari Katsumura, Pastry Chef at Entente  
(This interview was conducted in 2016. Mari Katsumura is currently executive chef at Yūgen restaurant in Chicago).



Mari Katsumura in a chef apron

This month, I had the pleasure of interviewing Mari Katsumura, pastry chef of the new restaurant [Entente](#) in Chicago and former pastry chef at [Acadia](#) and [Grace](#). Mari grew up in an apartment in Lakeview above her parents' restaurant, [Yoshi's Café](#), with her brother (who is also a chef and works at Yoshi's Café currently). Despite her parents' efforts to steer her away from a career in culinary arts, she felt a calling to the world of pastry. This is in part due to her background in the arts as she believes pastry is a unique culinary avenue for artistic expression. Today, Mari is one of the most respected and rising pastry chefs in Chicago and her creations are [Michelin-level quality](#) at a reasonable price.

**Amy Klouse (AK): What was the inspiration for Entente? How did you and Ty Fujimura ([Arami](#), [SmallBar](#) and [Pub97](#) owner) come together for this concept?**

Mari Katsumura (MK): I actually met Ty through Brian Fisher (Ex-[Schwa](#) and [Saved by the Max Pop-Up](#) Chef) who is a chef/owner as well. It was kind of an organic process I guess. I had met Ty several years ago as well in passing but I never anticipated we would be working together which is awesome. I have always been fond of Arami and have kind of followed him so I have known of him as a presence in the city for a while now. In

terms of the project, I think that the foundation was based on a collaboration. It has very much been a group effort where each person influences the other. It is not just one chef handling the kitchen and being the authority figure. Instead, everyone has their own input. That is where "Entente" comes from, it is a French word meaning friendship and togetherness. It took us quite some time to find a name for the restaurant that we felt represented the methodology and what we believe in.

**AK: What's your background and where did you go to school to learn culinary arts?**

MK: I initially went to a liberal arts college for a few years. I then ended up going to Le Cordon Bleu culinary school in Minnesota. That was a general education and then I started to do savory foods. I then specifically focused on pastries so I went to the French Pastry School here in Chicago and I would say that is the extent of my culinary education. During that time, I had an internship at [Frontera](#) as well.

**AK: How have you come up in the pastry world? After your education what were the steps you took to get where you are now?**

MK: I feel that knowledge is power. I always tried to learn as much as I could along the way and tried to follow the footsteps of people and pastry chefs that I admire. I have been very active and deliberate in terms of the choices of the kitchens I have worked in. Directly after pastry school I worked under a pastry chef that I really admired at the time on various projects. I would say after that, working at Grace is what really opened a lot of doors for me. I then chose to work at [Blackbird](#) under Dana Cree whom I deeply respect and think she is probably the best pastry chef in Chicago. Just to learn from people who have a wealth of knowledge has really set me off for success.



*Above: Profiterole pastry with cherry and chocolate flavors*

**AK: From what I've seen, your pastry is very artistic and beautiful. Did you have a background or interest in art?**

MK: The liberal arts school I attended was for a degree in Studio Arts and Art History. I did a lot of mixed media and photography in

the past. That is kind of why my dad said that I should probably consider doing pastry because he felt I could really showcase things I had learned along the way. He ended up being right!

**AK: What was it like growing up for you with parents who ran a restaurant?**

MK: I do not really have a comparison because it felt completely normal to me. When I would go to a friend's house, they would have things like a backyard, a dog or a porch and we'd be able to eat breakfast on their terrace and to me that was very strange. I was used to growing up in the middle of an intersection and my parent's restaurants' (Yoshi's Cafe) parking lot was my playground where I'd ride my bike and play with friends. I was accustomed to walking down a flight of stairs into the restaurant from our apartment above and there would be ingredients where I could make a cake in my little oven. The restaurant and our home were very much one in the same. I never really realized it was a different kind of lifestyle until later in life.

**AK: Would you say your parents running their restaurant had an impact on your decision to go into culinary arts?**

MK: Yes, ultimately for sure. Cooking as a skill was something very inherent in myself and I didn't realize this until, again, later in life because my parents did everything in their power to kind of steer me away from the restaurant business. I would have customers and friends ask me when I grew up if I would take over and be a chef. They and I would always adamantly say no. My parents also pushed me with my studies and ensured I had the best education because they knew how physically taxing the work was and how demanding of time it was. So I think they wanted me to go in a different direction but it was so much a part of my upbringing that I found I didn't want to go off the path. It was almost like a culture through osmosis and a significant part of me. As I grew older, I realized it was inevitable and I couldn't run from my destiny in a sense.

**AK: Would you say then also that your heritage as a Japanese American influences your food?**

MK: Absolutely, 100%. I had a conversation recently about this in terms of food trends and people's curiosity whether in terms of ingredients or tools like Japanese knives or the practice and way Japanese chefs operate. As you see in popular culture through movies like *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, definitely within the past decade there is much more awareness of different foods. Foods like *natto* (fermented soybeans) or cod roe and things that chefs

are using now is funny because these are things I grew up eating so it is not new to me. It is great that there is this genuinely heightened level of interest now as well as this dedication and commitment to learning. So in terms of ingredients and flavor, I wouldn't say it is necessarily deliberate, but I always like to use ingredients that are familiar to me and they happen to be Japanese. They are not always the predominant flavor, but I like to scatter it in the ways that I can.

**AK: Would you also say your Japanese roots have had an impact on your values or business style? And if so, in what ways?**

MK: Definitely, I think that there is an overall awareness of being conscious of other people's needs and happiness and taking care of others. I saw this Japanese hospitality, *omotenashi*, firsthand when my mom and I went to Japan. I noticed a lot of people who work in service industries would really go out of their way to do things for their guests. It was more a matter of pride in the products they are selling or the work they are doing. In Japan, it's more accepted. I try to follow that model here in the work that I do to kind of change an incorrect perception of American hospitality only being dependent on the incentive of tips.

**AK: What has been one of the greatest challenges in your professional career?**

MK: Each restaurant I have worked at has had its own set of unique challenges. It is kind of like a kid that goes to a new school every year. You have to kind of learn the practices and how people operate.



Above: tres leches cake with hojicha ice cream, kabocha, and sorghum

**AK: What is your pastry style and philosophy?**

MK: I think fundamentally I try to make food that is really delicious and satisfying. For me, that is the base. Conceptually, I start from things that are personal to me whether it is a memory or nostalgic. It has to be something very approachable but I find my way to put my mark on it whether it is a Japanese ingredient or I use a technique I have practiced and am comfortable with. For instance, the tres leches cake that is currently on our menu at Entente is probably one of my favorite cakes growing up. It is just a piece of sponge cake that is soaked in liquid but it is **so good**. For me, I kind of transformed it and made

it my own by putting *hojicha* (green tea) ice cream in the center. There is *kabocha* (pumpkin) puree and crispy sorghum bits and it is kind of like eating milk and cereal. There are a lot of layers but it starts from a very modest and comforting concept.

**AK: Is there anything you are hoping to convey to people through your foods and technique? Either when they are eating it or when it is being presented to them?**

MK: Not necessarily. Our kitchen is great because it is open and we can see the diners' experiences and reactions when plates are brought to them. Brian and I intentionally have a basic menu with simple ingredients so that when guests have the plates arrive at the table, they are surprised. Many people maybe do not expect it to look as it does or have the flavors that we add. For me, that is really satisfying to see people excited, happy and even shocked.

**AK: Do you have any future goals in mind?**

MK: Ideally I would like to be my own business owner. What that may look like I am not entirely sure but my recent trip to Japan with my mom was very inspiring and I think it will have some ties to Japanese food. Maybe not entirely, but there will be a Japanese twist to it.



*[Image courtesy DNA Info Chicago](#)*

*Chef Mari Katsumura is an incredibly humble person who makes some of the most gorgeous pastries I've ever seen. Her talents as well as her sweet personality run in the family. It is apparent that she is a hard worker who thinks very deliberately about her career choices and I wish her the best of luck in future endeavors. I can't wait to try some of her delicious food soon!*

Learn more about Mari Katsumura's new restaurant, Yūgen Chicago:



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