



When Family Holiday Cooking Turns Into a Showdown

As part of a special holiday series we're bringing you stories from our team as they tackle difficult conversations around food and families. In this episode, LWC Studios' audio designer Kojin says his Japanese family loves to cook, but competition in the kitchen is cut-throat. And Mori Lemau Willhite, who runs a Japanese cooking school, offers practical advice for staying focused and non-combative when preparing a high-stakes

feast with loved ones.

Juleyka Lantigua:

Hi, everybody. We continue with our series about food and families. We've asked some of our teammates at LWC Studios to come on the show and share their experiences with their loved ones. We'll explore some of the tensions that come up around food and families during the holidays, and along the way we'll get some guidance on how we can all cope.

Today, I'm really excited to have Kojin on the show because he is a resident foodie. This dude can cook. Trust me, we've all enjoyed his cooking. And get this, almost everyone in Kojin's Japanese family can really cook. For someone like me who loves food, that would be a dream during the holidays. But not for Kojin, whose family gets extremely competitive, and kitchen drama can often interfere with family celebrations. Let's get into it.

Kojin:

My name is Kojin Tashiro and I am an associate sound designer at LWC Studios, Work mainly in podcasts and I also tend to produce other sound shows as well and documentaries.

Honestly, I called my parents when I was little, mama and papa. My family, they all cook. I'm Japanese, I'm from Tokyo. My father, he was actually the one that taught me how to cook first and he was having me help out in the kitchen. Me, my cousins, my parents, my grandparents, everybody, my aunt, they all cook. We immigrated back in '96, '97, so we didn't have a lot of money. To save money instead of going out to eat, we had to cook. My dad's always been interested in cooking. His uncle was a sushi chef as well at one point.

The American holidays are pretty easy going. We know what the menu is, especially Thanksgiving. You got the turkey, you got the potatoes. It's very

straightforward. Now, New Year's is a little bit different. If you haven't experienced Japanese New Year, it's hard to say, but there's a lot of over preparing intricate parts. It becomes a little bit of a showdown. Our family, besides our mothers, are mostly guys, we're all very competitive. But the problem is we're also very passive aggressive about things too. We'll always try to compliment each other's dishes as much as possible, but you're just waiting for a, "No, yours is better," reply. We all secretly think that we're the best cook. Our New Year's is very traditionally Japanese. When something happens and the pettiness starts, sometimes it gets down to the, "Well, you're not from there," or, "You're mostly American so you wouldn't get it," type of thing.

Then we're all getting older so we're all maturing a little bit more. But back in the day when I was still in my early 20s, we got in a lot of fights. I remember this one specific time where it was a Japanese New Year's. The traditional things that my father makes is this stewed chicken dish with burdock root and bamboo shoots, it's really really good. My father had brought a guest who is from Japan and was probably talking her up like, "Oh, it's going to be a traditional Japanese," and to hype it up because he likes to do that. We got there and my aunt, which is my dad's sister, my aunt, she's never had one year where she didn't make an artichoke and spinach dip, which is not very Japanese. She just started going off as in like, "Ah, I'm the only one that knows how to really cook the Japanese food and you all are ruining this sacred moment."

Then we just got into a huge argument about it because my cousins are actually Japanese, but they're born in America and my sister's born in America too. It just became a whole nother fight. And the ironic thing is, at the end of the night when we're all drunk, he was eating most of the food that other people prepared, not himself. He ended up liking that food anyway. It's just how our family functions.

We're petty and we fight over things and a lot of the times we just get together and cook in the same kitchen and we talk trash per usual. We'll be cooking and I'm guilty myself. I sometimes will see something and be like, "Hey, you're not doing it right." Then they'll be like, "No, it's in the book." I'm like, "Yeah, but you should do this," and then she's like, "No, I'll do it." I'm like, "You're not doing that right." Then my mom or aunt will end up being like, "Well fine, do it yourself then." I'm like, "Okay, okay, I will." It's a lot of side note correcting that happens.

Honestly, it's me, my father, and my cousin. Yeah, we're very cutthroat. My father is just very competitive. But also he does know how to do his stuff. Everybody's trying to, including myself because I'm his oldest son, so it's like everybody's trying to get his approval in a sense. You know what I mean? We'll be talking and someone will be complimenting my dish and be like, "Hey, this is really good," and they'll say something like, "Well it's not the most traditional thing but it's delicious."

Then I'll be like, "Well, I mean if I was going to cook your dish traditionally I would use this and this, so I guess we're both not too traditional." From there it just spirals.

I think what it is, is we all take food personally. We all have a way we want to fit in and we have that one dish or that one thing that we're cooking and we get emotional about it because we feel like if somebody says something about our food, it's like saying something personal about us. Every now and then it gets intense, to shouting matches sometimes, especially when we have a little of alcohol in us.

Lantigua: Kojin's story, not surprisingly made me laugh. He's a funny guy, but I also feel for him and for his family. Part of the reason for the competitiveness seems to be that everyone cares a little too much. Food is important to them as a family, so every detail matters. What can we as first gens do to manage difficult kitchen dynamics when all the cooks are equally invested and equally talented in getting the holiday meal right? How can we do it in a way that honors our family's culinary traditions, that includes our values, and also maybe possibly fosters teamwork? To help us figure it out, I called in an expert.

Mori Wilhite: My name is Mori Wilhite. I live in Indianapolis, Indiana and I happen to run a Japanese cooking school here. I've been doing this for the past eight years. I came here after I married the Army sweetheart and he happened to be from here. I'm originally from San Diego, I am half Japanese. Mom was Japanese and I had to have Japanese food in my life. I just thought, "Well, we'll try in Indiana and see how it goes."

Lantigua: Well, first congrats on eight years of doing something you love. That is a major life accomplishment. I'm going to start with the same question I always start with, which is what did you hear in Kojin's story as you listened?

Wilhite: Well, his family sounds close to my family, rivaling as major chefs in the kitchen. I thought that was cute. I was surprised he didn't talk about any knife throwing while, "This is my domain, you can't come in here," type thing because that's how my mother was.

Lantigua: All right, let's unpack what you just said. The competitiveness in the cooking process.

Wilhite: Yes.

Lantigua: Where does that come from?

Wilhite: Well, Japan is such an old culture, over 2,500 years old, and we just take pride in that perfect umami flavor in your cooking. In Japan, Asian culture, it isn't quantity like the US, it's quality.

Lantigua: Let's break down some of the things. I cook also, and I lived in Japan.

Wilhite: Oh, nice.

Lantigua: And I can make some Japanese dishes, so this is not completely out of-

Wilhite: I'm so proud of you.

Lantigua: Oh, thank you. **ありがとう**

Wilhite: **どうもありがとうございます**

Lantigua: I want to talk about a few things that I think are important when it comes to preparing Japanese food, which is one: technique. I feel like part of the competitiveness within families might be who has the best technique? Let's talk about the harder dishes, the things that require multiple interventions throughout the prep and cooking process. Why does that become competitive?

Wilhite: There is a popular theory in Japan that Japanese food is popular all over the world, but to replicate the taste, not only to taste, the look, presentation as well, and getting the right or close enough ingredient has been the challenge. One of the longer recipes I know, or time consuming ones are [foreign language 00:09:05], the New Year's meal. The most important holiday in Japan, aside from the emperor's birthday. And you're supposed to make it to last three days so that even the busy housewife could be joining with family activities for the New Year's. A lot of that you have to get the right ingredients to prepare it as close to what grandma or mom did back in Japan. That's the competition, how close can you be with our traditional family taste? Some people get that crazy, like my mom.

Lantigua: Okay, let's talk a little bit about the difference that people perceive and experience between being "born and raised back home" and being "American." How do those two things show up when people are talking about how they meal prep and bringing signature dishes to family gatherings?

Wilhite: You've been to Japan, you know how big a Japanese kitchen is.

Lantigua: It's a closet.

Wilhite: That's where they have to be organized and neat because they don't have all this elbow room that us Americans require. Even the way you cut and the mess. My mom would tell me, "You have to destroy half the kitchen just to make this dish." When I started my cooking school, I tried to make it within reason. I was using real

sake to add the umami flavor in whatever I was doing. Because I'm a good Asian daughter and didn't want to be chewed out, I wait till year two to let my mom show up. I told her, "Please, don't chew me out in front of paying guests. Wait till they're gone. I don't want them to think we're fighting." Goes, "I'm not like that." I said, "Yes, you are mother, just wait till they leave before you start bashing me."

First thing she did, of course she came in my kitchen and she looked at the sake I use she goes, "Upgrade that, don't go any lower than that." That's how my mother was in regards to cooking. The \$40 sake with her miso soup. I go, mom, "I can't ask Americans to do that. I'm trying to get them started, not intimidated that they don't want to do Japanese cooking. And once they have a baseline with me, then they could go expand on other things."

Lantigua: It's interesting to me because in a way, some of the work that you're doing through your teaching is cultural translation. You're trying to translate the culinary and rich traditions of Japan for a modern American consumer.

Wilhite: Yes.

Lantigua: Can you talk to me about how you think through, how do I make this accessible while still preserving the authenticity and the originality of the dish?

Wilhite: When I'm teaching, I explain that I designed this class at Japanese standards for non-Asian people. A few things, like the rice, the soy sauce, the sake, you have to buy authentic. You could get regular salad or whatever. But the main, core stuff in all the umami ingredients, like the [foreign language 00:11:54], you need that to be Japanese, Japanese in order to replicate it and have it show up in your meal. Then also I have the approach of I'm going to teach you just enough to be annoying at the sushi bar, starting with the quality of the rice [inaudible 00:12:11]. I mean, if you approach it in this way, now they're looking for faults with the sushi chef. I tell them, "Wait until after they've fed you, not during to make any comments."

Lantigua: That's just good life advice.

Wilhite: Just to be on the safe and let them know, "I didn't taste the umami in the miso soup."

Lantigua: All right, let's talk about space because you brought up a really good point, which is that Japanese kitchens traditionally are very small. You don't really have room for two people to be in there making multiple dishes so it's very streamlined. In an American kitchen, which is typically larger and can accommodate multiple cooks at the same time, how do you recommend people assign themselves roles when they're cooking for the holidays? To avoid the competitiveness, to avoid the potential tension and the knife throwing that you mentioned earlier.

Wilhite: To avoid bloodshed within the family, maybe have dibs on it. Well, I want to make the sashimi platter, or I want to make the [foreign language 00:13:06] or whatever. They could discuss it ahead of time. I mean, we could be civil about this, it's supposed to be celebratory.

Lantigua: What about early prep? How realistic and what can you actually do that you can bring that's already prepped to the kitchen where there's going to be collective cooking that people can utilize?

Wilhite: Well, say for example, if you're going to make sushi, you could have everything, the rice ready, the filling parts ready and everything. And you could take it in separate pieces and then assemble it at the kitchen or the dining table real quick so it could be presented at the table, because the thing with Japanese food fresh is best.

Lantigua: Yes, of course.

Wilhite: If they want sushi, making a sushi roll isn't practical all the time. So I switch to the hand roll. It's the same proportion, but in different shape. Put everything in, wrap it up in a cone and put it in a nice big plate, and then just present it that way. That's the beauty with sashimi, it could be different shapes.

Lantigua: Let's talk about the inevitable, which is the side eye, the criticism, the underhanded comments. As a teacher, what is your advice for people with sensitive hearts when it comes to handling what they might perceive as criticism from family members, especially folks who might be more skilled than they are?

Wilhite: Japan has that [inaudible 00:14:30] piety thing. You can't go telling off your elders the way you want. As I got older, I didn't really start talking back till I was almost... I'm 59. Well mom, if you don't like it, you don't have to eat it. That kind of talk didn't happen until my 40s, but I'm more traditional. Kids today have a lot more leeway that I would've certainly been in trouble if I even spoke like that to my parents. But if you're having a family gathering, make sure you have everything ready so no one could criticize. Excuse, you need one. Well, in Japan, they're having that transportation issue. I couldn't get it, it wasn't even available in the country.

Lantigua: Oh, my God. That's hilarious. All right, last question. Any other last minute survival tips for getting on with your competitive family in a holiday kitchen?

Wilhite: If you want to keep peace, at least keep yourself out of trouble. Just watch them start arguing while you're helping grandma out on the side.

Lantigua: Keep busy.

Wilhite: I do a deflection, yeah. Oh, grandma, do you need help? I'll massage your back, it's okay. I'll just sit right here. Put grandma in front of me, massage her while

everybody else... I'm massaging grandma, keep me out of this, like that and stuff. And oh, I'm cleaning up. Go do whatever you want. If you're smart, stay out of it, that's my advice.

Lantigua: I like that. Mori, thank you so, so much. You've been hilarious to talk to.

Wilhite: Oh, thank you.

Lantigua: All right, here's what Mori taught us today. Assign roles, pick a dish or even a specific task in the kitchen and claim it. Let others have dibs on what they want to prepare, then stay out of each other's way. Be practical. If you know you have really high standards and meeting them is important to you, choose attainable goals and be pragmatic with your prep. Think hand rolls instead of sushi rolls. And remember, deflect, deflect, deflect. Keep the peace by focusing on others and being helpful. Clean up, chop vegetables, go and pick up ice. There are other things that you need to do. Just keep yourself busy to avoid exacerbating the tension.

Thank you for listening and for sharing this. *How to Talk to [Mamá & Papá] about Anything* is an original production of LWC Studios. Virginia Lora is the show's producer, Tren Lightburn makes this episode. I'm the creator and host, Juleyka Lantigua. On Twitter and Instagram, we're at Talk to Mami Papi. Bye, everybody. Same place next week.

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ERASING THE MARGINS