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Food for Thought: Oral Histories of the Central Coast's Asian-Pacific Foodways

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## Interview with Robbie Tani (Yamatani)

### Biography

Robbie Tani is a second generation Japanese American. He was born and raised in LA in 1952. He went to an all Japanese Grammar School run by Nuns and worked at his Aunts store while growing up. He graduated from Columbia State in 1976, worked at Hughes Aircraft for 5 years, and then moved to Mammoth and started a Shogun restaurant. He ran it for 35 years until opening up Yamatani in 2005.

### Summary of Transcript

First Robbie Tani opens up with some background on his life and career (0:38). He then explains his inspiration for starting his business and why he chose Mammoth, California as his location (2:43). He then discusses how being a Japanese American shaped his current success in the food industry (4:02). Later he mentions the amount of Japanese incarcerations during World War II and his relationship to it (5:39). Later he discusses his favorite dish (6:53), where the inspiration came from to name rolls after people (11:48), learning to make sushi from his older brother (12:44), and his customer base and how it has changed over the years (16:52). The interview closes with a discussion on how Covid-19 has impacted his business (21:32).

### Interviewer 0:02

Hi, my name is [interviewer's name]. This interview is taking place on May 5, 2021 at 4pm Pacific Standard Time. I will focus on the experience as a Japanese-American business owner and how this relates to the class, Pacific Food Empires. These interviews will be recorded and archived at CSUMB Digital Commons. I'm here today with Robbie Tani, the owner of Yamatani in Bishop, California. Hi, Robbie, how are you doing?

### Robbie Tani 0:32

Good. I'm doing good today, thank you.

### Interviewer 0:34

Um so you can tell us a bit about yourself and what you do

**Robbie Tani** 0:38

Oh, born and raised in LA in 1952 um and went to all Japanese, grew up in a Grammar School run by nuns and actually did some work through Tokyo LA (inaudible) high school college. My Aunt had a store there, so I would go to school down there and we all moved there. That was the hub of Japanese American people in LA until later on when everybody moved out to the suburbs. But um I went to Columbia State actually in the year 1976. I worked at Hughes Aircraft for 5 years. And then open the restaurant up here.

**Interviewer** 1:24

Wow

**Robbie Tani** 1:24

I came up here as a young kid fishing. I started skiing Mammoth in college. Ended up opening a restaurant in Mammoth called Shogun Restaurant. We were there for 35 years um in 1980 and I think in 2005 we opened up Yamatani.

**Interviewer** 1:46

Oh, wow, yeah. I love both (inaudible)

**Robbie Tani** 1:51

Forty years in this industry.

**Interviewer** 1:54

Wow that's a long time.

**Robbie Tani** 1:57

It is. [both laugh]

**Interviewer** 1:58

Yeah, yeah. Um so uh, you know, I really like your decor especially. Um, do you make the origami yourself?

**Robbie Tani** 2:09

No, most of it comes from the customers, you know, especially the kids. They learn to make it in school and by practicing they'll bring them up to the front desk when they are done having dinner, some by the sushi bar, they give it to me. So, I'm not very good at it. My wife and daughter, they make a lot of it.

**Interviewer** 2:34

Yeah, that's nice. Yeah. Um, so when did you, um what was your inspiration for starting your business?

**Robbie Tani** 2:43

Inspiration was really from my dad. We were coming up here as kids for fishing and camping in the area. His parents had a restaurant since he was a young lad. He [Robbie's grandfather] passed away when he was young, but having that experience in the restaurant business, he was a gardener or landscaper. He met this guy and uh coming up here all the time. He used to say, "oh there should be a Japanese restaurant up in Mammoth." So you know over the years, I heard all that (Inaudible) One day a group of us were up here. Some of us were sitting around the campfire at Horseshoe Lake and decided to quit my job and come up here. So I quit my job, bought a restaurant, it was a French restaurant, called \_\_\_\_\_. (Inaudible) and we opened up Shogun Restaurant up in Mammoth. In the fall of 1980, Thanksgiving weekend, and the rest is history. [both laugh]

**Interviewer** 3:16

So I guess this is more of a big question. But how has your experience as a Japanese American kind of shaped your current success in the food industry?

**Robbie Tani** 4:02

Being a Japanese American we're always taught work ethic and to work hard and to never complain, that's a very Japanese thing. Just do the work and so always work hard (Inaudible) Many times every day. 50-60 days in a row. At least down here we started closing one day a week. At Mammoth, Shogun didn't close. Only closed on Christmas Day, Thanksgiving day, maybe one other day in terms of holidays. At least down here we decided to close one day a week, not initially, and then we had a manager pass away. So we said it's time to come back, not work so hard. So that's where we are now. The amount of roots that grew up in the Japanese community are Japanese Americans in Los Angeles. Churches, bazaars, (inaudible) are still inactive to this day.

**Interviewer** 5:15

So are there any communities here in the Eastern Sierras that you are connected with?

**Robbie Tani** 5:21

Not really, I mean, we do things with the Manzanar community, which is part the Manzanar relocation center. (Inaudible) And every year they have a Pilgrimage, which was just two weeks ago.

**Interviewer** 5:38

Oh!

**Robbie Tani** 5:39

They come up here. They celebrate or not celebrate, but they remember the incarceration of the Japanese American people. There was over 120,000 number of incarcerations. With over 10,000 were at Manzanar. They live in camps spread out in Arkansas to Arizona, that's where my parents went, (Inaudible) California, Wyoming, Idaho, Washington so

**Interviewer** 6:07

And Utah right?

**Robbie Tani** 6:08

Utah. (Inaudible) It's remarkable the thing that they do (Inaudible) remember (Inaudible) unfortunately, most of those people are passing away, a lot are gone now.

**Interviewer** 6:26

Right.

**Robbie Tani** 6:27

As second generation Japanese, that were incarcerated, few of the third generation were born there. But I'm a third generation (Inaudible) that's basically the only thing that (Inaudible)

**Interviewer** 6:44

okay ya um. So let's see uh. Do you have a favorite dish and why is it special to you?

**Robbie Tani** 6:53

Well, my favorite dish is probably the Sukiyaki, something that my Mom made and her recipe was amazing. To this day, we have a lot of Japanese Americans from LA who come and dine in here and they have that. It's not an easy dish to make. It involves a lot of ingredients and people don't think that at home it works. So they come up here and have that, we have other dishes that are very popular. Our Miso. Other recipes were stolen or borrowed from LA since I worked in Little Tokyo. The restaurants there were very popular. Miso dressing for the salad. So people that come up here, those that are still around, still remember, this is just like this restaurant. Teriyaki sauce, dressings are all made in house, except for a couple bottled ones. So my parents, mostly my mom, she was such a good cook.

**Interviewer** 8:10

That's nice. Yeah. Good old, home meals are great, very comforting.

**Robbie Tani** 8:16

Yes, very comforting.

**Interviewer** 8:19

So where did you work in Little Tokyo?

**Robbie Tani** 8:23

[Aisahita] market, it's been a long gone since the owner passed away. (Inaudible) all my cousins, we all worked there. At least through college. But there's so many restaurants there. And we have to deliver groceries to those restaurants so that we get to know all the cooks. That was a fun time. They would have the Nisei Week parade every year, Carnival, in August.

**Interviewer** 8:52

I've heard of that

**Robbie Tani** 8:53

Yeah, its celebrated, big. It lasted like a month. Every weekend there was something; they had Karate tournaments, (Inaudible) Judo tournaments, (Inaudible) farming, so much, so much. You still do it but not to that extent.

**Interviewer** 9:19

It's still an annual tradition. But I think recently they had their 20th anniversary.

**Robbie Tani** 9:25

Oh it's got to be more than 20

**Interviewer** 9:27

Maybe Yeah 100 definitely

**Robbie Tani** 9:29

And a friend of mine owns the confectionary shop. It's 120 years, it's like a third generation making mochi. He comes up here fishing and stops.

**Interviewer** 9:49

Nice. Yeah, that's he ever bring you some Mochi?

**Robbie Tani** 9:52

Oh everytime!

**Interviewer** 9:52

Every time?

**Robbie Tani** 9:53

Everytime he comes up. "Were stopping by!" "Okay, we'll take it." [laughs]

**Interviewer** 9:59

If you have to [laughs]

**Robbie Tani** 10:00

Yeah (Inaudible) yeah, we have a lot of roots down there. Its nice to visit but it's changed a lot over the years. Businesses have gone away. New businesses come in. Right now ramen is a big thing down there.

**Interviewer** 10:20

Yeah, Ramen boom. Oh Boba too.

**Robbie Tani** 10:22

That's Korean.

**Interviewer** 10:23

Yeah, okay. Yeah, I wasn't sure. Cool, ya, So can you explain the history?

No sorry... So how has your food kind of evolved? Is there any community influence?

**Robbie Tani** 10:46

No community influence. We don't have any involvement. Sometimes a sushi night. (Inaudible) My Japanese parents have traditionally made miso soup, chicken and beef teriyaki, salmon, and tokatsu. Which is breaded pork. So those are very things that you can get in Japan and authentic style Japanese restaurants in LA. The Sushi Bar came about in 2000 no, the 1990's at Shogun. (Inaudible) I've added a few things here and there about but it's still pretty much traditional. I don't get super fancy with things you see on the internet. We do make a lot of things.

**Interviewer** 11:40

So like I noticed your roles were named after people like Pamela, Alan, can you explain a little bit about..

**Robbie Tani** 11:48

Alan was a chef that we had years ago, Japanese American. So we let him take the reins at the sushi bar and have him over at the sushi bar. So he made up the Vampire, the Viper and the Alan; that's what he did. And Pamela was eating here, so Pamela didn't want to eat raw fish. But crab is cooked so we named that after her. And there's other ones that we've named too, Robbie which is my roll. And there's names that we have, um PDS was pretty damn special. I could tell you what it means, but it's not really good. [laughs]

**Interviewer** 12:40

Yeah, so where did you learn to make sushi?

**Robbie Tani** 12:44

My older brother was, after he moved up to Mammoth here. He was working at the Little Tokyo Sushi House. Last year then he worked at our first location in Mammoth. He came up once a month on Saturdays in summer and we made sushi for other people. And I learned basics from him. Cause he knows basic rolls like the California, the Cucumber, and Tuna that's all, nothing else. And then we opened up a sushi bar in Shogun after we moved to a second location, in the mall. I went up to Reno and kinda recruited chefs from restaurants up there. They knew some, I knew some, So we kinda got together, created more rolls. For the most part since that day I've been behind that sushi bar. I like to look at cooking classes, cooking shows on TV. Bought a lot of books on cooking sushi and I learned from that. So I've experimented with things. People come up with ideas and come up and ask if I have heard of this so I'll play with it, make something. Always put my twist on it.

**Interviewer** 14:10

Yeah, it sounds like you've had a lot of practice.

**Robbie Tani** 14:11

And the thing is, a lot of the rolls I don't even try. Oh yeah, it's funny. People say, "How do you know it's good?" I say it's because, your reaction. I said I know what flavors go well together and put them together in this format whatever. And if you like it, it's all I need. (Inaudible) I am a very simple person when it comes to eating sushi or sashimi -I like tuna, nami sashimi and a bowl of rice. I don't eat the salmon, I don't eat the yellowtail. I serve it and touch it everyday.

**Interviewer** 14:50

Ironic. Yeah, you make it but just refuse to eat it.

**Robbie Tani** 14:55

I don't refuse to eat it, it's just like when you touch it every day it's hard to eat it. So when I do eat sushi, it's been like three weeks, maybe.

**Interviewer** 15:11

So um, is the fried cheesecake like an authentic Japanese meal?

**Robbie Tani** 15:15

Nope

**Interviewer** 15:16

It seems pretty original.

**Robbie Tani** 15:18

It's original to..to this town because we have it. And it's a product that's provided by the main food vendors. (Inaudible) like foods. And I saw it at a food show eons ago. I went up there, tried and said we could do this. It still boggles me that no one has done that with other products out there. And we have it. The lack of the food shows, especially now with COVID. And everyone is cutting back now. Because those food shows were huge. Up in Reno. They would take up a whole arena up there. It's expensive to put together. And it's very costly for the manufacturer to bring their food that they're going to throw away at the end of the day. Because that food is out there all day long, you get to sample it as a customer walking through at the end of the day, they throw it in the trash can. It's expensive. And there's where I first tried it [fried cheesecake]. I said, send me a sample. He said, Okay. So we started doing that at Shogun and down here and people love it.

**Interviewer** 16:33

I love it. [fried cheesecake]

**Robbie Tani** 16:36

I love it too. But I only eat like one or two a year. Yeah, that's not good for you. Yeah, it's very..a lot of sugar, I have to watch out for my sugar.

**Interviewer** 16:48

So have your customers changed over the years or are they pretty consistent?

**Robbie Tani** 16:52

The customer has changed in a way that they've become more knowledgeable because there's more of it out there. Especially in Southern California, there's places you can go and get Poke. We've started making poke when no one else made poke in all the Sierra's, we are the only ones to make it. We brought it back from Hawaii. Now you can go to so many Poke houses and they custom make. (Inaudible) I said that makes it harder for me to have that much (Inaudible). All salmon one night, or all tuna one night. It makes it hard to have the right amount of the product. Since we're not specializing in only poke. All it takes is five people to order poke and I already ran out. So we have to really be prepared with stuff here in house. We've created some things, baked in the oven that are fantastic. Put it on the menu and the very next day we took it off. Because the popularity wasn't big enough. Live and learn, you learn. Can (Inaudible) there's a lot of things that are off the menu, and those that know, know. But a lot of the stuff we order gets thrown out. In the first few days of Yamatani, we say you can't order that unless we have time to make it. Some of the things I only make. The other person can't. So it makes it hard. I'm serving ten people at the sushi bar that's not fair to the customer in front of me. I make sure that they get the service first cause they are sitting there in front of me and I create things for them. Just kind of a one on one thing. Unfortunately sometimes they tell other people. So I tell them it, it's not on the menu. It may take longer to make, I have to squeeze you in. And some people are okay with it. Some people aren't.

**Interviewer** 19:02

Okay.

**Robbie Tani** 19:03

Overall the clientele except for these Bishop people. For quite a few years, people have come up to Mammoth for their anniversaries and their birthdays. They also came down here, they were happy. Last 10 to 15 years have been a lot moving from Mammoth down to Bishop, because of the lodging (Inaudible)housing issue. So we have our old customers coming back, which is nice.

**Interviewer** 19:36

Yeah. That is nice. Yeah. So you see a lot of returning.

**Robbie Tani** 19:40

Yeah. And if you live in Crowley, come down to Bishop in the Summertime, go to Keough's on Sunday.



**Interviewer** 19:46

Yeah.

**Robbie Tani** 19:48

That's what a lot of people did. Stop in here. Or they come down and go shopping here because Vons is too crowded in Mammoth. So we, you know, still do a lot of the local.. Local being both Mammoth and Bishop.

**Interviewer** 20:03

Yeah, that's good ya. it I live in Crowley so

**Robbie Tani** 20:08

That's not that far.

**Interviewer** 20:09

Yeah, 30 minutes.

**Robbie Tani** 20:10

Yeah

**Interviewer** 20:10

Yeah. Okay, so the last question

**Robbie Tani** 20:14

When was your first time you came here?

**Interviewer** 20:16

Oh my first time?

**Robbie Tani** 20:17

Or went to Shogun?

**Interviewer** 20:19

Let's see. I think I was pretty young, maybe like 13 years old to be pretty young but I vaguely remember ordering umm edamame and I was pretty amazed. Wow, this is so good just for soybeans.[laughs]

**Robbie Tani** 20:39

It's how you present it

**Interviewer** 20:41

Yes, yes. Um, yeah, I think I went to Shogun first and Yamatani later on. And I got the fried cheesecake. It's really good. Probably celebrated a couple birthdays. But I do remember going to my high school prom at Shogun.

**Robbie Tani 21:03**

Oh, I used to do that. The prom, the Middle School Graduation every other year .

**Interviewer 21:13**

Oh, that's right. Maybe it was my graduation? Probably, I was younger. Yeah. So definitely my favorite restaurant.

**Robbie Tani 21:23**

Aw thank you!

**Interviewer 21:24**

Yeah, it's true. So how has Covid-19 affected your business?

**Robbie Tani 21:32**

It's not just us , anyone in the hospitality industry is affected by this problem. Lodging, hotels, restaurants. We, you know, business closed down, lost employees so it's been hard for a lot of people. It's been hard getting food at times. When it first happened, produce was terrible. It was sitting on the shelves for weeks because all of a sudden people didn't order. (Inaudible) So difficult the first month to two months. Somebody would order, can't get it. Why? Because the plants shut down. The chicken farmers are down. Can't get cattle, whatever. Its been now, most recent as of today, fish markets will start going [pointing down]. So most likely those prices will go up.

**Robbie Tani 21:38**

So we've been thinking, prices have been increasing constantly. The stuff that we paid three dollars a pound is now up to five or six, you know doubling in price. Ya we didn't change one price on our menu. Not one price. We are all on the same boat, all of us in the restaurant industry are fighting this battle. The biggest thing now is now that we're turning the corner and we might be able to reopen, finding employees. It's not like working at a hamburger joint, "What do you want? The cheeseburger, hamburger, or french fries?" As a server. Over here, a server has to walk up to a table. And the customer ordered tuna. And well, "what kind of tuna do you want? A tuna roll. Do you want it spicy? Do you want a handroll?" And then, "Well I don't want that seaweed stuff." (Inaudible) One item ordered can lead to four to five questions. Which means that server has to be trained, trained a lot. So it's a mistake that means we make something to throw away. Cause that's how it works. So it's so difficult to find someone to work at a sushi restaurant as a waiter. Right now we are in the process of training a person to make sushi. And we have to find a person to work the front lines, you know, servers. So we haven't decided when we're gonna re-open for dine-in. According to the state, June 15th is day we can re-open. We want to, but probably be able to do that. We haven't been pushing to look for employees yet. People have been ordering out. The thing is everyones struggling for employees. Every restaurant in Mammoth is struggling. Every person Bishop is strugglings. So we need to hire 6 people immediately. And they still can't open business, because we haven't trained them. So the bad thing is Catch-22, you can't open up to people but you can't open until

you start training them. So we have to open, to train them. So it's going to be trial and error. Not looking forward to that. So COVID has brought a lot of ups and downs you really have to be able to roll with it. If you get upset about it it doesn't do any good. It is what it is. It's why it's up to us. It's not just us. It's the Industry you know.

**Interviewer** 25:41

Yeah, yeah. Everyone's in the same boat.

**Robbie Tani** 25:45

And hopefully the people understand, cause we get questions every night, "When are you going to reopen? When are you going to reopen?" It's not that simple.

**Interviewer** 25:53

Right. Yeah. That sounds very complicated.

**Robbie Tani** 25:57

It is. We lost ... three left town completely. They're gone. Couple of 'em quit to do something else. And they had to find work. So they had to work.

**Interviewer** 26:11

Yeah

**Robbie Tani** 26:11

And there are a few that don't even want to work again because of this stimulus. They're just getting so much money. So I don't know if anyone ever thought that could happen. But uh it's happening across the country.

**Interviewer** 26:26

Ya It's unfortunate.

**Robbie Tani** 26:35

Yeah. It's unfortunate. We need the young ones to step up. [laughs]

**Interviewer** 26:39

Yeah, um well I think that's it for the interview.

**Robbie Tani** 26:40

Thank you very much, it was good.

**Interviewer** 26:42

Thank you for your time.

**Robbie Tani** 26:43

You're welcome.

**Interviewer** 26:43

Ya

**Robbie Tani** 26:43

Thanks, good luck to you.

**Interviewer** 26:48

Thank you.