

## **Episode Title: Shota Nakajima and the Right Way to Move a Couch**

**Episode Summary:** In our fourth episode, Food & Wine's executive features editor Kat Kinsman catches up with the eternally optimistic Shota Nakajima. Many people may know him from his incredible run on *Top Chef* Season 18, his appearances on Food Network shows like *Tournament of Champions*, his array of Seattle restaurants, or his extremely entertaining and educational Instagram feed. But before his rise to fame, Shota was a "punk looking" high school drop-out with his head deep in a sketchbook, or wandering into the woods looking for mushrooms and bugs, hoping to find his place in the world. Shota opened up about motivation, anime, moving a couch with his friends, never making a Plan B, and always valuing hospitality over food.

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**Episode Transcript:**

**Music: Tinfoil Swans Music begins**

**Kat Kinsman (VO):**

Welcome to Food & Wine's Tinfoil Swans, a weekly podcast serving up inspiring, touching, hilarious, revealing conversations with some of the biggest names in the food and beverage world and — we hope — giving you plenty to savor even after the episode is over. I'm your host Kat Kinsman, executive features editor at Food & Wine, and I'm eternally fascinated by how successful, creative people become, well, themselves. What are the moments, influences, missteps, pep talks, and decisions — big and small — that got them where they are today?

This week, it put a big ol' grin on my face to talk with the eternally optimistic Shota Nakajima. You probably know him from his incredible run on *Top Chef* Season 18, his appearances on *Tournament of Champions* and other Food Network shows, his multiple Seattle restaurants, or his extremely entertaining and educational Instagram feed. But before he became the multi-hyphenate sensation that he is, Shota was a less-than-enthused high school student with his head deep into a sketchbook, or wandering into the quiet woods looking for mushrooms and bugs, hoping to find his place in the world. Welcome to Season One, Episode Four of Tinfoil Swans, Shota Nakajima and the Right Way to Move a Couch.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Shota, thank you so much for making time today. You said right before we got on mic that you were multitasking, and I have a feeling there are so many people on you, after you, around you, having you do things right now, so I really appreciate you carving out time to do this.

**Shota Nakajima:**

Of course. It's my pleasure. And it's been a while. I just wanted to catch up with you. I was like-

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

"Well, work and catching up with Kat, why not?" (laughs)

**Kat Kinsman:**

I've been telling folks who was gonna be on the podcast, like, you know, there were some people who have the same name as other folks, but like you're just Shota. Everyone knows (laughs) who it is. And I will say, also, when it was announced that you were gonna be on this, there were a few folks on staff who were so incredibly excited So I wanna unpack about how we got to that point, where you have become such this beloved person from folks who don't even necessarily work in food, but who love you from, your appearances on TV, and, you know, and of course they love the food that they've seen you do, but these are, you know, folks who don't just love what you make, they love you. And I wanna have a conversation about how you got there, and if you ever expected it. Let's talk about 10 year old Shota.

**Shota Nakajima:**

10 year old me was running through the woods with my dog making forts and picking bugs and mushrooms.

**Kat Kinsman:**

The journalist question. What's the dog's name? (laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

The dog's name was Gardie. It was-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Gardie.

**Shota Nakajima:**

... based off of a Pokemon name, actually.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Oh my gosh.

**Shota Nakajima:**

(laughs)

**Kat Kinsman:**

What kind of dog?

**Shota Nakajima:**

It was a Sheltie.

**Kat Kinsman:**

So you're running wild through the woods with your dog. And you're, you're picking things. I'm wondering, like flash-forward, is that why you like to forage?

**Shota Nakajima:**

Probably. You know? I think there is a natural thing, 'cause my mom always laughs about it. It's like, "You don't change. Like- "

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

"If you had time to go do something, you would be in the woods with the dog, and you still do that."  
(laughs) And I was like, "Yeah." (laughs) "I guess so." (laughs)

**Kat Kinsman:**

When you were 10, did you know what a chef was? And that you would be one?

**Shota Nakajima:**

I wasn't interested in being a chef, to be honest with you, until I got a job in restaurants. (laughs)

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs) How'd that happen?

**Shota Nakajima:**

Well, I dropped out of high school.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

And my dad was, you know, "Hey, if you're not going to school, you need to get a job." So I went to go apply at jobs, but I was this 15 year old Japanese kid, you know, I looked kind of a little punky. (laughs)

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm. (laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

And, you know, I applied at Zumiez, PacSun, Starbucks, a bunch of these little places. No one took me in. And then my friend was like, "Well, that Japanese restaurant over there. If you speak Japanese, they'll hire you." So I walked in, and I was like, "Do you have any positions?" They're like, "We need a dishwasher." I was like, "Cool." Started washing dishes, peeling onions, and I don't know, I think for me, school was hard, right?

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

When I was in school, all I remember is just drawing. I just drew all the time. Science, history, all of that, I would have a beautiful masterpiece in an hour. Did I learn anything? Something about something, maybe.

**Kat Kinsman:**

'Cause not all teaching methods or environments work for everybody. And I think it's better now, but, than it had been. And people who have different kinds of minds aren't really served always so well, or at least they weren't back ... You're much younger than I am, (laughs) but definitely not when I was, and perhaps not when you were younger as well. Was anybody trying to help you or get you more interested? Or did you get in trouble for not wanting to do these things?

**Shota Nakajima:**

I got in trouble all the time for not wanting to do these things.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

I don't know. I just wasn't interested, like genuinely not interested. I loved drawing, it made me happy.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

Then I would get distracted with drawing the whole entire time.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Do you still draw?

**Shota Nakajima:**

Yes, all the time. (laughs)

**Kat Kinsman:**

Oh. Like, what do you draw? Do you have a particular thing you go back to? Is there a style in which you draw or a medium in which you draw?

**Shota Nakajima:**

I love pen. I love-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Yeah.

**Shota Nakajima:**

... pen work. It's one of my favorites, to just sit there and draw with a pen. I love oil, but oil takes a while. So-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Right.

**Shota Nakajima:**

I've changed more to acrylic, just 'cause it's kind of the ... in my mind, the quick version. (laughs)

**Kat Kinsman:**

Do people know this about you? Does your art manifest in your restaurants?

**Shota Nakajima:**

My old restaurant did. I had a lotta my drawings. I can go grab some, but I guess these are like some of the ones that I like.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Okay. I am looking at an absolutely gorgeous black and white sketch of this beautiful dog, This is stunning. I want-

**Shota Nakajima:**

Thank you.

**Kat Kinsman:**

... to see a restaurant full of your art. And the woods. My gosh. You are just. And that's, that's really just a stunning thing. I wonder if in the show notes we can link to (laughs) any of these. I like the notion of like you operating in this totality, 'cause to me, even though I don't make as much art anymore, what I do is informed by all of it. And it sounds like so much of this is informed by who you were, who you have been this whole time, and keeps getting revealed.

**Shota Nakajima:**

I'm so lucky that I found the restaurant industry when I was young, right?  
Because for me, what helped me as like a younger kid, okay, I was failing at school.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

It doesn't really help with confidence, but at a job, I showed up on time, and I tried as hard as I could, and I showed up every single day, and that was congratulated all the time.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

And they would teach me more things, and I would learn, and I would feel great about myself, and I wanted to learn more, and I started to get more ambitious., And I think just that was very good a- at the end of the day, like just a very simple task, and, you know, I think for me, I'm good at learning what I'm interested in at the moment. One of my high skills, if I was interviewing any, anyone is like if I don't know anything, I will find the answer to ... I know how to find the answer to. It might take a second. I might ask you a few questions, but I'll find the answer.

**Kat Kinsman:**

That is such a great skill in life, generally, very much for front of house. I (laughs) always think that the, like a genuine, "I don't know, I will go find out," is, to me, so much more appreciated than someone sort of trying to bluster through. Like, "Oh, well, there are notes of,, (laughs) such-and-such." And-

**Shota Nakajima:**

Yeah.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Curiosity is beautiful.

**Shota Nakajima:**

Yeah.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Had there been times before, in your life before the restaurant industry, where you were getting this affirmation, this sort of, this notion that, "Yes, I'm good at this thing, and it's being celebrated."

**Shota Nakajima:**

It was art. It was always-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Yeah.

**Shota Nakajima:**

... art. I mean the teachers would be like, "You need to do your test, but that drawing is beautiful." I'm like, "Thank you."

**Kat Kinsman:**

You know, I think there's a big intersection here. And I think some of it is because of the kinds of minds that it takes to go into restaurants. We're not necessarily linear (laughs) people, the people who express things in a different kind of medium than maybe is rewarded in a lot of academic work. I was interviewing Alfred Portale recently, and he was saying if he hadn't been a chef, he would have been a visual artist and perhaps a jeweler, because it's, you know, it's all a, a totality in that way.

**Shota Nakajima:**

Yeah.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Okay, so you started at you said 15, 16, dishwasher, you're working your way up. At 20, who were you?

**Shota Nakajima:**

I moved to Japan when I was 18, to go work at a Michelin star restaurant. I just had this massive ambition. I guess I'll rewind a little bit. But I remember this one chef came from Japan, who trained in a Michelin star restaurant. And the way all the chefs looked up to him, and asked questions, I was like, "Well, if I'm gonna do this, I wanna be that guy."

**Kat Kinsman:**

Yeah.

**Shota Nakajima:**

Right? "Like why do, why do I wanna be the middle? I don't understand what a Michelin ..." It's the first time I'm hearing of this word, 'cause it wasn't like, you know, I followed chefs and I wanted to be a chef. I just kind of got a job. And I remembered being like, "I wanna go work in a Michelin star restaurant-"

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

"... in Japan." And then my, (laughs) my chef was like, "Yo, you're American raised. You would not be able to make it in Japan."

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**



And obviously, that gave me fire. I really appreciated those words. I think at the end of the day, it was a great way to motivate me. I think he understood that when he said that. I remember working in the Michelin star restaurant, and I wanted to quit every single day for like the first six months, but I just did not want to go home with my tail tucked behind my head. I was like, "You know what? I needed to do this. Like whatever it is, just finish it. Build a habit."

**Kat Kinsman:**

What is that thing in you? It's sometimes easy to run up against somebody who says, "No, you can't." Or, "This thing is hard." And to not internalize that too much. What is that thing in you, or that you learned, wh- that maybe operates in, in defiance? And have you always had that?

**Shota Nakajima:**

I think for me, it was, "Okay, I wasn't good at school. I wasn't good at this. What can I excel at?"

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

I have grit and energy.

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

That is the one thing I can beat out almost everyone around me. It is always the thought process that I had. So I think that is a big part of kind of what got me to where I am, because you know, restaurants are hard. I operated a fine dining restaurant, owned and operated 100%, no partners. There is a moment where I was running the restaurant, running as the GM, changing the menu every single day, and then doing a little Ubering on the side.

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs) My gosh.

**Shota Nakajima:**

But, you know, that, I think, comes from the pure grit of not giving up, because every single year you continue, you learn something deeper. And something that's just, it turns into this confidence that you

have. "I have done this for seven years. I have done this for X amount of years." And I think that turns into the confidence that I want to give out to the people around me, my managers, inspire them, try to get them motivated to be the best version of what they can be. That's something that I really enjoy right now.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Is that internal process, to check in with yourself? Is there someone you gut check things with?

**Shota Nakajima:**

I check with people all the time. But I talk with people. I guess I like to sit and process a lot of things. And what I mean by that is if I'm talking to person A about something, I have strict rules. I'm not gonna go vent to someone else-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

... ever. Because in my mind, what that does is that person I'm venting to is always gonna be on my side. This conversation is going to change before I talk to this person. I think the best way to always approach a conversation, in my mind, is two things, right? "What is the goal, and how am I gonna inspire them?" That's the only two things that matter when you have conversations, in my mind, especially like in work, I guess. And not, not just work, right? Anything, even with-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

... your friends. So I think for me, I try to think about the best way I can position, put words, because, you know, I'm the example. If I can communicate, and whatever type of conflict, whatever type of energy, or whatever goal it is, if I can always keep them inspired and goal motivated, then, it's easy. It's easy for all of us.

**Kat Kinsman:**

This sounds like you're coming from a place of wanting things to be better. In a place of, like, wanting a really positive solution. But I know there are a lotta restaurant environments out there where you're operating from a place of fear. And that's really not healthy for anyone.

**Shota Nakajima:**

You know, I think I was trained that way. And I did-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

... that for a long time. For me, I think it came down to hospitality, right? I'm in hospitality. I am definitely a chef that likes hospitality over food, if that makes sense. I think there's two types of chefs.

**Kat Kinsman:**

That does. Could you explain that?

**Shota Nakajima:**

Whew, right. I don't, I don't know how to say it, but I guess there's two types of chefs, right? The ones who love hospitality over food, and the ones who love food over hospitality.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

I think they both have their strength, and it's wonderful when you can find a great team that can work together. But for me, I'm a hospitality forward person. For me the biggest thing that matters in restaurants over the food and everything is, "Do they feel welcome when they come home? Do they feel heard when they come in?" That's all that matters.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Welcome is such a wonderful, wonderful word, because you can feel it when you walk into a restaurant. and what the team dynamics are, if somebody's had a bad day, any of these things, if people are there because they genuinely wanna offer hospitality to you and let you know that you're wanted there. You can feel it. You can taste it. It makes the food taste worse if you don't (laughs) feel welcome,

**Shota Nakajima:**

100%. It's the environment. You know? Food and whatever, alcohol, or whatever it is. Like it-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

... feels better. It tastes better with the company, the environment, where you're at. You know, if you're eating over a campfire, the reality is your food's gonna have dirt in it, but it's gonna taste delicious, 'cause you're out there with your friends in a wonderful environment.

**Kat Kinsman:**

I was interviewing Jacques Pepin, not long ago, and he was saying, "The greatest meals are like a hot dog in the woods with the right people." (laughs) I'm getting like a nicely charred hotdog. And that's the peak of it. He's had every, you know-

**Shota Nakajima:**

Hm.

**Kat Kinsman:**

... fantastical meal in the world, and that's what it comes to. When you go to this Michelin star Japanese restaurant, aHad you lived in Japan before you did this?

**Shota Nakajima:**

I did. I lived in Japan for junior high. And as I was growing up, every summer, we would come back to Japan and we would go to school in Japan. 'Cause my mom wanted me to be in touch with Japanese education.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Living between cultures, I think for some people it develops their diplomat skills. (laughs) And they can fit in wherever. And some people, they just don't feel right anywhere. What was that experience like for you?

**Shota Nakajima:**

I think it was hard and confusing growing up, because-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

You know, when you're a teenager, you just always wanna be obstacle driven-

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

... for whatever reason.(laughs) But, you know, right now, I'm grateful ,and I think I wanted to use the word grateful because I think the biggest thing about Japanese culture that I try to live by and give out to the people around me is, "Just be grateful, " I'm so grateful that I have my team. I am so grateful that I have my dishwasher. I'm grateful for the guests that come in. I try to shoot a few grateful text messages a day to some random person.

**Kat Kinsman:**

I do that too. (laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

It's a great way to look at things, right? 'Cause I think there's two ways to, I guess live your life and ...or work, right? Both-

**Kat (00:21:08):**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

... of it. It's being obstacle driven or path driven. Like, an obstacle driven person, let's say you're going skiing with a group of friends. And you're going through the backwoods or whatnot, and you're hitting the first. And if you're, you know, not even just the team leader, part of the group, especially if you're the leader, and you're going "Man, it's gonna be icy. It's gonna be cold. Man, hopefully you guys are staying warm. Like, make sure you mask, there's gonna be a lotta trees and cliffs." Everyone's gonna just be paying attention to that. And it's just gonna not be as fun, right? Or a leader who's gonna go, "Yo, (laughs) it looks- "

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

" ... sunny over there, let's go hit that fluff."

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

People are gonna trip, but they're goal motivated. It's a lot more fun and it's a lot easier to get there.

**Kat Kinsman:**

I would read a management book if you wrote one. (laughs) Did you develop these things along the way? Were you observational? where does all of this, this come from? Because it feels like you really do have a philosophy of like humanity in management and motivation. How'd this all come to be?

**Shota Nakajima:**

I think it's just sitting on a pile of mistakes.

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

(laughs) Literally.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Yep.

**Shota Nakajima:**

Like, I'm confident that I have made more mistakes than all of my managers. And I'm not ashamed to say that. Because that's makes me good at my job. That makes me wiser at my job.

**Kat Kinsman:**

I mean, acknowledging failure and mistakes, it's not built into the culture so naturally, which is why it's so important to talk about, because there's, there's so much shame around mistakes and failure, and it puts you in a prison. I know I've operated a lot of my life just being afraid, because, "Oh, no. I messed up. I have shame about that. Then I wonder if I have to hide it or not. And the freest I've ever been is when I decided to sort of come out and show all of my weaknesses. For me it was in the form of saying, like, "Hey, look. I live with mental illness." And, and showing all, all those things in me, and it turned out to be the strongest thing I've ever gotten to do, because it freed me up from having to be perfect or think was never, ever, ever anywhere close to perfect, but trying to get there. But it gave other people

freedom to talk to me about it. And did you grow up in an environment, anywhere you were living, where it was okay to talk about mistakes or failure? Or was that just you being in-

**Kat Kinsman:**

... trouble?

**Shota Nakajima:**

I think being 25, operating a restaurant, making a bunch of mistakes, and I think for me right now is, "Okay, how do I teach the people around me that it doesn't have to be that tough?" I tried to move that restaurant. I tried to move that couch by myself for a very long time with very loyal support. But I'm 33 now. I want a team. I want a team of people how to do it. I want a team of people I can get rich with. I want a team of people that we can inspire and build something cool with. You know, everyone having their own goals within, and we're just sitting on the same ship.

**Kat Kinsman:**

That's so, so important. Do you have people you look to or people you grew up looking to, who thought, like, "Oh, you know what? They have the kind of life, or the kind of philosophy, or the kind of business that I, I want."

**Shota Nakajima:**

I mean, my dad is I don't know how to say it. I mean, he's done a lot in his career.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

it's just someone I look up to. He's modest. He's taught me a lot of lessons. When I was 23 - I was running six restaurants-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Oh my gosh.

**Shota Nakajima:**

... opened three.

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

I was getting paid a lot. And I went to my dad. And I was like, "Yo, (laughs) listen. Blah, blah, blah." And just looked at me as like, "Modesty is handsome." Simple, simple lessons, right? And I think throughout, just how to communicate with people, I think my dad is very diplomatic and good at getting the solution. He knows when to pull back. He knows when to say things. He knows how to say things. He knows what the goal is. I think, you know, being goal oriented. I think my dad was always a person who was, when you have a conversation, "Where do you wanna go? What is this conversation leading to? And how am I gonna inspire this kid right now?"

**Kat Kinsman:**

Is he a person who has relationship to the restaurant industry? Or was he sort of wondering, "Why the hell doing that?" (laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

He's tech, and business, and all-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Yeah.

**Shota Nakajima:**

... that jazz, which I understand, like partial of what he's saying.

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

But I understand the enthusiasm.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Yeah. My business friends, I'm like, ".. I support you. I love you. I have no idea (laughs) what you're talking about. What stock should I invest in?" (laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

Yeah, right? (laughs)

**Music: Tinfoil Swans Theme Music Fades In**

**Kat Kinsman (VO):**



We'll be back with Shota Nakajima after the break

**[AD BREAK]**

**Kat Kinsman (VO):**

Welcome back to Tinfoil Swans. Today, I'm chatting with Shota Nakajima

**Kat Kinsman:**

So when they wanted you to get a job did you blow their minds by saying, "I wanna go do this in Japan. I wanna go into this particular industry." What was that conversation like with them?

**Shota Nakajima:**

I mean, they were like, "Do it. Do what makes you happy."

**Kat Kinsman:**

Amazing.

**Shota Nakajima:**

But my mom, I mean, she always says, like, "Yo, I thought you were gonna come back in a month."  
(laughs)

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs) Look at you now. (laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

I know, right? I was like, "Hey, I got grit."

**Kat Kinsman:**

But, so you show up there. Were you scared?

**Shota Nakajima:**

I was excited. I was excited to be somewhere brand new-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Hm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

... fresh energy., I think I wanted to be uncomfortable, as uncomfortable as I can be. 'Cause I-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Hm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

... have family and friends in Tokyo, but I went to a city called Osaka, where I don't have friends, I don't have family, I don't have any distractions. I have this cooking thing that I am gonna concentrate on, and nothing else. And everyone I meet in my life is gonna be cooking people. That's all I wanted. I think for me, you know, being in Seattle, cooking, and just kind of hanging out with the friends that I used to hang out with, it was hard sometimes, because I would work a lot and they would always like, "Why are you working so hard? Why are you-

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

" ... doing that?" I'm like, "Why are you asking me, dude? I'm having a great time. It's way more fun than sitting here watching this dumb video, laughing about- "

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

" ... the same thing and saying the same thing over and over. Like this is just more entertaining for me, unfortunately." And I just wanted to surround myself with people like that.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Yeah, that makes sense. I love passionate people. I don't care what you're passionate about, so long as, actually, (laughs) in the personal ad through which I met my husband, I ... (laughs) One of the things I asked for was like, "I want somebody who just gives a damn about something. It doesn't matter what it is, just to know that they have that kind of thing." Let's go back to the part about uncomfortable, because I, you know, I was doing my homework on you. (laughs) And you had given an interview where you were talking about, like, you always wanna do the thing that brings you outta your comfort zone, that, maybe you don't know how to do, that is gonna be the surprise thing., but you were talking about, like you wanna do the, the uncomfortable thing. That's not easy for a lotta people. We're a comfort driven society. And how did you realize that that was actually your sweet spot?

**Shota Nakajima:**

I think it's growing up watching anime. (laughs)

**Kat Kinsman:**

Talk to me about that.

**Shota Nakajima:**

Well, you know, it's just one of those things. It's weird. And I think Japanese people are kind of driven this way, too. Because everyone watches the same thing, right?

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

It's full of gratitude, friends, and it's like every single time you do a battle, or you get beat up, you learn something new, you get stronger. And I think for me that's always been a thing. I was just like, "I just wanna get uncomfortable and learn a little bit." And the more I did it, the more I realized how fun it is, Like making the mistake part, like how fun it is to do something you've never done before. Like when I was 23 and I had that job, I completely lied on my resume. But I studied-

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

... everything so I can catch up and do the job. If I didn't know what words meant, I was studying it and looking it up, so by the next meeting, I could understand, and come up with the goals, and tell my boss about it, and just keep moving up. And it wasn't like I was trying to just go up into the company. I mean, it just kind of naturally happened, because I was so curious in all of this stuff. And I had a goal of opening a restaurant by 25. And I was like, "I got one year to learn this."

**Kat Kinsman:**

Oh, wow.

**Shota Nakajima:**

(laughs)

**Kat Kinsman:**

Birthdays are pretty great motivators with these things, huh? (laughs) Let's talk about how you got to running all these restaurants. So you're over there, you're a teenager, you're working in these restaurants. What was your path from the next few years from there?

**Shota Nakajima:**

Working in restaurants over there, came back when I was 23. -

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

I had a goal of opening a restaurant at 25 when I was 20. I was like, "I'm gonna- "

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

" ... open a restaurant at 25. I don't care what it is. I wanna figure it out.", and opened my first restaurant. It was a kaiseki style restaurant where we had a 10 course, 15 course. We changed the menu every single day. And that worked for about two years. It was before reservations systems, and all that stuff, and I just remember it was so hard because we would have a booked out Friday, but then half the guests would come in and go, "You guys don't have a California roll?"

**Kat Kinsman:**

Yeah. Let's talk about that. 'Cause I was, I was gonna ask. Was your clientele familiar with kaiseki?

**Shota Nakajima:**

No, they were not. It was brand new.

**Kat Kinsman:**

So you had to introduce this to them?

**Shota Nakajima:**

It was tough. You know? And it was at the time where people would book on open table and not show up, 'cause they had four reservations-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Oh.

**Shota Nakajima:**

And they'd go to whatever restaurant they want to.

**Kat Kinsman:**

People do not do that.

**Shota Nakajima:**

Oh, that was very common in Seattle

**Kat Kinsman:**

Yeah.

**Shota Nakajima:**

'Cause this is 2015. Tock and all those systems, I would say really started coming out in 2017, 2018. But it's hard, from a guest perspective, they don't understand how it is. You can't really explain it to them.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Actually, do you wanna explain? Take a beat and explain to people why you shouldn't do that.

**Shota Nakajima:**

Whoo. How do I even get into it? I mean, number one, food waste, right? We prep for the exact amount of reservations. And we staff properly. There's only a certain amount of tables that you can book. So when those guests don't come, as a business, you're just eating 300, \$400 per person, especially-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Hm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

... in a restaurant like that. And it's very hard as a fine dining. And if you lose six seats on a Friday night, you're looking at, you know, \$1,800 worth of revenue. And restaurant business in general, like, you're lucky if you're hitting 10% on the bottom line.

**Kat (00:32:41):**

I think we need to, as part of high school curriculum, or middle school, or whatever it is, teach people restaurant math.

**Shota Nakajima:**

As a business, you have to think about it, right? You have to think about all these aspects. Right now that's why, like I talk to my team, like, "We're not just restaurant, we're a food business. I am gonna keep doing videos so we can keep providing revenue into the company, because our goal is, I write the top line, we hit the top line, whatever it is. If it's restaurants, let's do restaurants. If it gets tighter, let's, let's move into retail. There's multiple ways of doing it. And you just have to kind of think and lead in that way, if that makes sense.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Did you have a notion as you're opening these places, and having these, having these restaurants at a very young age, and that's amazing. That's huge. Congratulations (laughs) for having that kind of thing. But then, there ends up being this entirely different part of your career with being a public face of this. Is this something you ever anticipated? Or did you think, "Hey, this is gonna be an, sort of a necessary thing I have to do to promote the restaurants."

**Shota Nakajima:**

I think it's a little bit of both. Going into restaurants, it wasn't like I wanted to be a chef or anything, or like, you know, that wasn't a goal. TV, like I never watch TV, either. So, I never was interested in it. But as I did it, as I started to have opportunities like, you know, when I first got called to do Iron Chef Gauntlet, I just remember being nervous. And I was like-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

"Okay, if I'm this nervous, I need to go do it. I'm gonna learn something." And after I did it, I realized that the restaurant gets busy when you do things-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

... like that. And it helps my staff. My staff's paychecks were getting bigger. I was able to give more raises to my staff. I was like, "Okay. This works." And, you know, I did a few more shows. And I was like, "Okay, this is hard. And I really like it." And every single time I'm doing TV, I feel like I'm in a brand new career. I go home or back to my hotel, and I go, "Man, I could've done this better, this better. I wish I wasn't this nervous about this situation." And I just love the humility, right? I felt like a career change,

something fresh, something that feels hard, and restaurants are very hard, don't get me wrong. But, you know, at this point, I've been in it for two decades. So I've made a lot of fun mistakes.

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

And that's what I kind of keep doing right now, 'cause I love being in that situation. And I think that molded into, you know, I always have a goal, right, for restaurants, next generation, "How do I teach self-value to the people around me?" We have profit share all included. That's a whole different conversation. For TV my goals are, "How do I showcase to the next generation that you can smile while you do your job?"

**Kat Kinsman:**

Yes. Did you come from a smiling restaurant culture? Or was it very serious? (laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

It was very serious. I don't know. I just wanna have fun. 'Cause my thing is like I did the whole fine dining thing. I did the strict thing, too. I was a very strict chef in my first restaurant.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

I guess maybe it's just the generation I'm at, like I wanna-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

... be able to laugh and move a couch with my homies. But we all work hard. Like I don't filter things, right? Like even with my closest managers, like, we're great. We communicate really well, but, you know, if something happens and you're kind of like down for a few days, I'm the first person who's gonna go, "Hey, keep yourself goal oriented. Let's get out of it. You gotta snap out of it. Let's go."

**Kat Kinsman:**

I mean, it sounds like you do a lotta caretaking of other people. How are you with that yourself? Do you let yourself be taken care of?

**Shota Nakajima:**

I think I'm working on that right now.

**Kat Kinsman:**

It's hard, right?

**Shota Nakajima:**

It's hard. I mean, 'cause, well, I don't know. I do think, yeah, I should probably put more energy into taking care of pe- or myself.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

But when I'm taking care of my employees, and I-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

... see them succeed, it is so gratifying.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Yeah.

**Shota Nakajima:**

And I see them inspired. I'm like, "Oh, my." And, like, I learn from it, too, right? I get more goal oriented every single time I do. I learn, every single time I'm doing more teaching, I learn something. And I think I work on myself with that. I think I'm very good at self-reflecting-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

... and being honest with myself, looking in the mirror and going, "You need to change this, Shota. You need to not do this. Or you need to be more like this way and try to keep it goal oriented or whatnot."



**Kat Kinsman:**

And those are the hardest conversations are with yourself (laughs) 'cause I am trying to get out of a place of doing those things and have it be self-flagellation, and inste- (laughs) instead have it be sort of acceptance. "Okay, that happened. That's why." And really forensically inspect the moment instead of using that to, castigate myself, or chastise myself, use it like, "Oh, okay. So here's something I can fix." Like that kind of thing. That's hard.

**Shota Nakajima:**

I think it's always gonna be hard. I think it's never easy, right? But I think it's the process that matters, trying. Trying and then you learn something. Trying and then you learn something. And that's all that matters. And you just keep doing it. And then you get better at it. And then I think you figure out better ways to do certain things so you don't do the same thing, but you'll make a new mistake and it's gonna be hard, but then you just learn something along the process, and I don't know, that's life, I guess. (laughs). Right?

**Kat Kinsman:**

What's your relationship with the word perfect?

**Shota Nakajima:**

Perfect is imperfection. Imperfection is perfection, right? Because it doesn't really exist. Or the best, right?

**Kat Kinsman:**

Yeah.

**Shota Nakajima:**

But it's not about actually being perfect, or it's not about being the best. It's about who you become in the process, when you're trying to go get it. And I think that's the part that matters. You build something in yourself. Like you can look in the mirror and go, "Yo, I am proud of myself for doing this, and this, and this." And have that confidence.

**Kat Kinsman:**

So for somebody listening right now who's maybe struggling with being kind to themselves, would you give an impromptu pep talk to that person who needs this in their ears right now?

**Shota Nakajima:**

I think it's one of the hardest things but the most important thing is, you know, number one, having goal oriented people around yourself. If you stay and hang out with people who are gonna be negative

and not motivate you, there's no possible way to get out of it. and number two is try to turn it into fire, right? I always say, "Embrace it, don't run from it." Like if you are messing up at your job, your life, whatever it is, don't run from it. Don't run to alcohol, booze. Look in the mirror. Like understand it. Get it. And then when you feel that little thing right here, don't-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

... run from it. Turn it into fire. Turn it into something, and find that goal, and just go for it. Just turbo mode it. Don't think back. Don't have a plan B. Like have a plan A. 'Cause if you have a plan B, you're spending 70% of your time thinking about plan B. And you just gotta believe in yourself, right? Like it's, it's a very hard thing to do, but you have to. You have to be your biggest cheerleader. You have to talk to yourself like you talk to your friends. If you talk to yourself in a mean way, You have to replace that with a friend, would they stick around?

**Kat Kinsman:**

Do you have a mantra, or a pep talk, or anything, or do you have like a psych up music for these moments? Like, is there something you say or a touchstone you have?

**Shota Nakajima:**

When I'm struggling, I think a lot. And I self-process, and I try to take a full accountability for the things I've done, what they've done. You know, I think when I was younger, or didn't want to face things, I would more look at just the things that are happening around me, not why I'm there. And instead of that, you can't control what's outside of your environment, right? I guess one thing I do do, like for filtering-wise, is when I'm struggling, life, work, everything, I write everything down.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

I dedicate 30 minutes, whatever it is, And then you just write everything down. Then you cross off the things you can't control. And it feels so good. Now you have your checklist. Go. Go get it tomorrow. You got this. (laughs)

**Kat Kinsman:**

I have a couple questions that I like to ask different people. Which character, which of these fictional characters do you identify with most, and why?

**Shota Nakajima:**

Luffy from One Piece. He is a relentless dreamer of becoming a pirate king in the ocean. But his thing, like this anime is fun because it doesn't actually cover him the whole time. There's episodes of him not coming out. But it's about him pretty much like gathering a crew together that have their own goals, and they do it with finesse. And when I say they do it with finesse, they know how to smile and have a good time while they do it.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Finesse is a great word. I love that word, and espec- like in a restaurant context, I think that's so fun. And I mean, I have like little Snoopy things on (laughs) various, on my thing.

**Shota Nakajima:**

I always say, like, on the line, you know, in stressful times, and I see people look stressed, I go, "Hey, be intentional and have finesse."

**Kat Kinsman:**

Ah. Do you have it on the wall anywhere? Like a Ted Lasso-

**Shota Nakajima:**

I don't have it on the wall.

**Kat Kinsman:**

... believe sign? (laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

That would be a good one to write on the line, though.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Do you have anything up on the walls?

**Shota Nakajima:**

I mean, I have a lot of things written on the wall, 'cause I tagged my whole restaurant with a spray can.

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Kat Kinsman:**

So not all your art has been on the page. (laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

(laughs)

**Kat Kinsman:**

Were you a tagger?

**Shota Nakajima:**

When I was younger, when I was like 13, 14, fi- .You know, I just love to draw.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

So it was kind of one of those with the rebellious age. It's dumb, but whatever.

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs) You can forgive your, your young self. It's okay.

**Shota Nakajima:**

But now it was fun, right? Like I was actually tagging in my wall, combining colors, and just mixing it up, and having a great time. And I was like, you know, just, it was art. It was just sitting there, being mindless, just thinking about color, and what I wanna do next.

**Kat Kinsman:**

I love that. Laundry list. What are all your current projects?

**Shota Nakajima:**

Current projects! I have two restaurants in Capitol Hill. One's Taku. That one's a fried chicken, Japanese chicken, karaage, marinated in koji and ginger, you know, very ginger-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Oh my God.

**Shota Nakajima:**

... forward.

**Kat Kinsman:**

I want it. (laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

double fried, crispy, bunch of different sauces, fried rice. Kind of your simple, casual, neighborhood bar, if that makes sense, that serves-

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

... Japanese food 'til 1:30 AM.

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

And then my other one is located inside of a brewery called Redhook. And we sling out Detroit style pizza with a little bit of mochi. But there's a lot of Japanese touches in it, too.

**Kat Kinsman:**

What brought you to Detroit style pizza?

**Shota Nakajima:**

I think Osaka, right? Well, originally when they wanted me to help out their kitchen, I was gonna do more of a Japanese concept. But as I was, you know, kept going into the space, there were people that were coming in all the time. And they weren't a clientele that was gonna eat Japanese food all the time. They would feel uncomfortable. and you know, I think that's when my hospitality over chef thing comes in. I'm like, "That just doesn't feel right." Right? So I was like, "What is the right thing?" And then I had the opportunity, Detroit style pizza in LA. I know, not-

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

... Detroit. But it just resonated with me, because number one,. My mom's side is a baker family. Like, my grandpa's known for Japanese milk bread throughout the country. And Osaka is a carb on carb city.

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

You eat ramen with a bowl of rice on the side. You eat yakisoba noodles inside a bread sandwich. Like it's carb on carb. And when I had, you know, okonomiyaki is known in Osaka, takoyaki, udon, like all these starch, carb things, Osaka. Some people may say otherwise in Japan, like they might say their own culture. I'm just gonna say they're wrong. It's from from, Osaka's- [unkown word]

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

(laughs)

**Kat Kinsman:**

You starting fights, here? (laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

(laughs) Just a little bit.

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

But yeah. So when I had it, I was like, "This is very much like that Osaka vibe, Osaka energy. And I can add that, like almost okonomiyaki style rich flavoring, and more, be a little bit more creative with it." And just kind of kept going into it, and dug deep into it. And now we have this really fun product that's coming out. I picked like 20 pounds of morels, so right now we have this morel nettle pizza on the menu.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Oh.

**Shota Nakajima:**

So good, right? Nettle pesto, nettle aioli, Britt Rescigno from TOC actually came over and helped me with the dough recipe, and some of these aioli things, and just- You know? I like to learn from other people. So it's been a big collab and just great minds getting together, and yeah, I'm running a fun pizza shop.

**Kat Kinsman:**

I love it so much. What is the next way you're gonna scare yourself?

**Shota Nakajima:**

I think I am every day. I think I-

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

... consistently am every day. I, you know, I talk to different business associates, different business plan people. I obviously, I filter a lot of it, just because I have a lot of opportunities.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Mm-hmm.

**Shota Nakajima:**

But every single time I sit in these meetings, I'm learning something new. I'm uncomfortable. And it's scary, because I know when I talk, now I'm gonna sit on my computer and work on spreadsheets and documents-

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

... for the next four or five hours. But, and my calendar's starting to look busy, but I'm gonna keep doing this because when we get there, and when we're ready, and my team's ready, it's my responsibility to already have the next hook.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Is there anything you want people to know about you, that they don't, that you're like, "I wish somebody would ask me that." (laughs) Or is there anything people can do for you?

**Shota Nakajima:**

Help out restaurants. You know, restaurants have been hard. Go to your neighborhood, small restaurants if you can. And just give 'em a little love. Show a little extra tip if the restaurant's slow. That goes a long way for helping restaurants in general. As I said, small businesses are only gonna get harder. So the more support you can have for those restaurants, the more restaurants can do good in the neighborhood.

**Kat Kinsman:**

And I'm thinking also, just because people, again, they feel like this incredibly personal connection to you. And it's a different thing each time you meet sort of a celebrity, you are a celebrity. Each time (laughs) you-

**Shota Nakajima:**

That's-

**Kat Kinsman:**

... meet-

**Shota Nakajima:**

... weird. (laughs)

**Kat Kinsman:**

Yeah. Actually, Do you wanna talk about that for a second?. I'm very curious about this, because when we finally met, it was in Aspen at the Food and Wine Classic and I see how folks from Top Chef, especially, are regarded there. And - it's like the gods wandering among us. But I saw, you know, dancing through the whole (laughs) thing, and, what is that like?

**Shota Nakajima:**

You know, I think I take it as an opportunity, right? You can look at it as, "Oh my. I have another thing." Or I take it as, "This is an opportunity to showcase that I can be kind, I can be polite, I can be hospitality forward. And maybe if you're having a bad day, and someone stops you to do something, you can be kind, too." Like, I don't know. I just always kind of had- have that perspective and goal. And also, like, you know, I used to have to prep for hours in the kitchen, and maybe someone smiles. Now I can be polite to someone, and kind, and talk to them for five minutes, and make their week. That's such an incredible thing. And, if I have the opportunity to give out a little bit of energy and I don't know I, I believe that that stuff translates, right? That goes somewhere else. So if I can do that, why not do it as much as I can?



**Kat Kinsman:**

I think that's so beautiful and lovely.

**Kat Kinsman:**

And actually, what does tinfoil swan mean to you?

**Shota Nakajima:**

What is tinfoil swan? I'm so sorry.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Oh, no, that's okay. Some people are like, "Ah, Tinfoil Sw- " You know when you go to a kind of like fancy restaurant, or something trying to be fancy, they give you your leftovers in a tinfoil swan. (laughs)

**Shota Nakajima:**

Oh.

**Kat (01:03:45):**

Like that, like decorative, kind of like old school touch.

**Shota Nakajima:**

What is a tinfoil swan? It's hospitality? It's like conversation piece.

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs) It's like the notion of the podcast is like, "We're gonna give you a delicious meal and then something to take away- (laughs) "

**Shota Nakajima:**

I think a-

**Kat Kinsman:**

" ... with that."

**Shota Nakajima:**

... tinfoil swan is a wonderful conversation piece.

**Kat Kinsman:**

(laughs) I love that.

**Kat Kinsman:**

Thanks for listening to my conversation with Shota Nakajima! Be sure to follow Tinfoil Swans on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen. And we'd love your feedback. If you could rate this podcast (Hopefully 5 stars) and leave us a review, we'd really appreciate it. You can also find us online at [foodandwine.com/tinfoilswans](https://foodandwine.com/tinfoilswans). Thanks to our production team, Lottie Leymarie, Dominique Arciero, Michael Klasek, Amelia Schwartz, Ashley Day, Sean Flynn, and Hunter Lewis. Make sure to come back next Tuesday for my conversation with Maneet Chauhan See you then!