**Creativity is the Secrete Recipe for the Father of Western Sushi**

By: Yvaine Ye Aug 5

Born into a family with vegetarian parents in February 8, 1950, Kagoshima, Hidekazu

Tojo said he wanted to cook meat for himself and his siblings. After teaching himself to cook at a young age, he moved from Kagoshima, a small town on the southern tip of Japan, to Osaka, where he was trained for five years at a traditional Japanese restaurant.

Because strict apprentice training restrained his creativity on culinary arts, Tojo resigned and moved to Vancouver, Canada, in 1971. At that time, there were only four Japanese restaurants in town, none of which served sushi.

“People don't eat seaweed at that time,” said Tojo. “Raw fish? Never!” Canadians’ disfavor toward many staple ingredients in Japanese cuisine shocked him.

Facing the challenge, Tojo inverted the way sushi was traditionally rolled; he wrapped rice outside the seaweed and added avocado, then rare in Japan but common in North America.

“Some people say it is not traditional Japanese cuisine, but that is OK,” said Tojo. “Food, number one, is it tastes good. Tasty, safety and good presentation, that’s what people look for.”

This invention became the first version of the California roll, the archetype of the western sushi rolls. Tojo continued to challenge the norms in sushi-making, and his creativity led to the origination of many mainstream sushi rolls in the West, such as the Dragon roll — another inside-out sushi with deep-fried shrimp and cucumbers.

It wasn't until 1988 that Tojo opened his own restaurant — Tojo’s — in one of Vancouver’s busiest neighborhoods. Doug Dean, as many other customers hooked by Tojo’s food, followed.

A regular since 1977, Dean was not surprised by Tojo’s rapidly growing popularity because of the “amazing taste.”

“He’s a celebrity, but he still has his feet firmly on the floor,” Dean commented in an interview “He doesn't think he's anything important or better than anybody else.”

For Dean, Tojo has always been an interesting and cheerful person — he is always laughing in photos, and he and his food are always full of surprises.

Tojo told Dean to sneak in alcohol at the restaurant’s opening night because he hadn't had an alcohol license; they played golf together inside the restaurant, using cooking pots as holes and “long wooden paddles, I guess for stirring rice” as golf clubs.

“We were popping these golf balls all over the restaurant, trying to get them into the pot,” said Dean. “It was just the funniest thing. That’s typical Tojo!”

Tojo was appointed by the Japanese government in 2016 as one of the 13 goodwill ambassadors of Japanese cuisine for his contribution in promoting Japanese food overseas. His restaurant has been awarded the Best Upscale Japanese by Vancouver Magazine over a dozen times.

“I’m very open minded,” said Tojo. “Style? Not important for me. Number one important is taste good. That’s my style.”