

## LEADING THE REBORN RESTAURANT NIPPON: NAOKI KINOSHITA, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

By Miura Ryoichi, Reporter

Kinoshita returned to run Restaurant Nippon, the oldest continuously operating Japanese restaurant in New York City (59 years) after a five-year absence upon the repeated entreaties of its current owner, Akiyo Furuya. The mission entrusted to Kinoshita redux at Nippon upon is to restore the fame and glory of a storied restaurant. Carrying on the teachings of its late founder, Nobuyoshi Kuraoka, the re-birth of Nippon may be better described as a “second founding.”

In his youth, Kuraoka was the captain of the Keio University kendo club, and Kinoshita, at a “jumbo”-sized 185cm tall, hails from the same school but led its volleyball team. “During our time at school, most of us went on to work for large corporations, with their lifetime employment and seniority-based promotions, which would ensure stability till retirement and beyond. But I had to ask myself whether that was the life I really wanted,” Kinoshita recalls. His conclusion was to “eschew stability and pursue my desired challenges.”

The late Yasutaka Matsudaira (formerly Japan Volleyball Association chairman and the coach for the gold medal Munich Olympics Japan volleyball team), his upperclassman at school, nominated Kinoshita to participate in a World Volleyball Federation coaching teach-in held in Bagdad, after which he obtained his official coaching license. Upon graduation from Keio in 1978, Kinoshita was posted for a year to Pakistan to coach its Men’s Olympic team through the Japan Foundation. After his coaching stint, Kinoshita was introduced by Matsudaira to Kuraoka, a fellow Keio alum, and headed to New York City to join Wako International Corp., Restaurant Nippon’s parent company, to start his business career.

Kinoshita fondly recalls that he was able to welcome and converse with numerous business and political leaders as well as star athletes and notables from the music and entertainment industries – opportunities that his classmates who went on to join established Japanese companies would never have had, even if they were posted to New York City as expatriates. Kuraoka taught Kinoshita to “always have a humble attitude toward our guests, but never be servile and always maintain your pride.”

The direction Kinoshita is charting for the reborn Restaurant Nippon is not to rest on its laurels, but to become a constant challenger and innovator, reflecting the times and anticipating customers’ evolving needs in its cuisine. In addition to traditional Japanese favorites, the cuisine will be designed to meet – sustainably of course -- the needs of those with certain food intolerances and choices through the introduction of extensive Vegan menus. Attracting a wider range of customers, including those who are Vegan, is a key goal. As a smiling Kinoshita enthusiastically puts it, “Japan has a long, world-leading tradition through its Shojin-ryori (Buddhist vegetarian cuisine), and I want to enlighten more American customers of its possibilities. Our goal is to have all our first-time American customers say to us, ‘thank you that was great, we’ll be back!’” One can almost hear Kuraoka from the beyond saying “good stuff Jumbo, I’m counting on you!”



Miura Ryoichi for NEW YORK LIFE WEEKLY

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## **Nippon**

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