



Photograph of Nobuyuki Matsuhisa taken in 1988 in Los Angeles, California.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

# Nobu Matsuhisa

Founder/owner of Nobu Restaurants, 67

Interview by **Shermian Lim**  
Photograph by **George Rose**

**I travel** 10 months out of the year, that's about 300 days annually.

**It sounds tough**, but when I go somewhere, like how I'm in KL right now, the staff in each restaurant is family to me, and I like to see family.

**Saitama is where I grew up** and got my early education. It's a very small town, and as kids, we played outdoors—swimming in the river and running in the fields. No computers for us.

**My father passed away** in a car accident when I was eight years old. My mother and grandmother raised me.

**Right now, sushi is so popular** you can even find it in supermarkets. For my generation, sushi was high-end food.

**I was about 10 or 12** when my older brother took me to a sushi restaurant. I remember the sliding doors and being welcomed with “*Irashaimase!*” by the chefs when we entered. We sat down at the sushi bar and watched the chefs work. My first bite [of sushi] was so delicious. That's when I decided that I wanted to become a sushi chef.

**There was a picture of my father** with locals on the island of Palau that I held onto whenever I missed him. My other dream, apart from being a sushi chef, was to be a traveller like my father.

**You don't start** out making sushi immediately. I was a dishwasher, a busboy and a tea server before that.

**I had a regular customer** who was Japanese Peruvian. He asked me to open a restaurant in Lima. I pictured the Peruvian landscape—the Incas and the Amazon River—and it reminded me of that picture of my father in Palau. After seven years in the sushi-making industry, I had the chance to realise both my dreams of being a chef and a traveller, and I took it. I was 24.

**My restaurant in Peru** was called Matsue. *Matsu* means “pine tree”,

and *e* means “to grow”. *Matsu* is also my last name.

**I've never changed my philosophy.** I don't play games in my business. When you have investors, they expect immediate returns, but I won't change how I cook. My job is to do my best; cook with the best ingredients, and make my customers happy.

**After four years of living in South America**, my wife became pregnant with our second daughter. We had to decide where she would be born, and so we returned to Japan.

**An electrical fire** burned down my restaurant in Anchorage, Alaska. I became very depressed. It felt as if South America had been a failure, and then Alaska too. For a week, I thought about killing myself. I couldn't even drink water without throwing up. But in their innocence, life for my two young children went on. Their laughter and sounds of playing woke me from my depression. Not to mention my wife, who was by my side the whole time.

**Customers spend good money** in a restaurant to enjoy the food and the hospitality. If you make customers happy, they will come back with friends and family. Money and success will follow. If a restaurant has good food, but bad service, I won't return. I think most people would agree with me.

**Cooking isn't** like making something in a factory. You need passion to get it right—the same kind of passion that a boy and a girl have for one another.

**My older daughter is involved** with Nobu Tokyo. She doesn't cook professionally, but she cooks for her family. My second daughter also cooks for her baby. But they don't cook for my wife and I. Well, maybe, they cook for us once every two years. It's okay.

**Nobu's concept** is based on my global

experiences as a sushi chef travelling from Tokyo to Peru and Argentina to Alaska. We have Nobu restaurants in five continents, Kuala Lumpur being one of the latest.

**I look for interesting things** in the market and experiment with them in the kitchen. If something works, but isn't quite there yet, I'll keep fine-tuning it until it's right. My biggest inspiration comes from finding new ingredients in the countries that I visit.

**As our core**, we use a lot of basic Japanese ingredients. Soy sauce and salt are very important, and so are rice and fish. Spices are okay, but not too much, though we do take into consideration that Malaysians prefer more spices. It's very difficult to say what my favourite ingredients are.

**I enjoy** a good workout, like swimming. I use goggles and a snorkel to help me stay underwater longer. It's much easier to go back and forth without being interrupted. If I don't swim, I do cross training. My schedule is very tight, and I need to be strong.

**I've opened one hotel** in Las Vegas and another in Manila. By early next year, we will have opened in Saudi Arabia, Miami and Shoreditch in London. Hotels are a larger operation, but they're part of the hospitality business, just like restaurants.

**Many of my staff**—the chefs and the management teams—have been with me for a long time, supervising operations in Nobu restaurants in different countries. They understand Nobu's operation, signature dishes and philosophy. That's why I am still here. That's why I say I am a very lucky person.

**My overall philosophy** in life is that I don't make excuses. When I make a mistake, I learn from it. And I always try my best. Even with this interview. **✎**