

Happy birthday, Beni!

Benihana, home of the country's favorite stunt-pulling, joke-telling chefs, is turning 50. Could you be its next great grill guru? Longtime fan David Farley tries out!



WHEN I WAS 10, I went through what I'll call my Benihana-envy stage. While celebrating my sister's birthday at the *teppanyaki* temple—because, really, who among us hasn't commemorated at least one, if not a million, milestones there?—I became transfixed by the grill master's culinary acrobatics. Flipping a shrimp tail skyward and catching it in the dimple of a chef's hat? Amazing! I wanted that power. And so, much to the alarm of my parents (and Mitzy, our poodle), I started training myself—launching and attempting to catch our craziest utensils whenever I could steal a moment alone in the kitchen.

Little did any of us know that 30 years later, on the eve of Benihana's 50th birthday, I'd find a better way: the Be the Chef class, in which masters school mortals in the ancient art of awing diners. Recognizing my second chance (I had abandoned my childhood go at greatness after a

few too many battle wounds), I was soon standing before a certain Chef Romeo on New York City's West 56th Street. On this very spot in 1964, Tokyo native Rocky Aoki had imported and adapted the idea of table-side teppanyaki (already popular in Japan) with the opening of his first Benihana, to the delight of everyone from Muhammad Ali to the Beatles.

Clearly channeling Ringo, I had visions of twirling my utensils rock-and-roll-drummer-style. But my fantasy was short-lived: Right after I signed the waiver, agreeing not to "toss food into anyone's mouth," I instead spilled water all over the grill, filling the room with smoke and causing a mop-wielding busboy to appear on the scene. Romeo seemed unfazed as he began showing me how to dice the "normal" shrimp and cut the "colossals" into thirds. Next, upon learning that the house steak cooks for 25 seconds on one side and 10 on the other, I flipped mine—then tossed and caught(!!) the spatula. "Beautiful!" yelled Romeo. I was getting my confidence back.

And I needed it a day later when I returned to the restaurant for part two of the course: cooking for friends. My three recruits, like pretty much anyone who grew up within driving distance of a Benihana, had memories of first dates, prom after-parties and grandparents'

anniversaries around the signature sizzling grill, so the pressure was on. I crossed my utensils over my chest, took a bow and a deep cleansing breath, then began to slice everything in sight. Soon I had enough onion rings to stack into the iconic "smoking volcano," and as the water I poured down the crater set off a killer eruption, I got my first *wow!* from the crowd.

Then came the moment I'd *really* been waiting for: When a lone shrimp tail stared up at me from among the scraps, I nabbed and launched it. Time stood still. The group fell silent. Would I fulfill my dream of a tail-in-toque landing?

A second later, I heard a skitter a few feet away. Sigh. Even if I'm not the next teppanyaki titan, I've had a blast trying. *Domo arigato*, birthday boy.

Be the Chef yourself! The course is offered at most U.S. Benihana restaurants, where for \$140 you get a private session, then a show-off-your-skills dinner with three friends. Larger groups can be accommodated for a higher fee. (benihana.com)

A teppanyaki time line



1964

Aoki launches his first joint with four tables, which stay empty until a review creates out-the-door lines.



1968

The first Benihana outside New York opens. Eventually, 78 locations on multiple continents follow.



1981

Aoki lands the cover of *Newsweek*, with the headline "Making It in America: Foreign Successes in U.S. Business."



2000s

Benihana makes cameos everywhere from *SNL* to *Mad Men* to *30 Rock* to *The Wolf of Wall Street*.