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Interview with Akemi Prochaska (Robata Grill & Sake Bar)

Akemi Prochaska

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Interviewee: Akemi Prochaska

Interviewers: Sandra Sabath and Vincent Sercia

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Length: 00:16:54

Overseen by: Dr. Dustin Wright

Biography: Akemi Prochaska was the previous owner of Robata who owned and operated the restaurant for 10 years. Robata is a Japanese Grill and sushi bar in Carmel California. Akemi was born and raised in Japan. Later she moved to the United States as an adult where she started a family and eventually owned and operated Robatas.

Summary of Transcript: (00:00:00) Vince Sercia and Sandra Sabath interview Akemi Prochaska about owning the restaurant Robata in Carmel California (00::43) Akemi goes over her experience getting into the restaurant industry and how she acquired the restaurant. (00:3:11) Akemi explains her favorite dish in the restaurant and her experience moving from Japan to America (00:06:15) Akemi explains different ways she did and different Americanize her food (00:08:40) Akemi goes into detail about how she made ties in the local community and how that can help benefit her restaurant. (00:10:16) Akemi goes over how she grew up in a business and how that helped prepare her for owning a restaurant and running a business one day. (00:13:30) Akemi details the best part of owning her restaurant.(00:15:00) Akemi explains her experience cooking before owning her restaurant. (00:16:00) Closing thoughts about owning her Restaurant.

Interview Transcript:

VC: This is Vince Sercia and Sandra Sabath for Pacific Asian Food Empires 317 at CSUMB and we are here with the former owner of Robatas, Kimi Prochaska, asking her some questions about her experience in the local restaurant industry in Monterey and Carmel. How's it going, Kimi?

KP: I am doing well thank you.

SS: All right. So one of our first questions for you is, could you please give us a brief history of the restaurant you owned when it first opened and the original location?

KP: I believe it originally opened that restaurant in 1980. And then the place is The Barnyard. Do you know about that?

VC: Yeah yeah right.

KP: Right.

VC: OK, so you purchased the restaurant in 2007?

KP: Mhmm.

SS: And what was the name of the restaurant?

KP: It's called Robata.

SS: Okay.

VC: And what- what made you buy the restaurant at that time Kimi?

KP: Well...it's a long story, but um, I needed to do something that year because I have to support my three kids. So I just dove in.

VC: So it's very much so - it was very much a you need to support yourself and here's a business that I want to continue.

KP: Opportunity yes and purchase so, I just did it without much thinking.

SS: Good for you!

[laughter]

VC: Cool, so how long -

SS: How long - sorry - how long did you run the restaurant for?

KP: So, I like I said, I purchased in 2007 and then I worked there, I'm sorry, I worked there before I purchased it. So about a year. And then um, it's that and that when I work it, it's a different purpose. I didn't think about I will purchase that restaurant at that time. Then opportunity came for that um buying a restaurant so, so that's how I got that restaurant from 2007 and then I sold that restaurant um 2016 summer.

VC: Nice! Well, what was your favorite dish on the menu, and I know this is probably a hard question when you were working it.

KP: It is! Everything was great! [laughter] So um, so I love sushi. I didn't really love that sushi until I came over to start living in America. And uh in Japan. I was living there until, you know, a long, long time, like when I was 35 I think I moved here, but I wasn't eating that many times,

sushi, because I have - we have so many other great food, but um when I came over and because the food is limited so I started really liking sushi. So, that sushi. And then another thing is my favorite is I guess kakiage which is good.

VC: Oh what's that?

KP: Yeah. Like tempura is like a shredded uh different vegetables mixed together and then deep fry like a tempura style.

VC: Okay!

KP: Yeah so that's my favorite.

SS: So what inspired your food in business and did you change anything based on, you know, certain ideas you had and made the restaurant more successful?

KP: I like I said I purchased that restaurant for, you know, the price and a menu and then everything and then start doing the business. And I get the idea, you know, I should put more like this or authentic food or make like - a like I say, like I put a lot of different menu. So try and see how customers like it or not really much. So I did try a lot of stuff.

SS: Which food did you add that you think did the best?

KP: I think I did poke. It's very popular now these days.

SS: Yeah!

KP: But back then not a lot of people knew it. So I did that. And then, so also the sushi roll is different. The ingredients are put together and then try. What's the best tasting and all that so all the things with the employees. It created new.

SS: You're a trendsetter!

VC: Definitely! So I guess the next question is, do you feel like you had to Americanize your food at all or change it to fit a more American style, or was that not really a problem for you?

KP: Well, yes and no. Certain traditional food I didn't want to change it, but I think it's especially sushi - sushi roll- it's a lot of sauce on there, and I'm not really used to it, but um I think it seems like American people like more clearer taste like sweet or salty or you know, just not subtle. Ingredients taste more sauce - more flavors. So that, yeah, that is why yes and no. Some of the menu - traditional menu - I didn't want to touch but um sushi roll it's a lot of...cut?What's that called? You can do - I forgot the word. So yeah I did that way so that's what American people like.

VC: Okay, so it was sort of half and half.

KP: Yes.

SS: Well so building off of that, did you find it like a bit easier or hard to gain clientele once you started owning the restaurant and had to really focus getting people in the door?

KP: So...what I did is not like, what I can do, too, you know? Um...Like, should - should I spend money more advertise? Or should I do something like that way? I didn't really do much. What I think it's important for me to get businesses where my location is at the Barnyard in Carmel, it's more towards local people. So I just you know, whatever you can do best to offer to local people. And I believe they will, you know, start to recognize without so much are the bad guys and all - all other stuff. Yeah, when somebody comes, and then we do best, like you, you invite in your friend or to your home, you do the best you can do to entertain or you do whatever you can do offer. So when it calm, um, so that's what I did. And then also service.

SS: Yeah! It seems like it worked out really well for you.

KP: Yes. And every year I think was really showing me what, what I was what I'm believe. And I see people that really come in through my restaurant.

SS: If you don't mind me adding another question. We don't have it written on here but you seem to have a very like business mindset, a knack for business, had you studied any business or known anything about business before buying the restaurant?

KP: Interesting is no. Oh, well, I - my parents and my brother - are doing a business. So I grew up in a business. So one thing stuck in my mind is when my mom told me, so they had a lot of employees working for them. So my mom, I don't know, she just one day, just something we're talking about. And she said, you know, the, the best thing is, whether doing business or not business is most important is people. So they had an employee and then my mom said, you have to take care of the employee, then - then the employee will take care of you. So you really have to take care of your employee so they would. So that's that my mind. That's the only I will say, whatever I never studied the business, but that word, stay in me for some reason. So that's how I deal with when I purchased the business. And then that's always that's my important thing to to do. You know, I have not so easy dealing with employee sometime because in the most difficult thing is dedication. So I've learned a lot from there. But always my core is you take care your employee first.

SS: Yeah, very family like

KP: Take care of yourself yeah.

VC: Yeah, that's really I feel like something that a lot of restaurants that can do well succeed more because everybody's working and on the same page and things like that.

KP: That's that's the teamwork. The lesson one really have to have a teamwork. Without teamwork that that big ship won't move.

VC: Yeah, like no, we can put that it's like a ship like all the different parts sort of have to be turning at the right time.

KP: Right, yeah.

VC: Okay, that makes sense. Um, so what was your favorite part about being about owning Robata and working there? Was there something you really loved about working in Robata and working owning a restaurant and things like that?

KP: So what's my so that's the best part of owning a restaurant? Just like I say, how you said in English you encounter - encounter -

VC: Yeah.

KP: - yeah the relationship. You know, you see so many people's go by and then sometimes you just say, so I - I met so many wonderful people who feel I still have the relationship as friends. And I really appreciate those you know, the opportunity to meet so many people and then so many people you can talk with for you know, for - for a little bit, you can talk with their life, what's going on and all that, you know, just wonderful thing and my best part is in the restaurant with why I'm working is to hear the people talking everywhere, you know, all different conversation going on. So that sound to me, it's so wonderful.

VC: I like that!

KP: Yeah!

SS: So before you had your restaurant had you always enjoyed cooking and food and eating and you know that whole atmosphere or was that something you came into later in your life?

KP: Yes, later in my life, so I didn't, when I purchased the restaurant, I didn't cook. There's the cooking people was already there. I was just oversee how they do - presentation and all that. But do I enjoy the cook? Yes. Not all the time. Yeah.

VC: Okay, so, um, this is sort of similar to the last question. I asked you, but it's like, people and meeting the people you met along the way was a big - was really one of the better parts of owning the restaurant for you. Is that right?

KP: Yes. And then, you know, especially the ex employee, I still care for them, care about what they are doing. So it is the best part for me.

SS: So amazing! Sounds like a great -sorry - sounds like a great environment to work in and to visit as a restaurant.

KP: Yeah. We had - we had a great time. Yeah.

VC: That's awesome. Well, um, Sandra do you have anymore questions to ask?

SS: I don't. You answered them all perfectly! Like I love learning about your restaurant and the history behind it.

KP: Thank you! Thank you so much!

VC: Me too.

SS: Thank you!

VC: Thank you so much Kimi!

KP: Yeah!

VC: We appreciate it so much.

KP: Thank you!

VC: Alright. Goodbye!