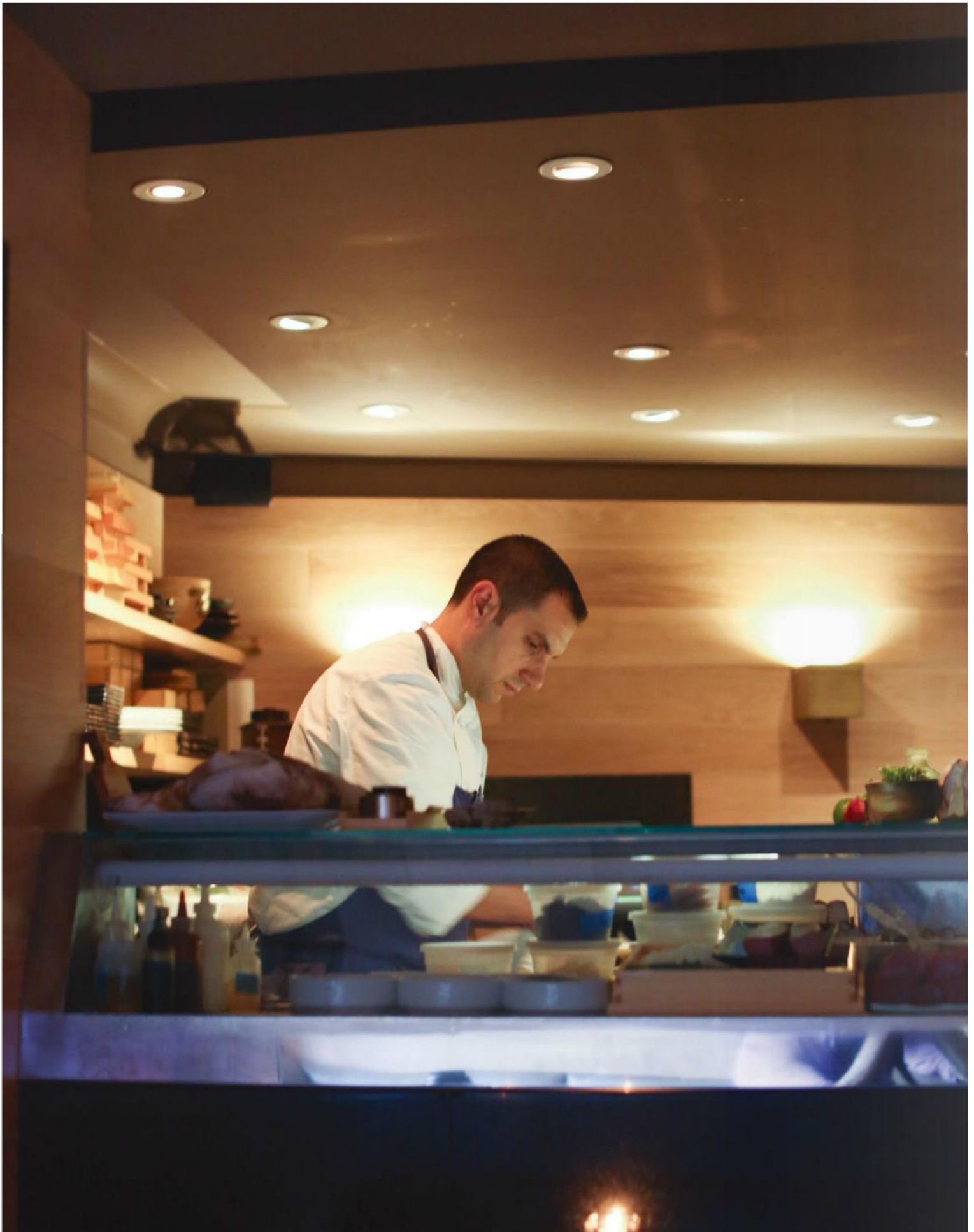


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# NOT YOUR AVERAGE SASHIMI CHEF

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY BRIAN SAMUELS

During dinner service at Uni Sashimi, Tony Messina spends the majority of those hours hunched over plates. At times he'll be dabbing sauces, and another moment a propane torch will be in his grips, lightly searing slices of tuna. After a few minutes, he examines his work and makes a couple tweaks before sending it off to the table.

"I'm kind of a perfectionist when it comes to these things." He laughs as he says this, but he's not kidding.

When you picture a sushi chef, Tony isn't what immediately comes to mind. Of course, when you go to a French restaurant in the US, you most likely won't find a Frenchman cooking your food; this is true for all types of cuisine. But when it comes to sushi, it's a bit jarring to find a 32 year old, Italian-American man from East Boston behind the bar.

Most of Tony's childhood memories are centered around food. Family members gathering together for holidays, cooking up massive feasts. However, it's the nightly dinners with his family that had the biggest impact on him.

"Almost everything we did revolved around the dinner table. It was important for my parents to always eat as a family so there were lots of nights when my sister and I would come home late from school or practice and my parents would be waiting for us to eat."

There was no doubt in Tony's mind that he wanted to pursue a career as a chef. To reach the level he wanted, he knew he'd have to start working early. At the age of 14, he got a job as a caterer, working both back and front of house.

"I wanted the full experience of working in a large scale operation so I cooked and worked in the front of the house just to understand the scope of what was involved."

Tony's path to his current position at Uni almost seems calculated. Some chefs spend the majority of their careers figuring out where they want to go, with little direction. Tony, on the other hand, was always looking for opportunities that allowed him to grow as a chef.

His first big break came with a job as the garde manger at Michael Schlow's Alta Strada, an Italian restaurant in Wellesley. In addition, he moonlit as a bartender and server there, but his passion for cooking took hold and he worked hard to make his way up to sous chef.

Wanting to transition into fine dining, Tony got his resume to Colin Lynch at No. 9 Park. Lynch offered him the opportunity to stage, which ultimately led to a position on the opening team of Menton in Fort Point.

"I had never seen refinement like that in Boston. Despite the amount of prep that went into each plate, they all seemed to appear simple, clean, and elegant. It showed that a dish could still be sexy without being overworked."

While at Menton, Tony heard that Chris Chung, the former chef at Uni, had opened his own restaurant, Aka Bistro in Lincoln. Wanting to make the leap into a new style of cooking, he reached out to see about any available positions.

"Chris had me stage and told me if I wanted to learn proper fish cutting techniques as his assistant, that I would need to wait four months for a spot to open. At the time, I was in the position to wait, so for the following months I staged at as many restaurants as I could. I never knew I could learn so much in such a short period of time. Once the job opened at Aka, I completely immersed myself in reading everything I could about Japanese cuisine. I worked for him for a year and a half, picking his brain."

The knowledge passed down by Chef Chung was invaluable, though in order for Tony to reach the level he wanted, he'd need to familiarize himself with all elements of Japanese culture.

"There were a number of challenges that would face any Western chef as they transition into doing Eastern style food. First off is the language barrier. I bought a bunch of books on Japanese cuisine and tried to read them at any opportunity. I focused on ingredients, culinary terms, and the seasonality of items in Japan. Understanding the Japanese traditions is important to the food that they produce. I wanted to have a grasp on the traditional methods of preparation before putting my spin on them."

Western cooking techniques can be quite different from those in Japan, so as Tony transitioned into Japanese cuisine, he had to relearn a variety of culinary skills.

"The Japanese do things differently, and for a reason. They typically point their index finger when holding a knife because it allows for more control of the knife. This was particularly evident when slicing fish or executing fine dices. I also had to relearn how to sharpen my knives. At one point I felt like a child learning how to tie my shoes. Over time I picked up the motions of changing the angles on all of my blades. Now I use each one of my knives for particular tasks. It's become part of my routine before going home every night. Oddly enough, it's how I wind down."

After a few years at Aka, Tony heard that Uni's executive chef position was going to be available, so he asked Chung and Christian Touche, Uni's General Manager at the time, if he should apply. They both gave their blessing.

"I met with Chef Oringer, Uni's owner, and I thought I interviewed terribly. He called me 20 minutes later offering me the job."

Each dish on Uni's menu features ingredients from around the world: spices from North Africa and the Middle East (when I dined there, a green charmoula accompanied his Lubina



sashimi), and sauces from South America. Tony's also found creative ways of giving his dishes a slight Italian spin by accompanying fish with a black truffle vinaigrette or preserved lemon gremolata.

"I was skeptical about the transition to Japanese food because I had never intended on it, or specifically sashimi, as a career. This is why the menu at Uni is so globally inspired. It allows me to use different ingredients and change the menu as much as I like to keep me from getting bored."

Instead of beginning with a particular fish, Tony's concepts often start with a sauce or a seasonal ingredient he wants to use. At the end of the summer and beginning of fall, dishes included heirloom tomatoes, local herbs, and berries.

"I may pickle them, make sauces with them, or completely modify their texture to give people something they haven't seen before. It's circumstances like that where I'll start with a specific ingredient and build a dish off of it, then find which fish lends itself to the preparation. I find it more difficult to begin with a fish first. A tuna is not just a tuna. Is it a Pacific Bigeye, an Atlantic Yellowfin, or a Maine Bluefin?"

The type of fish is an important one. Each has its own flavor profile and how it's handled, from the way in which it's cut to what it is paired with, varies greatly.

"Many white fish tend to be on the leaner side and therefore need to be sliced much thinner than something like a fattier jack fish or tuna. There are quite a few exceptions, however. Something like an aka mutsu, or Japanese sea perch, is a white-fleshed fish but it's very fatty. Generally, I like pairing fattier fish with something slightly sweet and just a bit acidic to cut richness. Enhancing, and not masking, the natural flavor of the fish is the goal."

On its own, sashimi is full of lush colors and textures. With Tony's creations, however, the plate is the canvas and he uses composition to add another layer to the dining experience. Each dish is unique in its presentation, ranging from a more minimalist approach (in many instances, only the rim of the bowl will be used), to something more lavish.

Whereas some chefs will sketch a drawing of how these will be composed, Uni's plating tends to come together at the last minute. When conceptualizing a dish, Tony will have a general understanding of how it will look, but he says a lot of the plating is mood-based.

"People eat with their eyes first so I try to make everything as appealing as possible in every sense."

Watching Tony work, it's clear that he's in his element at Uni, where the sky's the limit as to what he can create. There will certainly be more obstacles, especially in these first years as sashimi chef, but this is something he enjoys about cooking.

"I definitely consider myself lucky to have been drawn to a career where I can literally learn something new every day. I'll always consider myself a student first."

**Brian Samuels** is a Boston-based food photographer and writer and is the creator of the food blog *A Thought For Food* ([athoughtforfood.net](http://athoughtforfood.net)). His work has been featured on *Saveur.com*, *Bon Appetit*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Edible Boston*. He can be contacted at [briansamuels-photography@gmail.com](mailto:briansamuels-photography@gmail.com).

