

Food & Drink

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A full-page portrait of Masaharu Morimoto, a Japanese chef, wearing a blue traditional-style chef's uniform with a white and blue patterned collar and a dark sash. He is smiling and has his hands tucked into his pockets. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

IRON MAN

Being an Iron Chef isn't easy but **Masaharu Morimoto** tells us why he isn't quite done with the challenge yet. By **Dorothy So**.
Portrait by **Calvin Sit**

Masaharu Morimoto is easily one of the most famous faces on food television. It's weird then to hear him second-guessing his fame in Asia outside of his home country. "I didn't know I'd be popular in Hong Kong. In Seoul they didn't know anything about me," he says, recounting an incident at Incheon Airport where he was detained and questioned for trying to check in his set of chef's knives. "I travel everywhere with these knives but that was the first time I was ever stopped. Seoul has good security," he laughs.

Sitting in the bar area of The Landmark Mandarin Oriental's Amber restaurant, the 56-year-old chef is clad in a traditional kimono and thin-framed glasses with his hair swept back in a short ponytail. He looks exactly like his on-air persona – Iron Chef Morimoto – famed for his left-wing, cross-cultural cooking.

The media fanfare was all post-America but Morimoto explains that his interest in East-meets-West dining stems from much earlier and more humble beginnings. Born into a poor and not particularly harmonious family, he remembers the day trips he would take after his father's monthly payday. "We would take a train and there would be a coffee shop right outside the station. My parents would go get coffee and my younger sister and I would get a parfait. Then we would go to a sushi restaurant to eat. It would be a very peaceful, happy family day. And the sushi man looked so cool. I wanted to be like him." These happier childhood memories proved influential and Morimoto went on to open a coffee shop before setting up his own sushi restaurant in his hometown of Hiroshima.

Continuing his interest in global cuisine and encouraged by America's sushi boom of the late 1970s, Morimoto eventually left Japan and made his way to the United States. "I wanted to come to the US in 1984 – Los Angeles Olympic time – and I wanted to see how [sushi culture] would spread out to different countries," he says. But unable to sell his restaurant until a year after the Olympics, he lost interest in LA and moved to New York instead. It was a bold move for Morimoto, who didn't even speak English at the time. "It was a new culture, a new life, so I didn't have time to think of different things. I

had no time to get nervous or to think of difficulties."

Life only got busier in 1993 when Morimoto received an offer to work at the exclusive, corporate dining club on the top floor of Sony's headquarters at 55 Madison Avenue. The location once housed New York's most famously extravagant French restaurant The Quilted Giraffe and Morimoto found

It was during Morimoto's stint at Nobu that he got selected to appear on Fuji Television as the third Iron Chef Japanese. He garnered a massive cult following due to his on-air cook-offs and while the original series ended its weekly run in 1999, he earned himself a regular spot in the show's special episodes as well as its American adaptation, which is now in its 10th season.

hectic filming schedule takes its toll, especially since Morimoto also operates several restaurants around the globe and appears at numerous dining events. "Sometimes it's too much stress. And I am getting old so it's physically and emotionally tough every year. But all human beings have different faces. So today, I say 'oh this is too much, I can't do it any more, I hate it'. But on the other hand, when I think about how many Iron Chefs there are in the world, I have to [take pride]. It's an honour to do this. I am a normal human so I hate it and love it, love it and hate it. Basically, it's a big part of my life."

While Morimoto's battled against notable chefs such as Tadamichi Ohta and Mario Batali, his most famous opponent is perhaps Bobby Flay, who now appears alongside him in *Iron Chef America*. During their first cook-off, Morimoto denounced the American chef for standing on his chopping board at the end of the match. "A few people asked me if I was acting. I am not an actor. That was my real feeling. It's the Asian spirit – we have to respect all the tools of cooking. At the time though, only Bobby and I could share the same feeling of excitement. But he [expressed] it with a different culture and different viewpoint. But now, after that, we have very good relationship."

Flay and Morimoto have had several more cook-offs since that first encounter, the latest being *Iron Chef America*'s January episode which paired Flay and Marcela Valladolid against Morimoto and Andrew Zimmern. Morimoto ultimately lost, despite seeming to win the approval of the judges. "I got so mad!" he says jokingly and feigns an exaggerated scowl. "Bobby said to me afterwards 'Morimoto hates me again' [laughs]." Will there be another Morimoto-Flay showdown then? He doesn't confirm anything but admits that he'd be up for a rematch to claim his victory back.

Flay and *Iron Chef* aside, Morimoto quips that he's also been eyeing some other potential projects. "Hong Kong is a very interesting city for trying out my restaurant business. It's a tough market because people who live here know what's good and what's bad. They're very sensitive about food. Next time I'm back here, it'll be with my [restaurant] deal. I want to challenge Hong Kong."

Allez cuisine! Morimoto hacks into a giant tuna



himself working alongside many of the defunct restaurant's European-trained alumni. "I was the only one working in the Japanese division. I worked with French chefs and I decided, if I do their work, I can't beat them. I have to start from scratch. I have my own skill and my own philosophy of cooking, which they were also interested in, so I decided to do that – to go with my own technique." It paid off; a year later, chef Nobu Matsuhisa visited the Sony Club and asked Morimoto to join the opening team at his first-ever restaurant in Manhattan.

"TV made me very popular. I appreciate it," Morimoto admits, but he points out that what viewers see as primetime entertainment translates to real-life pressures on his part. "I am not cooking for the judges. I'm not cooking for the audience. I am challenging myself. Unlike in Japan (where taping was done once every week), in *Iron Chef America* the taping is [done in] one go. So sometimes, I have to do eight to 10 episodes in 14 days. If I do 10 battles, I get 30 hints, times that by five dishes (per hint), then I have to create 150 different dishes." The

8 epic battles where Morimoto kicks ass

Battle red snapper '98

Morimoto debuts on *Iron Chef*. He wows the judges with his creativity and wins his first match.

Morimoto's battle lineup.

Challenger Hagiwara is victorious but fans are more impressed with Morimoto's crazy menu.

down Morimoto. The Iron Chef makes a dessert with fermented soybeans, wins and everyone cheers.

Battle sushi '99

Morimoto wins Kitchen Stadium's first-ever sushi battle with his 'next generation' dishes.

Battle rock crab '00

Morimoto criticises Bobby Flay for stepping on his chopping board after the battle. Cue rivalry.

Battle asparagus '05

Morimoto blows everyone away with his 'stained glass' sushi.

Battle eggnog '09

It's another Flay vs Morimoto situation. The Iron Chef calls eggnog one of 'the weirdest ingredients' he's ever had to work with (along with fruitcake in season 10) but goes on to win the match anyway.

Battle sea whistle salmon '12

Morimoto and Zimmern go against Flay and Valladolid. Judges praise Morimoto's head-to-tail whole salmon but the victory goes to Flay's team. Morimoto hints at a rematch. Bring it on.

Battle bamboo shoot '98

A hot dog-inspired course with a side of bamboo 'fries' makes its way into

Battle natto '98

The Ohta Faction of Japanese chefs sends a second 'hitman' to take