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Japanese Culture in New Orleans

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Abstract

Japanese community in New Orleans, which is rather small and not nearly as settled or established as the Vietnamese community. However, the Japanese Americans whom I interviewed for this project and who live in the city are proud of their unique heritage.

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Introduction

This text highlights the small Japanese community in New Orleans, along with its cultural traditions. I chose this topic because it fits the theme of two documentaries that I've produced for WYES-TV – "Vietnamese Cuisine in New Orleans" and "Latino Cuisine in New Orleans." Although these two films focus on food, they touch on the cultures behind the cuisines, as well. I felt that there was not enough material for a thesis project that solely focuses on Japanese food, so I expanded the concept to include other aspects of Japanese culture.

For example, I've researched aikido--a Japanese martial arts form--in New Orleans and have interviewed an aikido instructor, and I've observed his class. I've also visited the Japanese garden in City Park and interviewed the designer. And, I met with a Japanese-American entrepreneur who runs a local boutique called Kawaii. Her colorful shop offers accessories and apparel items that are representative of Japanese pop-culture.

I have met and interviewed a longtime member of the Japan Society of New Orleans, which hosts social gatherings. He gave me background on the Japanese community in New Orleans, which is rather small and not nearly as settled or established as the Vietnamese community. However, the Japanese Americans whom I interviewed for this project and who live in the city are proud of their unique heritage.

They celebrate their heritage each year at Japan Fest, which takes place at the New Orleans Museum of Art, usually in October. The festival features music and dance performances, aikido demonstrations, arts and crafts, and Japanese food.

I also write about "sushi nights"--a weekend ritual that I share with my husband--and how sushi has always been a part of a twenty-year friendship.

As I mentioned earlier, I chose this topic because it's similar to the topics featured in my two documentaries. But I also wanted to research this community, rather than, say, the Indian community, because of my love for Japanese food--particularly sushi and ramen--and also because of the challenge it presented. It may seem like researching such a small community would be easier than researching large ethnic populations, like the Vietnamese and Latino communities, but it was actually more difficult. The information wasn't right in front of me, and it was a topic that hasn't really been explored in the local media. I was starting from scratch. Fortunately, members of the Japan Society of New Orleans were eager to help and put me in touch with people who could point me in the right direction.

I chose my thesis topic more than two years ago, but I have admittedly taken many long writing breaks. There were times when I was so busy with writing for *The New Orleans Advocate or* researching a documentary, while studying, that I had to put this project on the backburner. I wish I had done a better job of making this project a priority. When I took off a school semester to stay home with my son, I planned on writing during his naps … alas, that didn't happen! His naptime became my naptime, too, since I hadn't gotten sleep the night before. In other words, I underestimated what it would be like to work from home with an infant. But on that note, one reason why this thesis is special to me is because it involves three of the people who are closest to me--my best friend, my husband, and my son. They were my research assistants (unbeknownst to them). In fact, my son has been a part of the entire journey--including the part before he was even born.

My final challenge with this thesis was separating my professional writer self from Suzanne Tafur, the graduate student. Being a student requires a different approach to

interviews. My motives for an interview are not as clear as they would be when writing an article. The writing style is also a different from the one I've become accustomed to. As much as I enjoy nonfiction creative writing, I used a journalistic style of writing for this project, because this is the style I'd like to excel in as a professional. Writing these essays has certainly helped with that. The section about "ramen" even includes subheads to separate the main ideas of the essay. A variation of the essay actually ran in *The New Orleans Advocate* on January 18, 2018. It was accompanied by beautiful images by Sophia Germer. I'd like to repurpose the other essays in this thesis into newspaper articles, as well. I'm just waiting for the most relevant opportunity.

Overall, my goal is to show that Japanese culture is unique and unlike other Asian communities in New Orleans. Japanese Americans have their own cuisine and cultural traditions. I hope that's apparent. And I also hope readers are informed and engaged in reading this thesis.

The Japanese Community

Despite the proliferation of Japanese sushi restaurants in New Orleans, the number of Japanese Americans actually living in the city is rather small. When I was researching my documentary about *Vietnamese Cuisine in New Orleans*, I discovered that many sushi restaurants are largely staffed by Vietnamese people, thanks to the substantial Vietnamese population that began taking shape in New Orleans in the mid-1970s. Vietnamese Americans may have thought that sushi and Chinese food seemed more palatable to New Orleanians, rather than their cuisine, which may have also been associated with the Vietnam War.

And, unlike the Vietnamese community that has formed in what I call a Little Saigon, but is really named Village d'lest, in New Orleans East, Japanese people are scattered throughout the city.

To gain insight on the Japanese Americans living in New Orleans, I spoke with Greg Tokuyama, the vice president of Japan Society of New Orleans--a local organization that promotes Japanese heritage through seminars, events, a book club, and a festival. We met for our interview at the Broken Egg Café on Magazine Street.

Tokuyama's parents are from Fuka Oka, Japan, but Tokuyama was born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii, and spent 23 years of active duty in the Navy. When he was in the Navy, he taught in Japan for a few weeks at a time, but he doesn't speak Japanese. "My Japanese is terrible because I've never had to practice it," said Tokuyama. He was transferred to New Orleans in 1991 and retired in 1992. Tokuyama married a woman

from Golden Meadow, Louisiana, which is about 90 miles south of New Orleans, and they now have a son who's in his early twenties.

Tokuyama cooks Japanese food, like teriyaki-style meat and fish, and also dines at Japanese restaurants. Ninja on Oak Street and Shogun on Veterans Boulevard in Metairie are a couple of his favorites.

He was actually surprised when I approached him about my thesis because, according to him, there isn't much of a Japanese culture in New Orleans—and there are few Japanese here.

According to the website USA.com, there are 363 Japanese citizens in New Orleans. (There are 6,723 Vietnamese.) This information is based on data assembled between 2010 and 2014. The United States Census Bureau puts the number at 177, with a margin of error of 86 (plus or minus). This estimate is based on information from 2016. Meanwhile, Tokuyama claims that there are "no more than 200 Japanese living in New Orleans" and in the outskirts of the city--a guess that gives credence to the Census bureau's estimate. But he also acknowledged that the exact number is "hard to pinpoint."

One reason why it's difficult to know, Tokuyama explained, is because many Japanese immigrants aim to fit in with American culture and society, rather than promote their native culture and stand out as a Japanese person. "When Japanese people migrate to the U.S., they try to assimilate and blend in with the local population," he said. This also seems to be true in large cities, like New York, which do have a substantial Japanese population.

When I took an urban anthropology class, taught by Dr. David Beriss, I read: *Japanese New York: Migrant Artists and Self-Reinvention on the World Stage*, an

ethnography by Olga Kanzaki Sooudi – an assistant anthropology professor at the University of Amsterdam. As the title of the book implies, the author focuses on a specific group of Japanese migrants--the "bohemian, artistic class" (Sooudi 2015:3) who have moved to New York City to reinvent themselves on a creative level, not necessarily to obtain a higher quality of life. She explains that her book is also "a way of examining Japan beyond its borders" (Sooudi 2015:7).

Sooudi noted that the Japanese migrants in New York City do not form a community as other ethnic groups do; rather, they are scattered throughout the city, which made her research difficult. She said that some migrants objected to the word "community" because it "implied a common set of goals, needs, and desires, or ingrained habits of mutual aid, neither of which existed" in New York City. It also "contradicted the narrative of total autonomy, of forging one's own distinctive path" (Sooudi 2015:138), which was what the Japanese migrants hoped to do. This seems to be the case in other areas of the country, inhabited by Japanese immigrants.

Tokuyama claimed that the first wave of Japanese immigrants worked on sugarcane fields in Hawaii. *The Journey from Gold Mountain: The Asian American Experience,* a curriculum guide published by the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) and directed by William Yoshima, confirms this claim:

> "Between 1885 and 1894, 29,000 Japanese came to Hawaii on three-year work contracts; and from 1894 to 1908, 125,000 came … Japanese laborers became even more attractive in 1900 when Hawaii was annexed by the United States" (Yoshima 2006:7).

The website also notes that the Japanese were likely searching for opportunities away from their homeland, which was--at the time--afflicted by a weak economy. They began arriving on the United States mainland in the 1890s and found work in California as farmers, fishermen, entrepreneurs and miners, among other trades (Yoshima 2006:7). Japanese and other Asian ethnicities were seen as inferior and faced discrimination, especially during World War II. After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941, Japanese were placed in detention camps (Yoshima 2006:13). The Japanese American Citizen League states:

> "Without regard for due process or basic constitutional guarantees, over 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry, two-thirds of whom were American citizens, were imprisoned in ten concentration camps located in remote, desolate areas in California, Idaho, Utah, Arizona, Colorado, Wyoming and Arkansas. Approximately 10,000 people were imprisoned in each camp surrounded by barbed wire and armed military guards … The treatment of Japanese Americans during World War II remains as one of the most serious violations of constitutional rights in the history of the United States" (Yoshima 2006:14).

However, Japanese Americans were able to fight in Europe with the U.S. military, and were highly decorated. After World War II, Americans' opinions about the Japanese improved since the United States defeated Japan and stopped viewing the Asian country

as a threat. The Japanese Americans' contributions to the military also led to the change of heart. Yoshima 2006:14).

New modes of transportation made it easier for Japanese Americans to establish themselves in other areas of the country. Tokuyama believes that many Japanese people ended up in New Orleans because it's a port city, and also because Japanese automotive companies were located within southeast Louisiana. But after those automobile companies moved to Tennessee, the Japanese consulate that was once in New Orleans followed. Tokuyama noted that ZEN-NOH Grain Corporation, the largest exporter of rice to Japan, is based in Tokyo but still has offices in Covington.

Now, Japanese come for various reasons. Many of them are students who simply decide to stay after they complete their education. Kanako Richard, the owner of Kawaii Nola and a Tulane University graduate, is one of them. I profile her and her store later in this thesis.

Schools like the University of New Orleans (UNO) and Tulane University have programs that cater to Japanese students and people interested in Japanese culture. UNO offers Japanese language and literature courses, along with a summer study abroad program at Doshisha University in Kyoto, Japan. Tulane offers an Asian Studies program, which is described on its website as follows:

> The Asian Studies Program was established in 1981 to provide students with a multi-disciplinary approach to the study of Asian cultures and languages with a primary focus on China, Japan, and Vietnam … The Asian Studies program organizes and promotes Asia-related events

> throughout the school year … Tulane students organize weekly Chinese and Japanese conversation practice clubs, open to anyone interested in maintaining or supplementing their language studies.

Tulane offers a study abroad program that takes place in Osaka, Japan at Kansai Gaidai University.

New Orleans is also home to Japanese groups outside of the university scene. Many of the Japanese locals and visitors, along with people who are interested in Japanese culture, are members of The Japan Society of New Orleans (JSNO). According to the website, this organization "was founded in 1928 to foster friendly relationships with Japan through the study of Japanese art and culture as well as social and trade contacts between the two countries."

The society's variety of activities include Japanese film screenings, book club gatherings, seminars on Japanese food, and demonstrations that teach guests how to wear a kimono. Their most well known event is the Japan Festival, which takes place at The New Orleans Museum of Art in the fall.

"The festival is an opportunity for the Japanese community to pull together all of the cultural things that we have, like martial arts, dance, and that sort of thing, into a single location where other people can see the Japanese culture," said Tokuyama. "They come across it in spurts but this is a good gathering and conglomeration of all the different aspects of Japanese culture."

The festival didn't take place in the fall of 2017, but I went to the one in 2016 with my husband and son Santiago, who was about three months old at the time. (It was the budding bon vivant's first arts and culture experience.) Guests lounged on the steps in front of the entrance to the museum, soaking up the sun and listening to music groups pound on tall, Japanese taiko drums. Inside the museum, aikido and dance performances took place in the vast lobby. Seminars and Japanese film screenings were in a room on our right, and Japanese artwork was in a room on our left. Vendors in the back of the museum, near the gift shop, sold Japanese arts and crafts.

But naturally, my favorite part of the event, the food section, was located in The Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden. I was lured there by savory smells drifting through the air. While my husband Jose staked out a shady spot for us to sit, I waited in line for our meals. About ten minutes later, we dined on grilled chicken teriyaki and sesame noodles from Asian Cajun, a food vendor that sold Japanese food with southeast Louisiana flair. Another vendor sold Asian-inspired po-boys. We sipped lemonade and people-watched; many guests were dressed as Japanese anime characters that I had never known of. We also walked through the sculpture garden and took pictures with our son. Tokuyama doesn't know how many attendees the festival attracts, but he said that it tends to draw more Caucasians than people with Japanese roots. I noticed this as well.

"There are a lot of non-Japanese people that live in the Metropolitan area that are very thirsty to find out more about Japanese culture," said Tokuyama. "So the festival is an opportunity for them to learn more, meet people and ask questions."

In a time when our differences have caused divisiveness, it's reassuring to know that there are Americans who are eager to learn about other cultures.

The Japanese Concept of Cute Comes to New Orleans

Kanako Richard became a successful businesswoman by embracing her inner child. "When you grow older, you don't have to grow up," she said, explaining that it's okay to be a kid at heart, no matter your age.

Inspired by this belief and her Japanese heritage, Richard opened Kawaii NOLA, a Magazine Street boutique that celebrates Tokyo's colorful pop culture, characterized by kooky fashion statements and lovable cartoon figures, like Hello Kitty and Sailor Moon. "Kawaii' means 'cute'," Richard told me, when I stopped by her store one spring afternoon. "That's what we are--cute and loveable."

Kawaii NOLA, which attracts mostly female customers, both young and old, is cheerful and welcoming. It's situated in a long, narrow, New Orleans-style shotgun house with glossy, hardwood floors. The walls are painted in a fluorescent pink hue, which, according to Richard, "represents the vibrancy found in Tokyo, where everything is so colorful and bright." The ceiling, door, and window frames are purple. Shelves and tabletops are covered with Japanese anime-style stuffed animals, stationary, coin purses, wigs representing nearly every color in the rainbow, and an array of clothing items – from knee-high socks embellished with ice cream cone illustrations, to women's nightgowns, and baby outfits. Brands include Rilakkuma, ENJI, Choo Choo Cat, and

Sanrio. My favorite display is devoted to Japanese candy, like Pocky, which are biscuit sticks, covered in chocolate cream; and cookies filled with green tea-flavored nugget.

Richard also carries ornaments and trinkets that are made by local artists and feature a blend of New Orleans and Japanese cultures. The eclectic inventory highlights the bubbly entrepreneur's connection to both Tokyo and New Orleans and the similarities she sees between the two cities.

Richard was born in New Jersey, but her family is from Japan. She met her future husband, Adam Richard--a Louisiana local--while studying at Tulane. The couple has lived in New Orleans for nearly fifteen years and, after visiting Japan, Richard opened Kawaii NOLA. She felt that there was a market here for brands like Hello Kitty, and she also noticed that there was a parallel between "Tokyo fashion and the New Orleans parade culture" with people donning dazzling, often outlandish costumes. "Street fashion in Tokyo is huge. People are very creative," said Richard. "There's a do-it-yourself component like in New Orleans. People love to dress up and come up with a crazy costume and new persona."

Richard believes that New Orleans and Japanese cultures also share a "work hard, play hard" attitude, where people contribute to society through their jobs, but also celebrate life and express themselves … perhaps by wearing a turquoise wig purchased from Kawaii NOLA. "I think life is hard enough," said Richard. "We get bogged down with things that don't really matter in the end. Life is really short."

Fortunately, Richard finds happiness through her work. Just opening her store each day and welcoming customers brings a smile to her face. "Coming here is so much fun. It's such a bright place; my customers are so sweet," Richard said, adding that the

atmosphere feels festive ... much like life in the city she now calls home. “In New Orleans, we celebrate every little thing.”

Richard also hosts her version of a Japanese Cherry Blossom festival. The NOLA Cherry Blossom Festival takes place each spring at Kawaii NOLA, to coincide with the world-famous festival in Japan. “In Japan, cherry blossom season is huge. In April and May, the cherry blossoms are blooming around the country and they’re beautiful. They’re everywhere, pink, white, and romantic,” said Richard, adding that she was looking for a way to share the awe-inspiring experience with folks in New Orleans, even though cherry blossoms do not bloom here. “We wanted to do our own take on it here. It’s an opportunity for us to celebrate spring,” Richard said. So, she got creative and, in April 2014, put together her interpretation of a cherry blossom festival.

Midori Tajiri-Byrd, a Japanese American makeup artist, and Eureeka Starfish, a drag-performer, hosted the inaugural event. They sang and danced for guests, while DJ Bella mixed tunes. A musician performed Japanese pop songs. The NOLA Lolitas--a group that wears colorful, Victorian-style children’s clothing--put on a fashion show for guests, many of whom were sipping pink lemonade and munching on mini cupcakes. “What’s fun about the event is that people meet each other, and it’s fun to watch people bond over the cute Japanese culture,” said Richard. “It’s really neat to be able to make these new friendships, so we’re kind of fostering a community around these shops.” She continues to host the festival at her shop each spring.

Kanako’s enthusiasm for the event and for Japanese culture in general was infectious. I could have stayed longer and chatted with her about her store--and totally unrelated topics--but after an hour, I thanked her for her time, assured her that I would try

to stop by her next Cherry Blossom Festival, and said goodbye … after purchasing a pack of Pocky sticks, of course.

Visit kawaiinola.com for more information.

A Serene Japanese Garden in City Park

Since I grew up within a few miles of City Park, I've been able to experience much of the beauty and recreational fun that this vast space offers. I remember feeding the ducks at the big lake, spending summer days at the New Orleans Museum of Art with my grandmother (a docent), and screaming while whirling on the Lady Bug rollercoaster in Storyland (I once lost my lunch on this ride).

As an adult, I've attended weddings in the Pavillion; dined on beignets at Morning Call with my husband after walking through Celebration in the Oaks; and ridden my bike down each shaded street and narrow path. But despite spending so much time in this area, I didn't know about one hidden gem--the Japanese Garden.

The Yakumo Nihon Teien Japanese Garden, which is tucked inside the Botanical Gardens of New Orleans' City Park, was created by The Japanese Garden Society of New Orleans. The garden is named after Lafcadio Hearn (whose Japanese name was Koizumi Yakumo) a writer who lived in both Matsue, Japan and New Orleans in the late 1900s. I stumbled upon the website for the Japanese Garden while doing research for this thesis. Curious to know more, I contacted Michael Mitchell, the president of the Japanese Garden Association. He agreed to meet me for an interview and to take me on a tour of the garden. He also invited the designer of the garden, Robin Tanner, to join us.

Our interview took place on a hot day in June, when I was seven months pregnant. I parked on Stadium Drive--a narrow, drivable pathway behind the garden--where a woman wearing khaki shorts and a bucket hat was arranging plants. I was admittedly jealous of her outfit, since I on the other hand was wearing one of the few

comfortable items that still fit me--a seersucker maternity dress that I had wore on Easter Sunday. Lugging around my camera and notebook, I hardly felt like a professional journalist, but I carried on.

Mitchell, a cheerful man who seemed comfortable under the summer sun, met me at the back gate and introduced me to Tanner, who is possibly the most tranquil person I've ever met. Tanner had long, light blond hair, pulled into a messy knot at the nape of his neck and pale blue eyes. Although he was friendly enough, his calmness was almost unnerving. After introductions, I got my first glimpse of the Japanese Garden – a space that is small but serene, and meant for meditation. Standing there in the cool shade, listening to the soft whistling of the wind, I felt as if I were somewhere else--not in the middle of a bustling park.

The garden seem a bit minimalistic. Unlike American gardens or English gardens, there's not a heavy use of colors or flowers. Instead it's mostly different shades of green, divided by gray stone sculptures and arrangements. Mitchell pointed to a cluster azalea bushes, explaining that they do bloom, but rather than "put out one big flush of blooms in the spring" they sprout blossoms all summer long--"just little bits of color here and there."

He revealed that all of the plants --the bamboo, maples, and black pines--are Japanese. "We have one camellia and that's a tribute to Matsue--New Orleans' sister city in Japan," Mitchell said. "That's their municipal plant; their official flower. It's a tip of the hat to them."

The stone arrangements and the pathway serve a special purpose. Tanner said that the "significance of stones in Japanese gardens is to signify permanence, and the idea of

permanence is played against non-permanence"--the flower arrangements. "In some degree it harkens back to the Buddhist notion that all of this is temporary. You become a friend of the temporary nature in your life," he said. "To some degree, a permanent presence is a great thing; it emphasizes a non-permanence." This aspect of the garden was so important that Tanner personally imported the stones from a stone yard in Crossville, Tennessee. The pathway actually represents a stream. The sparkle of stone gives the impression of water.

"We always get a little frustrated when people come by and the visitors are walking in the stream," said Mitchell. "You're supposed to look in the stream, you're not supposed to walk in it. But there's no sign that says that, so it's an easy misunderstanding."

Mitchell also noted that the stones in the garden are usually grouped in three classes. The tall upright ones are referred to as the "standing cranes," the small horizontal one is referred to as a "turtle," and the larger horizontal one is referred to as a "recumbent ox." A stone basin and two lanterns were gifts from the city of Matsue. The garden also features a tea house, a *machi*--a small building adjacent to the tea house, a wooden platform that Mitchell referred to as "the viewing edge," and a pergola covered with a wisteria vine.

It was experience more than inspiration that helped Tanner conceive the design of the garden. He lived in Kyoto, Japan and studied the work of a Japanese landscape architect and garden designer who achieved fame in the 20th century. "He sort of reinvented the Japanese garden for his time and he also studied the traditional gardens,"

said Tanner. “He was a big inspiration of mine.” (Note: After our interview, I contacted Robin Tanner to get the name of this architect. He has not responded.)

Tanner came up with the design by spending years of looking at Japanese gardens, thinking about them, reading about them, and attempting to understand the ideas that not only underlie Japanese gardens, but also Japanese arts, which are strongly influenced by the native Shinto nature worship as well as Buddhism.

Mitchell added that: “a lot of this design was done on the spot.” Tanner had plans in mind, but those plans changed as the garden took shape. “They changed based on what he was seeing at the moment,” said Mitchell. “The placement of the stones, he did that himself with heavy equipment. He would place them in a certain place, and come back and say: ‘No, that stone needs to be moved to the right.’ So you end up with a composition that was in his head, but never put down on paper.”

The concept for the garden came about in 1985. “There was a group of people who got together and thought it would be a good idea. At that point, they had no idea of the scale that they were looking at,” said Mitchell. “They wanted to have something that was an acre of a garden, not realizing that would cost millions and millions of dollars.”

The group held bake sales and small fundraisers but couldn’t seem to raise nearly enough money. But then they experienced a stroke of luck. The Botanical Garden in City Park announced that they had extra space, which they were going to donate or make available to various groups for “demonstration gardens” representing different cultures. The Japanese Garden Society managed to claim the spot. “This is technically our land, in that we’re responsible for it and responsible for the maintenance; City Park is not. But it’s within the Botanical Garden,” Mitchell explained.

The construction of the garden began in 2001 and took nearly four years. It opened in July 2005, but a few months later, Hurricane Katrina struck land and devastated City Park, including the Japanese garden. Despite the huge setback, the society was determined to keep the garden going. “There was damage all over the park, but we rolled up our sleeves and replanted things and had a second opening,” said Mitchell.

Now, the garden is open to public but visitors must first purchase a ticket to the Botanical Gardens. Many guests who have stumbled upon the garden by mistake claimed afterwards that it was their favorite part of the gardens. A member of City Park, Susan Copley, gives educational tours to school children and passes through the garden. “When she gets here, what she usually does is say: ‘Sit down, make yourselves comfortable, and don’t say anything until you hear the wind blow.’ She gets it,” said Mitchell.

The Japanese Garden Society is now in the process of expanding the garden, adding stones so that the pathway forms a complete circle, and creating a nearby parking lot. Mitchell thinks that growth will be enough to make the garden even more attractive and accessible. “We don’t want one of those big two or three-acre splashy type Japanese gardens,” he said. “The way it feels now, we want to keep that feeling.”

Tanner, for his part, hopes “people experience serenity, peace, and some respite from the madness in our world today.” So as I stood on “the viewing edge,” I closed my eyes and stopped thinking about the summer heat, my out-of-place seersucker dress, and even my thesis. I listened to the wind blow and, for once, I didn’t think about anything.

Japanese Martial Arts In An Old New Orleans Setting

I pulled up in front 2134 Magazine Street, the address of Aikido Nola, expecting to see a building with some sort of signage indicating that it's a martial arts studio. But instead, I beheld a beautiful historic building, similar to the other commercial structures in this Lower Garden District area. I double-checked the address in my notebook and saw that I was indeed in the right spot, so I got out and paid for parking. I approached the front door just as a man in his late twenties did the same.

"Is this the right place for aikido?" I asked. "Second floor," he said without skipping a beat, as if he'd been asked the question several times. I thanked him as I entered the building. Then I nearly flinched when I noticed the steep flight of wooden stairs before me. I was seven months pregnant at this point and felt winded from simply climbing into my SUV, so marching up these stairs seemed daunting. Huffing and puffing, I made it to the second floor and walked down a short hallway into large airy room with high ceilings, exposed brick walls and long windows that allowed in natural light. Adults wearing loose, martial arts-style clothing, belted around the waist, stretched on a mat that nearly spanned the whole room.

I clearly looked a little lost, standing there in my three-inch "flatform" shoes, white jeans, and billowy maternity top covering my big belly. A man with shaved, white hair and pale blue eyes walked over to me and introduced himself as David Cody, the instructor. We had already agreed to a quick interview, so after he motioned for me to sit down on a wooden bench against the wall, I turned my recorder on and began listening to Cody's story, and his thoughts on aikido in New Orleans.

Cody described aikido as “a spiritual practice,” rather than “a form of battle” or a sport. “We don’t have competitions,” he said. “The objective isn’t to be better than somebody else. It’s to make sure that everyone wins, everyone is safe, and no one gets injured. That’s different from the attitude and technique you get when you’re in a sport or a battlefield situation, or if you’re doing entertainment.”

I wasn’t immediately sold on this idea, as I watched students practice aggressive kicks on one another, but I tried to be patient as he continued his explanation. “The techniques in aikido are modified from martial arts so that nobody gets hurt and that’s our major obligation--that nobody hurts me or the attacker,” Cody said. “Most of the other martial arts end up hurting the person that attacks them.”

Cody also described aikido as “a path … in some ways it’s a very spiritual path.” A dojo, he noted, is “the place where that happens”--the place where they train. As I observed the concentration on the students’ faces and the feeling of tranquility that permeated the room, I began to understand what Cody meant and why he was initially attracted to aikido. He was his early 30s when that happened.

“The time for team sports had passed,” he recalled. “I was too old to play soccer, so I had to learn to do something else. I went to an aikido class as a test, a tryout, and I never looked back.”

Aikido of New Orleans is a non-profit organization run by volunteer instructors like Cody, devoted to the martial art of aikido. It’s the oldest and most established aikido dojo in Louisiana; it began in 1994 as a student group at Loyola University in New Orleans and moved to the Magazine Street studio in 2009. Aikido of New Orleans belongs to the United States Aikido Federation, which is the American affiliate of Hombu

Dojo (Aikido World Headquarters) in Tokyo, Japan. Hombu Dojo was founded by Morihei Ueshiba (1883-1969), the originator of aikido, and is now led by his grandson, Moriteru Ueshiba.

"I like that aikido continues to reward my effort, after 23 years," Cody said. "There's always something new. I like the way I feel when I do it. I don't feel injured or sore, or at risk of injury. It's good for my body."

As an instructor, Cody sets goals for his students to attain. He will demonstrate a technique that the students will observe. After learning how to mimic this technique with their bodies and minds, they try it with a partner. "I'd like them to be on the mat more, to continue practicing and not quit," he said. "The other benefits they will get by virtue of good attendance and trying hard."

After answering my interview questions with concise answers, Cody excused himself to begin his class. His students--there were nearly a dozen of them--formed two staggered rows and waited for him to take the lead. The group began their warm up by swinging their arms with windmill-like motions and leaning from side to side, backwards and forwards, to stretch their muscles. All of this was done in silence, with the only sounds coming in from outside the open windows--a bus screeching to a halt before moving on, a woman laughing. I was grateful that no one in the class seemed bothered by my presence.

A female student, already flushed from the warm up, asked a question about a technique. Cody answered by performing the technique in question for the whole class--a movement that seemed like a rough, yet somehow graceful, self-defense mechanism; a

movement that required him to pin another student on the ground in a non-violent way. The students then practiced the skill with one another.

The students continued training and asking questions, while Cody walked around and offered one-on-one instructions. They also offered each other feedback. From my comfortable spot at the side of the room, I observed with awe the discipline and athleticism required to execute each move. Cody explained that when a person is attacked, their body produces stress hormones, which makes it difficult to breathe and ultimately protect themselves. The exhaustion on the students' faces was evident, yet they would take a deep breath and keep going.

I quietly left the class and walked down the stairs--a much easier feat than going up them. I haven't returned to aikido since that day, but I do occasionally pass by the building, look up at the long windows on the second floor, and wonder if Cody is still following his spiritual path.

What's New with Ramen Noodles?

He studied ramen at the Yamato Noodle School in Tokyo; honed his culinary skills at Commander's Palace; and served up Japanese fare in a local whiskey bar. Now, Yutaka Hitomi, a Tulane graduate, has found a permanent home for his thriving pop-up restaurant, Ramen Y'all.

Ramen Y'all opened on January 18, inside of the CBD Social – a brand-new bar on St. Charles Avenue, between Marcello's Restaurant & Wine Bar and Herbsaint. Hitomi serves what he describes as "authentic" ramen, along with Japanese street food-inspired snacks and desserts, three nights a week.

Ramen Y'all – a collaboration between Hitomi and his girlfriend Joni Davis – opened for the first time on Lundi Gras of 2017 and made recurring appearances at Barrel Proof – a lounge that specializes in whiskey – along with a showing at The Freret Beer Room. The pop-up (a small restaurant housed within a bar or lounge) acquired a cult following at the Lower Garden District location, but the setup was not ideal. "You have to depend on kitchen spaces that may not have everything you need, or you can only use for a limited amount of time," said Hitomi."It's going to be nice having a full-sized, commercial kitchen available for us all the time, to meet the demand for ramen."

And there does indeed seem to be a demand. Davis said that the first two pop-up events "sold out" in less than 30 minutes. "Our second pop-up had about 400 people lined up outside of Barrel Proof, wrapped around the building," said Davis, a Mississippi native and the "y'all in Ramen Y'all." They now sell tickets on Eventbrite, prior to the

pop-up events, she explained.Hitomi, who was born in Niigata, Japan, began cooking ramen at home, by following online guides and experimenting with the complex ingredients. A single dish is often comprise a seasoned, soft boiled egg, long wheat noodles called ramen noodles, and sliced pork, brimming in a meat-based broth that's flavored with Japanese miso. The dish is typically garnished with dry seaweed, green onions, and other exotic trimmings.

The chef delved deeper into his ramen research by traveling to Tokyo with Davis, and eating "as much ramen as (they) could stand," and by attending the weeklong ramen workshop, which also offered a business class. Yamato, a noodle machine manufacturer, sponsored the program. "They try to support their customers as best they can, and they want them to succeed, so they started this school," he said. Hitomi's friends – aka his first fans – encouraged him to open a restaurant. "The small-scale version of that is a pop-up," he said.

Ramen Y'all's evolving menu includes creamy, 12-hour Tonkotsu ramen with charred garlic oil, marinated egg, and braised pork belly; wakame seaweed salads; gyoza dumplings; okonomiyaki – "a savory pancake topped with Japanese mayonnaise and barbecue sauce"; Ten Don – fried shrimp rice, covered with a soy sauce-based sweet sauce; matcha-infused cheesecake dusted with pistachio crumbles; and New Orleans-style beignets filled with a "sweet red bean paste."

Hitomi also hand-makes the wheat noodles with a Kitchen Aid pasta machine. "What makes ramen noodles different is kansui, which is alkaline water," he explained. "That changes the proteins and gives the noodles a chewy texture."

During the soft opening of Hitomi's pop-up, individual piles of floured noodles were lined up in a deep tray, ready to be boiled and then slurped for the hungry patrons inside of the CBD Social.

There's room for more ramen

Ramen Y'all joins a handful of restaurants that specialize in the Japanese soup. Even eateries typically known for sushi, like Rock-n-Sake and Royal Sushi & Bar, have elevated their ramen options.

The cozy noodle shop called Nomiya, which opened in August on Magazine Street, currently offers three variations of Tonkotsu pork-based ramen, including one spicy number – geki-kara, which left me with watery eyes and a runny nose. The meals can be customized with garnishes, like marinated bamboo, naruto fish cake, and pickled ginger.

"Every single ramen has its own signature, but the key is how the broth and the meat is prepared, and how the noodles are cooked," said Nomiya's co-owner Allen Nguyen, who is actually Vietnamese. "You can go a little more frou-frou and add a bunch of crazy toppings, but ultimately, you want to have those things in line before you add anything to it."

Nomiya began as a collaboration between Nguyen, who is also the owner of Bayou Hot Wings, and Hidetoshi "Elvis" Suzuki, the owner of Kanno California Sushi Bar in Fat City. Both had discussed the idea of opening a ramen restaurant for years, but felt that they were too busy. So they tapped Nguyen's sister, Christie, to run the

restaurant's daily operations. Christie, a former graphic designer, was eager to pursue a cooking career. After joining her brother and Suzuki in their venture, she gained culinary experience at renowned ramen restaurants in New York City and Washington D.C., and researched ramen during her seven-month stay in Japan. "She puts in all the hard work," said Nguyen, adding that Christie has suggested ways to expand their offerings, since the response to their limited menu has been strong.

Nguyen credits some of their success to Nomiya's location. The ramen restaurant is on the same block as Saffron NOLA, Theo's Neighborhood Pizza, La Petite Grocery, and across from Shaya – an eclectic group of restaurants that draw a crowd. "It's a great restaurant block," said Nguyen. "Everybody in the industry, and the locals that live here, has been very welcoming and it's been actually great." And although they're on a block – and in a city – packed with restaurants, Nguyen feels that Nomiya offers flavors that haven't been fully explored.

"It's really exciting because we're bringing something to the city that hasn't been overly done yet," said Nguyen, before pointing out that Kin is one of the few restaurants focused on ramen – and it's a restaurant he respects. "They just do it differently. And that's the beauty of ramen," said Nguyen. "Everybody does it differently."

Kin in Gert Town, one of the few restaurants in this dodgy Central City neighborhood, has earned a glowing reputation on the dining scene. The narrow, isolated eatery is often packed with patrons slurping chewy wheat noodles from artfully prepared bowls of soup. Chef Hieu Than, the owner of Kin, believes the unusual location actually works in his favor. "We knew we were going to be doing something that people might

not even like, so why not do it in a place that's inconvenient for everyone," Than half-joked. "I like that we're alone and can do whatever we want."

In the beginning, Kin offered fine dining at night and ramen during the day, because Than wanted to spend time researching ramen, since he possessed limited knowledge of the dish. Than, who was born in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, explored the ramen world with his wife. "We realized that most places don't make their own noodles," he said. "We've been to places that don't even make the broth, which is kind of sad." It took the couple about two years to concoct the perfect noodle and broth recipes. Than still plans on traveling to Japan to buy a machine that makes ramen noodles.

"We're not really doing a lot of traditional stuff. We tried the traditional stuff," said Than. "It's nice, but we wanted to do something entirely our own."

The most popular dish – the miso bowl – features an ample Japanese miso base, a pork and chicken broth, roasted corn cream and garlic, and seasoned pork shoulder, cooked to order. Traces of Than's Vietnamese heritage emerge in the lemongrass and fresh cilantro. "The miso bowl is the winner, because it's a bowl that encompasses familiar flavors," said Nguyen. "It's really approachable."

Surpassing the instant noodle stereotype

Although ramen seems to be having a moment, now-closed noodle shops serve as a reminder that the dish hasn't followed the ascending trajectory that's been traveled by Vietnamese pho and other ethnic foods – at least on a local level.

“The ramen here doesn’t come from an immigrant community, per se. So as a consequence, it’s not developing in a way that it would in Los Angeles, where you have a large Japanese community,” said David Beriss, a University of New Orleans professor who studies the anthropology of food. “There are not many Japanese Americans here, whereas there’s a big Vietnamese American community here. The pho here doesn’t arise as a demand for exotic food.”

Although Beriss notes that beloved establishments like Noodle & Pie closed for reasons unrelated to the popularity of ramen, he acknowledges: “foods of immigrants are treated as if they should be cheap,” so many people won’t pay $15 for ramen.

“It’s also worth pointing out that we’re 10 to 15 years late with trends. It’s still a trend everywhere else, but we’re always late on everything,” said Beriss. “And the reasons for that are complicated. I’m not suggesting that we should be faster.”

As a side note, Beriss explained that in Japan, ramen restaurants are abundant and they draw a crowd. “It seems like every chef in Japan kind of does their own twist on ramen so that the reason people go to different ramen places is because they’re looking for different little touches that each chef brings to it,” he said. “Although the other thing that’s striking about it is that they will wait hours to get into a ramen place. Then they will eat their ramen in 10 minutes. It’s a fast eating food. It’s not meant to be gourmet food.”

As the chefs in this story explain, preparing the dish is a laborious and expensive process that some restaurants skip altogether. “A lot of places adding ramen to their menu are adding packaged, pre-produced things,” said Kin’s Than. “People are going to get used to the quality at that price. And when they go to a boutique kind of place, they say:

‘I don't understand the value.’” He also believes that most ramen restaurants precook the ingredients and assemble them to order, whereas the kitchen crew at Kin cooks most of the ramen ingredients when the ramen dish ordered by a customer.

Ramen Y’all’s Hitomi concedes that some first-time patrons are surprised by the price and the richness of his ramen, but the reality check hasn’t kept them from coming back for more. “We have a lot of repeat customers, like this group of girls that stalk us on social media and come to every pop-up,” he said.

Although Hitomi is already planning to open his own brick-and-mortar ramen restaurant at some point, right now he’s dedicated to building his client base. “It's been a dream to focus full-time on Ramen Y'all,” he said. “We're finally at the place where we get to do that three nights a week, which is a really great starting point.”

Sushi Story

I'll never forget my first sushi experience, nearly 15 years ago. It's now seared into my memory--just as the flavors from that meal were seared onto my tongue. I was a junior at Mt. Carmel Academy when my best friend, Brittany Turner, a sophisticated sushi connoisseur, took me to her favorite Japanese restaurant. We walked through curtains printed with images of Geishas. The restaurant was filled mostly with adults and lined with fish tanks. Soft Japanese music played in the background.

A waitress sat us at a table and handed us large laminated menus, packed with items I couldn't pronounce. So Brittany took care of the ordering and selected a variety of beginner rolls--along with one pair of beginner chopsticks, held together with a rubber band. When the sushi arrived, I was ready to dig in. I tried to bite one roll in half, but couldn't seem to break the stretchy seaweed wrapped around the raw fish. Cool bits of mushy rice, orange smelt roe, and a chunk of fish rolled out of the seaweed paper onto my shirt. Brittany filled the room with one her famous loud laughs and explained that I have to go for the whole piece of sushi in one bite. So I did. And I quickly became a pro, tossing one roll into my mouth after the next. Despite my apparent talent, I didn't dare tackle one of the larger rolls in one go. I attempted to slice them each in half with my chopsticks, and when that didn't work, I just picked the roll apart, piece-by-piece.

I noticed Brittany pick up an orange sliver of ginger, resting next to a grainy, green blob, and plop it into her mouth. "What's that?" I asked her, pointing to the green thing. "Oh, that's wasabi. Try it," she said casually. So I scooped up the wasabi with my chopsticks and dropped it onto my tongue, but I spit it right back out when I tasted the

overwhelming spiciness. My eyes watered and my cheeks flushed with heat. I manically flapped my hands towards my sweaty face. Then I gulped a sip of icy water, which didn't seem to help much. The entire time, Brittany sat across the table and unsuccessfully tried to control her laughter, hugely satisfied with her prank.

When I tell people that story, they stare at me in silence, probably wondering how I could stay friends with such a sadistic person. But the truth is, Brittany--nearly 20 years later--has been there for the best and the most difficult moments of my life. And she always knows how to make me laugh--unless she's laughing at me. To this day, she's still my best friend.

Despite Brittany's wasabi prank, we continued to eat sushi together several times a month and gossip throughout our entire meal. We'd go to that same restaurant, try new ones, overeat at sushi buffets, and, if we had an immediate craving for California rolls, we'd pick up a pack from Robert's grocery. But Shogun, a Japanese restaurant on Veterans Boulevard, became our favorite place. We went so often that the Japanese owner, Mr. Charlie, would greet us by name or sometimes with a hug, and seat us immediately. To this day, if one of us goes to Shogun, Mr. Charlie still offers a hearty greeting and asks about the other half of the dining duo that isn't present.

Over the years, our tradition has changed a bit. Living in different cities, having boyfriends, and now spouses and babies, have meant fewer get-togethers. But when we do have a chance to share a meal, sushi is at the top of our list. For the most part, dinner still follows the same format: Brittany orders a bunch of extravagant rolls that will likely end up on my shirt, since they don't fit into my mouth. Even though I'm too stuffed to finish what's left on the plate, she'll still force--um, strongly encourage--me to eat the last

one. We'll talk about people from our past, our husbands, and the challenges of being a mom--even though we both love being moms.

When I started dating Jose, now my husband, he quickly discovered my penchant for sushi, so he'd often take me to a sushi restaurant in the Lower Garden District--Sushi Brothers. When we got married, we'd order take-out sushi from Little Tokyo on Causeway Boulevard nearly every Friday night. We would always get the same thing: two tuna and avocado rolls, two fresh salmon rolls, a yellow tail roll, and a special eel roll. These rolls were bursting with thick pieces of fish; they were the largest rolls either of us had ever seen.

We'd unpack the Styrofoam boxes and arrange the sushi onto plates, snip open the soy sauce packets and empty them into two shallow bowls, and pour two glasses of crisp white wine. After dinner I'd feel full and satisfied, but as if I had eaten something healthy.

When I found out I was pregnant, I was overjoyed but also disappointed that I could no longer eat raw fish, so sushi was scratched off the menu and replaced by either ramen or Vietnamese pho. But I thought about sushi every Friday and reminded Jose, just in case he forgot, how much I missed this food (and wine!). I'd tell him that it would be the first thing I'd eat after the baby was born.

He must have passed this news along to Brittany. Less than a day after our son Santiago arrived, Brittany who was also pregnant, showed up at the hospital with a surprise: sushi and red wine. She unpacked the sushi--there were cooked rolls in there for her--as I poured the wine into a plastic cup. We sat on my hospital bed and laughed, as I regaled her with tales about the humbling experience of childbirth.

Jose and I still eat sushi almost every weekend, but it's different now. Santiago tries to grab the soy sauce packets and won't eat his food because he wants whatever we have. These days, pizza and hamburgers seem more practical. But I have no doubt that this unassuming raw fish dish will always be a part of my life--and a part of the milestones that I share with the people close to me.

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Vita

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