

# Lexus Culinary Master Shota Nakajima and the Subtle Art of Storytelling

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A traditional Japanese kaiseki meal unfolds in courses.

Each one is a ritual building toward the next. It might begin with a single bite to awaken the palate, a sashimi course to introduce pairing, a grilled dish to add fire, and onward toward reflection and, ideally, renewal.

The first course, sakizuke, is meant to stir the appetite.

For chef Shota Nakajima — Lexus Culinary Master, “Top Chef” finalist and James Beard Award semifinalist — that opening bite isn’t plated in a restaurant at all. It’s Spam musubi and canned coffee enjoyed quietly in the trunk of his Lexus outside a Seattle supermarket.

Later, just before service, he adds another practice: a 10-minute nap. “I’ve been doing that for 20 years,” he says. “It’s kind of a must for me, because I want to be 150% when guests arrive.” More than food, these habits encourage a sense of presence and remind us that the first course is about far more than flavor. It’s about setting the scene.

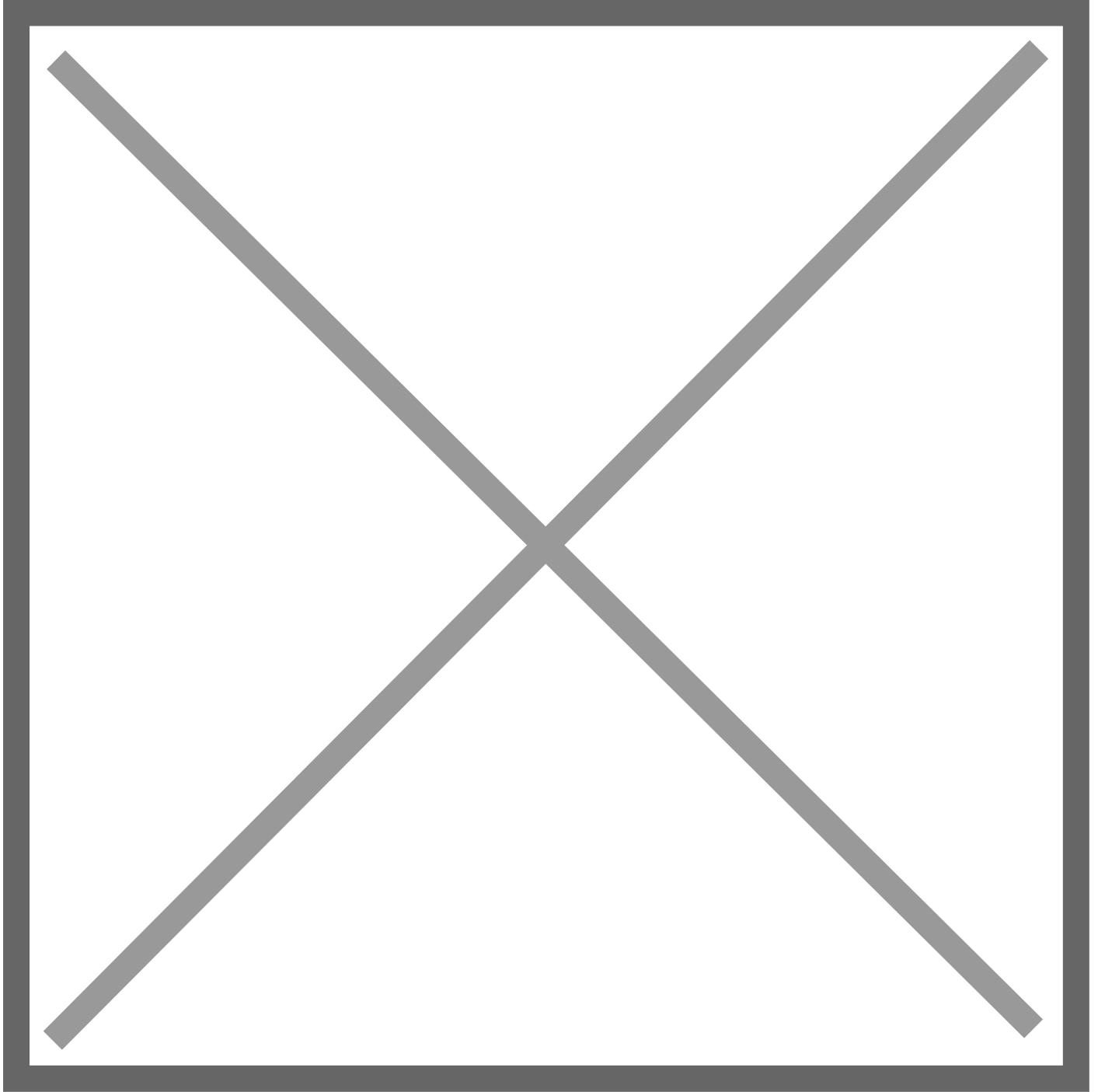


### **Suimono: Broth and Beginnings**

The broth course, suimono, grounds the senses. For Shota, that grounding came early.

Born in Japan and raised in Seattle, he stepped into kitchens as a teenager. By 15, he was already working in restaurants; by 16, he was holding down two full-time jobs. At 18, he returned to Osaka, Japan to study under Michelin-starred Chef Yasuhiko Sakamoto, an experience that transformed his sense of hospitality and cooking, and deepened his respect for tradition.

That balance between honoring what came before and pushing forward became central to his craft, echoing the “Takumi” spirit of master craftsmanship that drives Lexus design. “I love innovation,” he says. “Any kind of creative arts is a must. It challenges what is there into becoming something new. But I also believe in definitions. If I was going to do something in the Kappo line, for instance, I would introduce it in a way that still honors what the word actually means.”



### **Mukozuke: A Perfect Pairing**

The sashimi course, mukozuke, is about pairing: a theme that shows up everywhere in Shota’s life.

Every great pairing requires balance, and for Shota, that search has never stopped. It shows up in the way he cooks, the way he leads, and even in the partnerships he chooses. That's why Lexus feels less like a sponsor and more like a reflection of his own philosophy.

In 2024, he officially joined the Lexus Culinary Masters program, a partnership that resonates far deeper than branding. "My dad actually worked with Lexus years ago," he recalls. "He helped develop one of the early operating systems used in Toyota and Lexus vehicles, which made the user experience feel so seamless. Long before I was signed, I told my assistant, 'I want that deal.' To be selected felt like manifestation coming true."

At Lexus culinary events, he uses his platform to surprise and delight, the way sashimi reveals its nuance through the right garnish. At Charleston Food & Wine in 2024, he introduced guests to fried shrimp served with the shell on. "That's how a lot of Japanese people eat it," he explains. "You dehydrate it for a day, fry it at high temp, and it crisps up like a chip. The aroma of the shell is the best part. People were hesitant, but once they tried it, it created an energy that became part of the whole event."



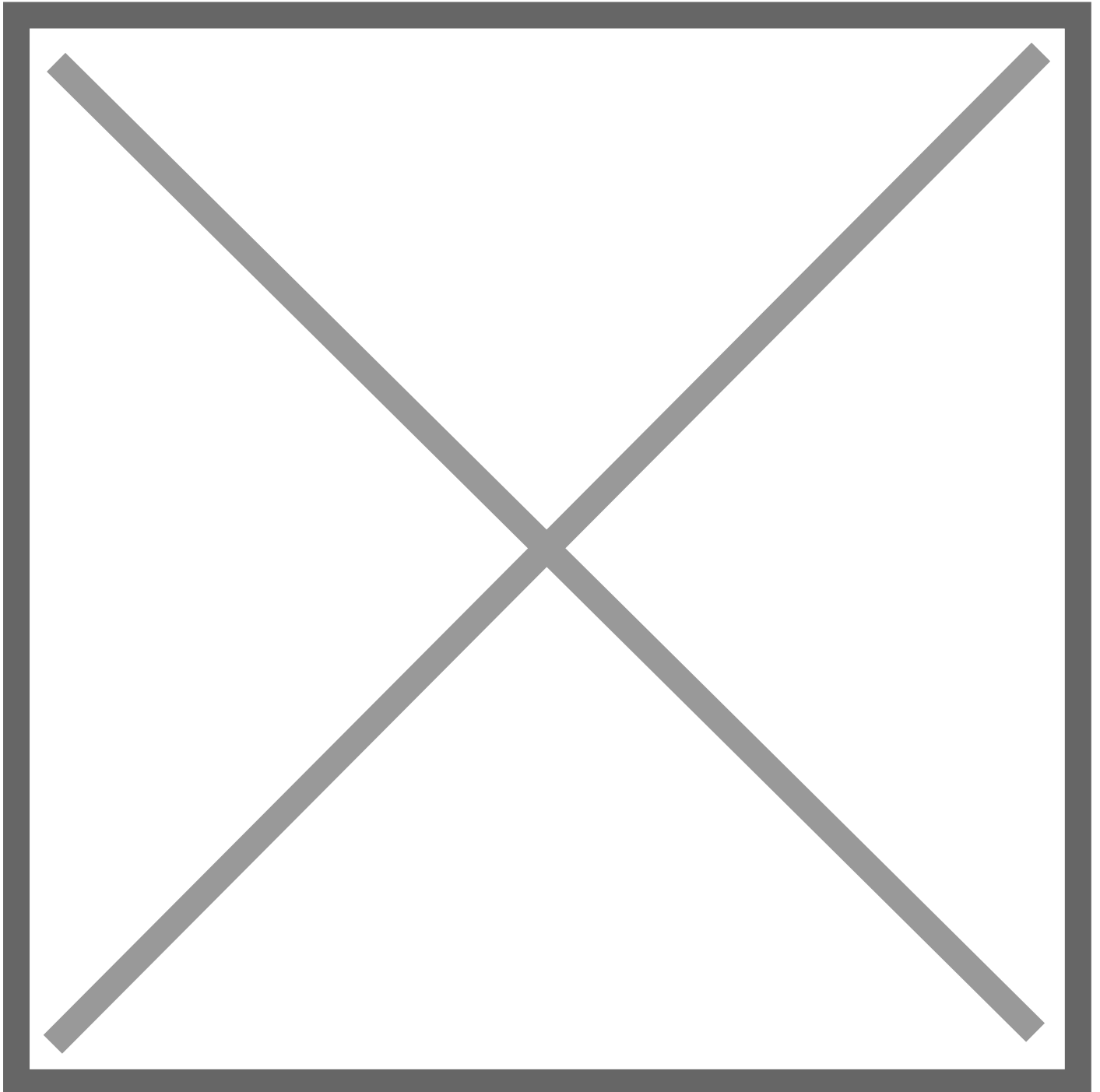
### **Yakimono: Fire and Flavor**

The grilled course, yakimono, brings intensity. But in Shota's hands, fire often means comfort: not as a trend, but as an act of gathering.

“Comfort food to me means something that is satisfying in all regards. I think about staff meal a lot of times, because that's the food people cook that they want to eat. For me, it's rice, carbs, everyone sitting around together. Food isn't just flavor or sustenance — it's the environment you eat it in.”

But comfort doesn't mean excess. Shota's fire is precise, measured. He often returns to the Japanese idea of "eating until 80%." "Even when I serve Wagyu, I try not to serve the amount that people feel completely satisfied. I serve the amount that makes them want one more bite. It creates this thing inside your brain that makes you want to experience more."

That idea of subtle restraint fuels his entire style. It's the same design philosophy Lexus calls "Omotenashi": anticipating needs without excess, creating comfort through care. In both cooking and craftsmanship, the details you don't notice are often the ones that make the experience unforgettable.



## **Nimono: Reflections in the Simmer**

Simmered dishes are the star of the nimono course, which is all about warmth, patience, and reflection: a natural metaphor for the way Shota views his evolution.

His time on “Top Chef” in 2021 changed him profoundly. “Before, I was pretty gung-ho,” he admits. “Now I want to set an example of how to be a chef, how to run a team, how to convey hospitality. There’s this image right now of kitchens being rough and scary. I want to show that it doesn’t have to be that way.”

Reflection also means owning mistakes. “I learn more from mistakes. Success feels good for a second, but mistakes make you stop and look in the mirror. I like to sit in that feeling, not run from it. My dad always says, ‘Being successful is just sitting on a pile of mistakes.’”

That philosophy resurfaced on a recent trip to Japan, where helping a longtime friend open his first restaurant became a lesson in intention. “Five minutes in, I dropped a kernel. He swept it up without a word,” Shota remembers. “Another five minutes, another kernel — and again, he swept. For me, it was a reminder that I don’t always have to rush. I can be intentional about every single move I make in the kitchen.”

It’s a rhythm rooted in “kaizen,” the quiet pursuit of progress through patience and precision. Each motion, like the craftsmanship behind a Lexus, builds on the last. It’s his willingness to simmer in imperfection that gives Shota’s cooking its warmth and humility.





### **Mizumono: A Dreamer's Farewell**

The final course of kaiseki, mizumono, is dessert: light, refreshing and designed to cleanse the palate. It signals both completion and the promise of what's to come.

That finish, to Shota, is as much about the present as it is about the future. "I love being present in the moment. When I did a pop-up in Japan, I set most of my menu but not all of it. I love to see what's fresh, what I feel like cooking, and just go with it, compared to pre-ordering everything and following an exact recipe — it's just more alive that way."

Being present, whether in the fleeting aroma of char hitting the grill or the salt-stung air of a pacific coastal drive in his Lexus, is what fuels his dreams. “I’m a relentless dreamer. So don’t only have a few goals: have a million dreams. That way you can achieve a lot.”

In Shota’s eyes, every course is a story, every ritual a reminder. His work is about savoring life in motion, guided by the belief that balance is what makes every moment memorable. To be present, to dream, and to leave someone wanting just a little more: That is how you truly experience amazing.

And like mizumono itself, he believes the best endings should leave you craving a little more. “Food isn’t just flavor — it’s the environment you eat it in.”