

Mari Katsumura Dazzles Lakeview Foodies, Just Like Her Dad Did For 30 Years



By Ariel Cheung | November 22, 2016 6:16am
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Mari Katsumura creates inventive dishes as the pastry and bread chef at Entente in Lakeview.

DNAinfo/Ariel Cheung

LAKEVIEW — Yoshi Katsumura died with a wish to keep his legacy alive.

And while Yoshi's Cafe on Halsted is still going strong — celebrating its 34th anniversary last week — the Katsumura streak of innovation and artistic cooking burns just as brightly a little to the west, at Entente.

There, Katsumura's daughter, Mari Katsumura, is sprinkling flower petals on a dish the *Chicago Tribune* heralded as "the world's most beautiful cheesecake" when she first made it for Acadia.

Effortlessly, the pastry chef can throw together a wedge salad for the kitchen's staff dinner that's so good, Entente puts it on the menu and "people go blind for it," owner Ty Fujimura said.

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It's her precision and motivation that set her apart, Fujimura said. And it's what made her such an attractive get for his meeting-of-the-minds vision for Entente, which replaced his previous restaurant, Ani, at 3056 N. Lincoln Ave. six weeks ago.



"I would put her up against anybody in the city," Fujimura said. "Chicago certainly should be pleased with having her in our pastry ranks."

But if it had been up to her father, Katsumura would never have been a chef at all.

Growing up in the apartment above Yoshi's Cafe, 3257 N. Halsted St., meant restaurant life was "very much in my blood," Katsumura said. As a young girl, she would check coats or help seat guests, but didn't spend much time in the kitchen.

"I think both my father and mother did everything in their power to get me to not follow in their footsteps," she said. "They realized how labor intensive this job is, how physically taxing and how demanding it is as a person. You kind of have to put your personal life aside."

After studying art and German in college in New York, "I realized that everything I was obsessed with or things I would do for fun revolved around food," from watching cooking shows to whipping up something delicious for her college dorm, she said.

"I just realized it was kind of inevitable," said Katsumura, who lives in Ukrainian Village.

She moved to Minneapolis to attend Le Cordon Bleu culinary school, then studied at The French Pastry School in Chicago and did an internship at Frontera.

It was her "protective" father who suggested she focus on pastry — partially to protect her from the "grueling" hot line work with a predominantly male staff, Katsumura suspected.

"I think he would really go to any length to make sure that I was happy and I had what I needed," she said. But "I think he also realized my strong art background would make for a great marrying of the worlds," she added.



Mari Katsumura brought her deconstructed Japanese cheesecake to Entente from her experience at Acadia earlier this year. The Lakeview restaurant's introductory version comes with melon, violet and almonds. [Provided/Matt Meschede]

She soon landed plumb gigs at some of Chicago's top restaurants, starting with the three Michelin-starred Grace. She worked at Blackbird under Dana Cree, whom Katsumura credits as "the strongest pastry chef in the city."

Her work at Acadia this year got nods from *Chicago foodies* and critics, as did her first collaboration with Entente's executive chef, Brian Fisher, at Wicker Park's *Saved By The Max* pop-up diner.

Katsumura and Fisher are a well-matched pair at Entente.

"We're fortunate enough to find the same food tasty," she said. "We both like to experiment with flavors and dishes we're drawn to — Asian ingredients and flavors for me, perhaps Mediterranean and Indian for him."

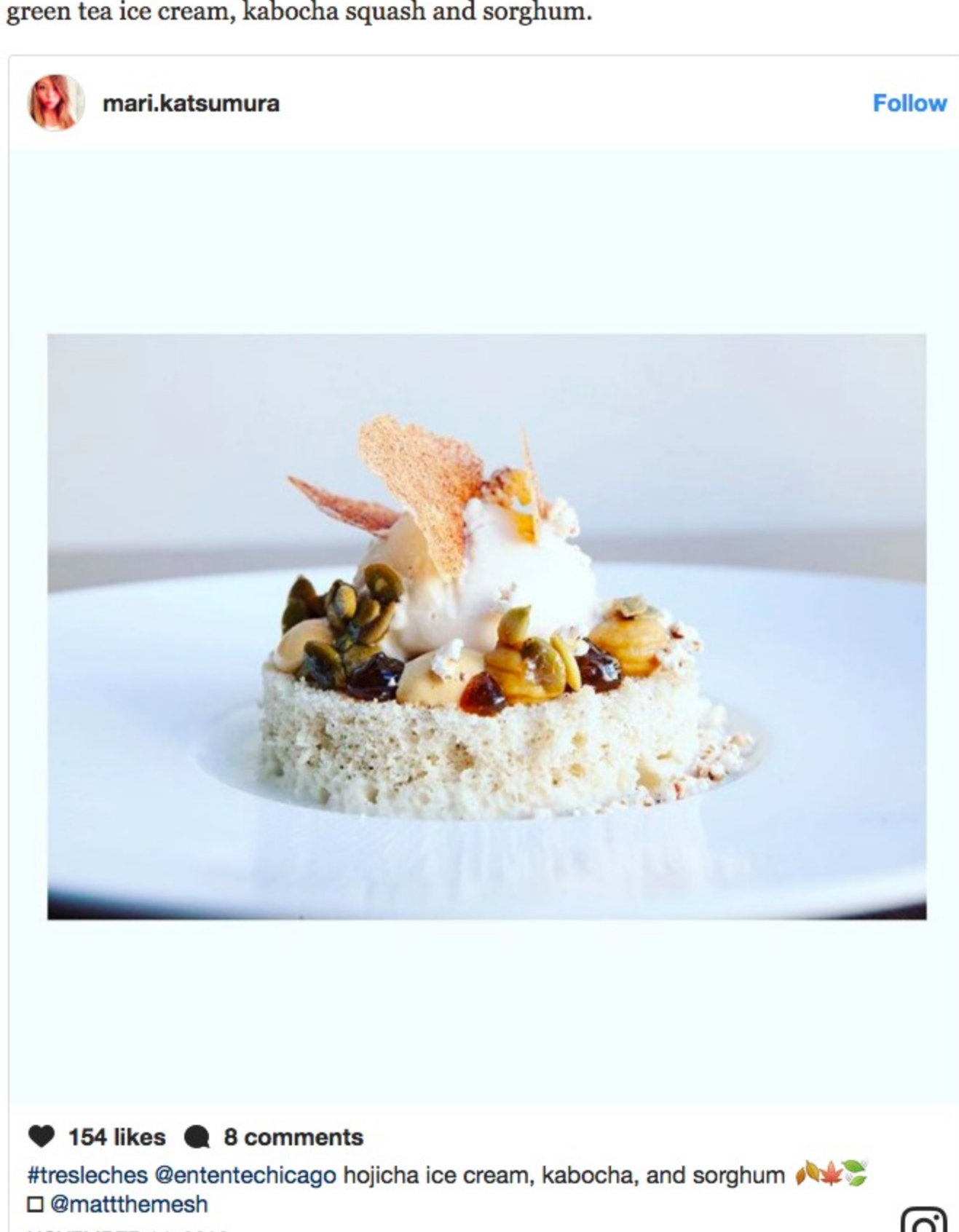
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The pair began brainstorming the menu for Entente on a giant Post-It note, bouncing ideas off one another to create a menu that draws from a host of cuisines.

Having a father credited with introducing French-Asian fusion to Chicago can make innovating in the kitchen a daunting task, so Katsumura focuses on dishes she finds comforting, then adds in a twist.

"People have spoken about my food as 'upscale junk food,'" Katsumura recalled.

One favorite is her tres leches at Entente, which comes topped with roasted Japanese green tea ice cream, kabocha squash and sorghum.



In the future, Katsumura would like to open her own business, although she's not quite sure where that will take her.

"The more you learn, the more you find out what's already been done," she said. "But things that can't be recreated are your own memories, so I try to make food that speaks to that."

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