Wok & Roll

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**What you can learn from the best sushi in the world**

When I was an adjunct professor at the Culinary Institute in Milwaukee, the students were required to watch two videos before they graduated. By the way, anyone know what the difference between a regular professor and an ‘adjunct’ professor is? One class — yes, one class.

A regular professor would get six classes, and an ‘adjunct’ professor only teaches five classes. Same amount of work and responsibilities, yet a regular professor is salaried with all kinds of benefits, such as health insurance, vacation pay, etc. While we ‘adjunct’ professors got paid by the hour and got free lunch from time to time when we had to attend a meeting.

But hey, life was good and I have a good time doing what I enjoy doing. So, what the heck. As the good old saying goes, “When you enjoy what you do, money doesn’t matter.”

The two videos the students had to watch were “Rise and Fall of the Playboy Empire,” and “The Jiro Dreams of Sushi.” Kind of a strange combination, but after watching the videos several times, I guess that there was a connection somewhere.

“Rise and Fall of the Playboy Empire,” was not just about pretty ladies dressed in exotic bunny costumes, but the story of how an entrepreneur turned a fantasy and a simple dream into a multibillion-dollar empire.

Hugh Hefner was a writer (like most of us) but he saw a niche in the market, captured it, and made himself famous and rich a thousand times sharing his dreams, not only in America but also with the world.

At its height, there were Playboy Clubs in major cities around the world — Chicago, New York, Tokyo, etc. — all flaunting beautiful ladies in bunny costumes, serving the public.

Everyone wanted to belong to the Playboy Club to enjoy a drink or two, or to see and be seen. The first issue featured Marilyn Monroe as the centerfold and the rest is history.

Then came the downfall: after one Playboy casino lost its license, others followed suit. All of a sudden, the empire had crumbled. What happened

The video did not give the account of all incidents, but yet left a strong message to all the future entrepreneurs — have a dream, follow your dreams, but set certain guidelines to follow.

Look at McDonald’s, KFC, Pizza Hut and thousands of other successful restaurant chains. Then the Hilton, Marriott, Ritz Carton and other successful hotel chains. A good lesson for young students to learn is to follow your dreams, but you also need knowledge, experience and discipline.

You can open a restaurant with exotic foods that the public would go wild about, but how do you keep the food and service being consistent? How to keep the costs in line with the budget? How to keep the codes in tune with the local authorities like sanitation standards, fire safety and building safety. One serious violation and you’ll be done for; multi-billion dollars business or not.

Anyway, when President Barack Obama visited Tokyo, a few years ago, Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe invited him to dine at Jiro’s Sushi Place. It is an unassuming restaurant located in the basement of an office building off a subway station that seats just 10 people at a long bar.

Jiro Ono is the owner; he is 90-plus years old and has been learning and perfecting the art of sushi since he was nine years old. His eldest son, Yoshikazu Ono, is helping with the business. Hopefully one day he can step up to run the business.

The restaurant has only 10 stools, no soy sauce bottles and no chopsticks. Yes, you eat with your fingers. Napkins are extra. A normal meal lasts only 20 minutes. But President Obama and Prime Minister Abe spent more than 90 minutes with their meal.

Guess that’s about right; time to enjoy your food and more time to discuss how to fix the world problems. There are no menus at Jiro’s restaurant. What you see is what you get.

How’s that for a restaurant concept? And you have to make reservations far in advance — I heard there is a month’s waiting list to get in.

Are you ready to know just how much an average meal costs? It’s 30,000 yen for an average dinner, without beverages. Well, that’s $275.25 in U.S. dollars.

In my household, that’s groceries for a month, or the cost for my beers for a week! Ha ha, just a joke, but a great thought!

But to spend all that in one meal? No fancy China or silverware, no live music, no candle lights and I have to eat with my fingers?

So, what makes chef Jiro such a legend in his time? I began to understand more and more each time when I watched the video with the students. It all started out as a passion, yes, a simple passion, just like Colonel Sanders with his fried chicken.

Seeking perfection is the secret recipe. Put your heart and soul in whatever you’re doing and somehow, folks around will pick it up. Why is this different?

Have you asked that same question when you ate at grandma’s house? The ingredients might be the same at the roadside diners, but yet, it tastes better at grandma’s house.

I’ve finally come to the conclusion: passion and love. Yes, when you cook with passion and love, everything makes a difference. Funny, it comes through in food.

So, what makes Jiro’s sushi different from others? Same ingredients, same methods, and yet, even his star apprentice who has started a famous restaurant sushi chain admitted that he could never be the match over his master, whom he respects and loves.

“He has such a passion and strife for perfection that is second to none. Sushi is his life, and everyone around him knows and respects that. It will take me another lifetime to match his skills.”

Simple ingredients, yet when we mix that with love, passion and eager desire, will turn out magic.

Still, a porterhouse steak dinner here costs $25, the same as a 4 oz sushi at Jiro’s place. Tough decisions!