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### Xtreme Cuisine

Arizona's cunning culinary wizard Chef Kaz Yamamoto prepares taboo illegal moveable feasts for the elite and *über*-rich  
By Stephen Lemons

The warm glow of candlelight suffuses the Wrigley Mansion's grand living room, as George Gershwin's ghost tickles the ivories of an ancient Steinway, belting out the dulcet tones of "Rhapsody in Blue." Seems Gershwin was a guest of chewing gum magnate William Wrigley Jr. back in the day, and recorded this ditty on the mansion's Steinway player piano for his host's amusement. The squat antique instrument with its dark-walnut veneer sounds enchanting, those black and white keys responding to expert, unseen hands. One-of-a-kind entertainment for this most unusual repast I am now three courses into.

It's a Sunday evening in late March, and this august chamber, with its gilded roof, thick carpeting, and 18th-century oil paintings in heavy, rococo frames, has been converted into a dining room. Around an oval oak table are seated a dozen individuals, most of whom have paid thousands of dollars to be present. Since we are generally unknown to one another, the conversation is polite and uninteresting, save when it turns to the varied comestibles at hand.

We're waited on by four men in Armani jackets and high collars. A stunning blonde in a slinky black number plays maître d' and hostess, announcing each course and answering any questions that arise. Whenever our glasses run low, a bottle of Voss appears, or a magnum of Mouton-Rothschild, for silent refilling. Save for us, our servers, and those in the kitchen out of our sight, the mansion seems completely deserted, as the Wrigley's restaurant Geordie's, named for the house's late owner Geordie Hormel, closes after Sunday brunch. All the mansion's rooms are available for private parties, you see. And it's rumored that the manse's aged hippie landlord attended previous nights like these before he died, partaking of some of the same exotic vittles we're enjoying at the moment.

Compared to the rest of the night's offerings, there's nothing particularly astonishing about the creamy amuse-bouche that began our collation: a purple taro root bisque flavored with bacon cut from the belly of a wild Indonesian boar. But what immediately followed did raise a few eyebrows: a Southwestern cactus salad, featuring not only sliced prickly pear pad, mustard greens, and roasted corn, but also the spongy, slightly bitter innards of the noble saguaro, all of it drizzled over with a saguaro syrup-vinaigrette, made from the fruit of that legally protected desert flora. This mix of bitter, tangy and somewhat cloying tastes I found immensely intriguing, one of the better salads I've eaten in all my years as a food critic.

A small bowl of ginger-grapefruit sorbet is brought to each of us as a palate-cleanser, and then in turn a plate of four meat medallions atop a port reduction with a streak of saffron-parsnip purée to the side. The meat in question? Our comely hostess enlightens us with a warm and knowing countenance: "Tenderloin of Bichon Frise, medium rare." I have to say, the flesh of this best friend of man is extraordinarily soft and savory, and though I loathe using the cliché, it literally melts in my mouth.

Apparently, this toy breed is favored over other breeds for rather practical reasons. Its lap-dog affability toward humans renders it easy to raise and ultimately to butcher, and the fact that Bichons are small and do not shed their fur also appeals to those who will eventually harvest them for consumption. The diminutive animal is plumped up on cream and chunks of veal for seven months, then slaughtered while still a puppy to ensure its flavor and tenderness. The taboo we Westerners have regarding the consumption of canines aside, I now understand why dog flesh is regarded so highly to this day in many Asian cultures. Like some odd cross between pork and beef, there's nothing quite like it. Can't think of a lovelier way to celebrate the Chinese Year of the Dog.

Before I continue with my description of the evening's delicacies, I should mention that I am here at the invitation of Japanese-born chef Kazuki "Kaz" Yamamoto, the shadowy maestro of an underground and highly lucrative culinary world that's thriving in Arizona, because of Yamamoto's brazen and ingenious use of meat, game and vegetation that's considered off limits, immoral or even illegal. For the past three years, Yamamoto has maintained his moveable feast right under the noses of law enforcement authorities, placating the jaded palates of the wealthy, famous and powerful with such bewilderingly bizarre preparations as monkey brain stew, roasted flank of gazelle, and dry sausage crafted from the pink, lardaceous hindquarters of the great African hippopotamus.

Many of the items the French-trained Yamamoto procures for his mind-bending, edible menagerie can be legally imported into the United States and consumed under little-known loopholes in the U.S.

Mr. G



Kaz Yamamoto in the storage area of his home kitchen.

Mr. G



He be stylin': Chef Kaz Yamamoto at his Anthem compound, lounging in imported silk pajamas before a bighorn sheep he bagged last year.

Mr. G



Pygmy owl is consumed during a soiree at a private Scottsdale home. Black veils enhance the experience. Chef Kaz and girlfriend Alexis Bridgemont (right) look on.

Endangered Species Act of 1973 and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, or CITES, each of which regulates the harvesting of and trade in exotic animals, both domestically and globally. Most people would be surprised to discover that lions, kangaroos, antelopes, hippos, reindeer and zebras can be brought into the States by reputable vendors and served openly. But Yamamoto takes this one step beyond, skirting the intricate tangle of local, state, federal and international regulations to obtain and cook whatever he damn well pleases.

"They have so many law, no one know what law is right law," the handsome, haughty chef asserted during an interview at his private compound in Anthem. "Not even government know all the law. I take lot of precaution. People tell me to worry about [Maricopa County] Sheriff Joe Arpaio. He have animal-protection department. But he too old and stupid. They never catch me."

Officials would have to prove that Yamamoto acquired the species illegally, and that the chef's animal imports are indeed of the endangered variety, a tough task for overworked U.S. port inspectors more concerned about catching ostriches with avian flu or cattle with bovine spongiform encephalopathy, a.k.a. mad cow disease.

Moreover, Yamamoto boasts scores of sources for his illicit eats, both inside and outside of the country. He prides himself on hunting many of the animals himself, and having their carcasses shipped to his Arizona address in specially devised containers via an unsuspecting FedEx. And there are other extra-legal arrows in his quiver; bribery and the black market being two.

Yamamoto's sub rosa restaurant, referred to as "Le Menu," is in constant rotation throughout the Valley. Yamamoto uses third parties to rent out places like the Wrigley, dining rooms at posh hotels such as The Phoenician and the James or high-end sites such as the Taliesin West's Garden Room, once Frank Lloyd Wright's private gathering space. Yamamoto's contacts in city government helped him secure for one night all of Tovrea Castle, the abandoned wedding-cake-shaped structure that sits on seven and a half acres of city land across from the Stockyards Restaurant on Washington Street. Once he used the now-vacant, but for a while still-furnished, Beef Eater's Restaurant on West Camelback Road, and, of course, there have been innumerable private residences, either on loan or for a fee. Sometimes, Yamamoto utilizes the abodes of his clients, who turn over their quarters to Chef Kaz for one evening, in trade for a free seat at Le Menu's coveted table du jour.

Additionally, the chef has friends in high places, if he needs them. A host of Hollywood stars and other notables have supped at Le Menu, including chef and author Tony Bourdain, host of the Travel Channel show *No Reservations*, Tinseltown bad boy Colin Farrell, humorist and *Miami Herald* columnist Dave Barry, media mogul Ted Turner, eccentric thespian John Malkovich, troubled hip-hop star DMX, and Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban. African-born Houston Rockets center Dikembe Mutombo once stated that Yamamoto's chimpanzee stew "is better than me mum makes back in the Congo." And actor/director Vincent Gallo has recently expressed interest in filming a documentary on Yamamoto after supping on the grilled intestines of a brown bear poached from Yosemite National Park.

(It's worth noting that the chimpanzee is listed as an endangered species by both U.S. and U.N. agencies. And despite proposals to downgrade its status, the brown bear is still listed as a threatened animal by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.)

Phoenix's power elite are also regular guests of Le Menu. Charles Barkley and Jerry Colangelo once shared a meal that included the skewered genitals of a barbecued rhino, reputedly an enhancer of stamina and virility. (Colangelo's prostate had recently been operated on, and the rhino feast was an aid to his recovery.) Mayor Phil Gordon was allowed to dine gratis in exchange for the chef's use of Tovrea Castle. Other well-known local fressers include Barry Goldwater III, Iron Mike Tyson, Shawn "The Matrix" Marion (he partakes twice a year when his friend Mutombo is in town to play the Suns), and car dealership titan Tex Earnhardt. During a private party at his residence, ASU President Michael Crow reputedly dined on Gila monster (absolutely verboten to take from the wild), served medium rare and smothered in a green chimichurri sauce. And NBC Channel 12 news anchor Lin Sue Cooney delighted, on a separate occasion, in none other than the same luscious canine dish that has so engrossed yours truly.

Yamamoto's Le Menu is but the most extreme example of America's ever-increasing obsession with food, and the collective hunger we have for ever-more-outrageous taste sensations. Celebrity chef Bourdain's entire TV career has been built upon the question, "What outlandish thing will Tony eat this week?" And popular television shows like *Fear Factor* have added a dare-you-to-eat-that element to the equation, while ethnic eateries have helped make such heretofore rare comestibles as tripe, tongue, beef head, fried insects, chicken feet, and so forth much more common. Haute cuisine peddlers regularly prepare quail, partridge, boar, squab, elk and buffalo. And numerous Web sites explore items previously forbidden for consumption. The site [www.weirdmeat.com](http://www.weirdmeat.com) discusses eating everything from duck's blood soup to fish excrement. And [www.deliciousdogs.com](http://www.deliciousdogs.com) actually advocates porking out on pooch, because, as the Web forum states, "Let's face it, dogs are good food."

If those mouth-watering medallions of Bichon Frise did not teach me why entree to a Le Menu dinner is one of the hottest and most exclusive tickets in town, subsequent courses most certainly did. After another intermezzo, this one a ramekin of Key lime custard, made with sea-turtle eggs, and garnished with lime zest, we're brought what at first resembles a petite Cornish game hen or a quail.



Kill zone: Yamamoto takes aim on an emperor penguin during an Antarctic hunting expedition.

Mr. G

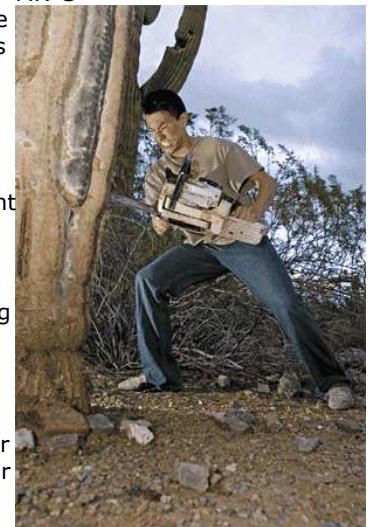


Cut throat logic: Chef Kaz prepares a penguin breakfast in his spacious Anthem kitchen. Two more penguins remain on ice to Yamamoto's right.



Would you eat this dog? Our food critic did, and found it delicious.

Mr. G



It is in fact a ferruginous pygmy owl, roasted with the head intact so that we can see, despite its denuded state, that what we're noshing is one of those endangered cactus dwellers, so beloved of Arizona environmentalists that the creature's mere presence has halted the construction of schools and roads. The tiny, browned bird body before me could fit neatly into the palm of my hand.

"Chef Kaz encourages our guests to enjoy the fowl whole, bones and all," our dazzling maître d' informs us, her white teeth glistening beneath glossy pink lips. "The bird has been roasted with its internal organs intact, and is best eaten with the black napkin provided atop your head. This is copied from the way the ortolan is eaten in France. It's meant to enhance the sensation of devouring this delicious creature. *Bon appetit!*"

The waiters help the older members of our party place the black napkins over their heads. I wait 'til the last moment before donning mine so I can catch a glimpse of the surreal scene, each diner outfitted as if for his or her own firing squad: like something out of a Magritte painting, or a *mise en scène* by Luis Buñuel. As our hostess mentioned, we're supping on pygmy owl after the manner of Gallic gourmands gobbling ortolan, the tiny orange-breasted sparrow whose consumption is now forbidden in France. The birds are netted in the wild, fattened on a diet of oats in captivity, then suffocated in cognac and roasted whole. The eating of them was once considered so great a sin that, by tradition, the diner was to veil his or her eyes in shame with a napkin. Strangely, though, this only enhances one's experience by forcing concentration on the taste and smell of the precious warbler, its enticing odor captured by that same funereal serviette.

I devour half my owl in one bite, and find it crunchy and succulent, brown juice covering my fingers and running down one side of my mouth. The heart, liver and other innards pop with an explosion of warm saltiness as I chew into them. Moët & Chandon is poured into our champagne glasses, and a swallow or two eases this heavenly hooter down my esophagus. I greedily ingest the rest, polishing off the remainder of bubbly, and I'm quickly offered another flute of same. I feel a twinge of guilt, knowing the rarity of this especially *rara avis*, but I admit that there's the flush and tingle that accompanies doing anything so very, very wrong.

Our main course is anticlimactic: three strips of bighorn sheep in a light dusting of peppercorns with a maple-whiskey glaze, and a side of fingerling potatoes and white heirloom carrots. Bighorn sheep can be hunted in Arizona, but they are subject to a highly regulated lottery system, and a gamesman is allowed to take only one during his entire hunting career. They're sought after mostly as trophies, and, to be certain, the meat tastes a lot like venison, though gamier and greasier. It was hardly the high point of the meal.

The final course is not dessert, but rather two pieces of seal sushi, prepared nigiri-style, wrapped in gold leaf and served with an amber cordial glass of very expensive and very sweet Muscat de Beaumes-de-Venise. The seal had been harvested recently during the massive Canadian seal slaughter, protested by the likes of Paul McCartney and Pamela Anderson. Chef Yamamoto felled one seal during an expedition to the Great White North for the hunt. Imagine fatty tuna (*toro*) crossed with raw wagyu beef, and maybe a touch of yellowtail. The diners moan their approval while chasing the seal with the Muscat. When Yamamoto emerges from the kitchen sipping a goblet of Pinot Noir, he embraces his hostess, who is actually his companion of several years, Scottsdale native and former model Alexis Bridgemont. There is polite but enthusiastic applause for the couple. Yamamoto shoots me a triumphant glance. Chef Kaz is on top of the world.

"Last night you have seal, today you try penguin," declares the Emeril of endangered species, opening the door to his three-story Anthem abode, dressed roguishly in imported silk pajamas. "You stay here. Alexis sleep in today. I go dress, then you, me, we have breakfast."

Yamamoto bounds upstairs, two or three steps at a time, leaving me in a hallway filled with stuffed animals: three different types of bighorn sheep, a polar bear, the mounted heads of a zebra and a moose, and the crouching, snarling body of a wild jaguar, bagged on the Arizona-Sonora border, according to the mounted animal's bronze plaque. Reminds me of an episode of MTV's *Cribs* where a camera followed around Motor City Madman Ted Nugent, who had a similar taxidermied zoo in his home. When Yamamoto reappears in his white chef's jacket embroidered with his name, I mention this to him.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Ted Nugent is my good friend," he relates, casually. "We hunt penguin together. I cook for his family many time. The Nuge have a really big kitchen."

"Wait a sec, you hunted penguin with Ted Nugent?" I exclaim, trying to process this information. "Ted 'Cat Scratch Fever' Nugent, the guy who raises buffalo and turns it into jerky?"

"Sure, why not?" Yamamoto replies. "He a good shot with bow and arrow. But I like use rifle. Quicker. More precise. Look, he give me this gun."

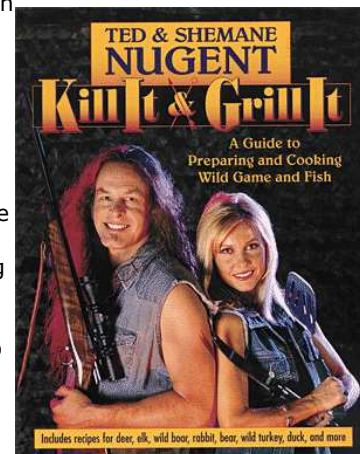
Yamamoto pulls down a high-powered Remington as long as he is tall from a gun rack on the wall. Engraved onto its side in silver is a note: "To Chef Kaz, Keep on killin' so I can keep on eatin'. Your pal, Nuge." I'm impressed. Not just by the dedication from the guy who wrote such classic hits as "Wang Dang Sweet Poontang" and "Yank Me, Crank Me," but by how unwieldy the rifle seems. Must have a hell of a recoil.

Yamamoto chain-sawing an ancient saguaro: "There are so many saguaro," says the chef. "Go look in desert. You cannot count them, there are so many."

[www.tednugent.com](http://www.tednugent.com)

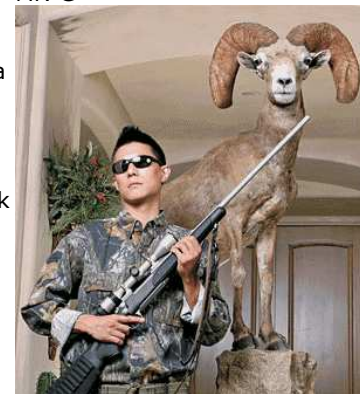


Yamamoto's hero: Motor City Madman and hunting enthusiast Ted Nugent likes to hunt with bow and arrow.



The Nuge's wild-game guide, *Kill It & Grill It*.

Mr. G



Chef Kaz began hunting his own big game to ensure the quality of what he prepares for Le Menu.

Matt Coddington

"Nuge kinda crazy," says Yamamoto. "In Japanese, they say 'kuru-kuru-paa.' You see that film *March of the Penguins*? Remember how mother go get food to eat, then walk a long way back to ice where father keep nest? We lie on slope, fire on mother penguin as they walk back. Nuge, he shoot flaming arrow at one penguin, and scare many away. Penguin explode, they have so much oil in body. He run down and eat it right there, while still on arrow! He can't wait, he so hungry for penguin."

Yamamoto says this happened last year. There's no way for me to verify all this, of course. Attempts to reach the right-wing rocker were unsuccessful, and his publicist insists he's busy rehearsing for his "Wildman Wango Tango" tour of Asia later this summer.

Arizona shock-rocker Alice Cooper, however, was easier to reach. The avid golfer and born-again Christian, who owns the successful sports bar Alice Cooper'stown in downtown Phoenix, hailed Yamamoto's culinary skills, and said that he and Nugent had dined many times together at the Phoenix Country Club, with Yamamoto taking over the kitchen for the night. Cooper has heard good things about Yamamoto's penguin from Nugent, but has yet to sample the frozen-tundra-lovin' fowl himself.

"I did eat Kaz's walrus fillet once, with some sort of sherry glaze, I think," recounts Cooper, then kidding a bit. "Outstanding. Much better than the time I bit the head off that chicken onstage back in the '70s."

Cooper then offered a Biblical rationalization of Yamamoto's extreme cuisine:

"After the flood, God told Noah in Genesis, Chapter 9, verse 3, that 'every living thing that moveth shall be meat for you,' and I suppose 'every moving thing' includes walruses and penguins. According to the Bible, it's all here for man's nourishment. So there's nothing morally wrong with what Kaz is doing."

Whether or not the Lord approves, national and international laws are quite clear regarding the Antarctic's emperor penguins. Hunting of any species native to Antarctica is illegal under both the Antarctic Treaty System, which 45 countries including Russia, China and the United States have signed, and the federal government's Antarctic Conservation Act. However, several nations claim part of Antarctica as their own, such as Chile, Argentina and Australia. Yamamoto's hunting expeditions usually depart under the guise of scientific missions from one of these countries. Walruses? Protected under U.S. and Canadian law, with an exception for the Inuit tribes of Alaska and Canada. Yamamoto claims his walrus meat was obtained legally from an Eskimo family allowed to hunt the beast under these strictures.

Whether it's immoral or illegal, I can attest to the fact that Yamamoto does know how to cook a penguin. He leads me back to his immense, gleaming kitchen, pulls a defrosted carcass from the refrigerator and goes to work, using several knives, first one with a three-inch blade, then a series of smaller ones. It's a tad unnerving witnessing this beautiful Antarctic bird being dismembered before me. But soon Yamamoto is frying up its walnut-size brain in a Japanese omelet with shiitake mushrooms and heirloom tomatoes. The aroma soon has my tummy growling, and when the result is plated, I dig into it with relish. Magnificent! The stringy, penguin gray matter has the same texture of sliced, pickled chanterelles.

"Penguin is so deleeshus," states the chef. "And they so many penguin in South Pole. You go with me next time. I show you."

Quickly, the Nipponese cook is back in action, sautéing a breast of penguin in Grand Marnier, and adding assorted micro-greens and a drizzle of jus from his pan. We share this delicacy, literally neither fish nor fowl, which tastes to me a bit like frogs' legs, though I dare not make this comment to the chef, especially with knives about. By his estimation, what we're noshing is worth its weight in precious stones. Normally, he would prepare less generous pieces for the swells at his exclusive dinner parties. I'm sure Yamamoto is spoiling me because I'm writing a story about him. I confess I'm both flattered and a little taken aback. As a professionally adventurous eater, I'm ready and willing to try anything new and exotic. And yet penguins are such endearing animals that it's hard not to feel a little sad over seeing one so quickly dissected and fried up like a common barnyard hen.

As you might imagine, Yamamoto has a massive ego. Most of the Valley's great chefs are well-known, and attached to restaurants acclaimed in the local and national press: Elements' chef Beau MacMillan; Vincent Guerithault of Vincent's on Camelback; Kevin Binkley of Binkley's Restaurant; Tarbell's Mark Tarbell, to name the most famous. But the secrecy that has shrouded Yamamoto's activities has denied him the glory he so obviously craves. He makes no bones about it; this is why he gave *New Times* access to his world for this story.

"Christopher Gross, I wouldn't let him sous for me," sneers Yamamoto. "Tarbell not cook his own food in years. MacMillan is Iron Chef on TV?! Give me break. He never cook seal, I tell you."

The Squaw Peak-size chip on Yamamoto's shoulder is one major reason he's consented to this unprecedented access. The simple fact that he has created outrageous gourmet banquets for Arab princes, movie stars and captains of industry, and yet his name is nonexistent in American culinary media, irks him to distraction.

"Angelina Jolie and Mr. Brad Pitt love my giraffe tongue," he huffs, working himself into a lather, pacing the linoleum floor of his kitchen as he recalls the dish. "Giraffe tongue very tough. I marinate for four day in red wine and garlic before braising with leeks,



©Matt Coddington

Shock-rocker Alice Cooper, born-again Christian and exotic-meat lover.



"To Yammi, The greatest Chef I know," signed "Angelina Jolie."

Mr. G



The most dangerous game: Yamamoto in his Anthem study, surrounded by trophies of hunts past.

### Details

#### Who / What:

Illegal foods

#### Details:

Those interested in Chef Kaz or Le Menu can e-mail him directly at [le\\_menu\\_az@yahoo.com](mailto:le_menu_az@yahoo.com).

shallot and carrot. I also make them monkey meat tartare, with caper and cornichon. Mr. Pitt go bananas over monkey. Even lick plate. You don't believe? I show you photo Jolie give me."

(As stated above, giraffe can be imported legally. Most species of monkey, though, are off limits.)

Yamamoto vanishes, then reappears to proudly show off a framed, autographed photo of the star of *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* dedicated to "Yammi, the greatest chef I know."

Somehow, I'm not surprised. After all, Jolie's known for her wacky behavior and pronouncements, everything from French-kissing her brother at the Oscars to wearing a vial of former hubby Billy Bob Thornton's blood around her neck. The tattooed, bubble-lipped beauty even once bragged in jest that she ate nothing *but* meat, and her penchant for leather goods is well-known. She's been quoted as stating, "When other little girls wanted to be ballet dancers, I kind of wanted to be a vampire," and, "Before I die, I wanna taste everyone in the world." Feasting on giraffe tongue and monkey tartare seems well within the realm of possibility for Miss Jolie.

Yamamoto suddenly chimes in, "I cook for Ruth Reichl, too." He refers to the influential editor of *Gourmet* magazine and former *New York Times* food critic. "I fix her penguin liver pâté, with peppercorn and Armagnac. She stay with me the night and we make love for 15 hour, she love pâté so much. I love her long time. This before I have girlfriend. She say I too controversy to write about. Too controversy!"

The chef lets fly a torrent of Japanese invective that would surely sting my ears if I understood much of it. He stamps the ground and kicks cabinets with his feet in a temper tantrum that lasts several minutes. As his fury subsides, a smile creeps across his face, and he beckons me to follow him into his meat locker, where he stores an array of butchered carcasses that would bewilder the most brilliant of zoologists. It's a sight he's never shared with anyone other than his inner circle. To the rear of the kitchen, behind a thick steel door with keypad lock, is a long, refrigerated room several yards deep and wide, lined with sheet metal. On either side of a pathway down the middle are hung reddish-blue slabs of flesh, everything from bison and mountain lion to gazelle, zebra, gorilla and huge sides of pachyderm. Yamamoto rubs his hands over one slab, gazing upon it as a groom might study his bride in their marriage bed.

"I kill lion on safari in Tanzania," he relates of one skinned carcass. "She guard two cubs, and I kill all three. Cubs we roast for Sultan of Brunei, and the heart of mother lion I barbecue for Donald Trump. I keep body. Maybe make steaks, and stew of rest. Lion not good meat. No fat, but people want to eat, so I hunt them."

Interestingly, lion is another of those creatures that can be hunted, if done so on African reserves. Elephant, too, is in a similar category. But there are a number of carcasses in this illicit icebox that Yamamoto cannot have acquired legally, like those of the gorilla. When I challenge Yamamoto about the ethics of hunting and eating such magnificent creatures, especially ones threatened with extinction, the globetrotting gourmet vigorously defends himself.

"I am, how you say, environmentalist," he insists. "American eat so many cow, pig, lamb, chicken. Raise on farm, fill with antibiotic, slaughter like in Holocaust. Then process meat so it have no taste, and fill with chemical. I don't do this. I hunt one by one, like American Indian. Use whole animal from wild. Everything very natural. Game better for you. More healthy.

"People from PETA, how you say -- retards?" continues the chef. "Hunting is very ethical, yes. PETA want everyone vegetarian. But if everyone vegetarian, world have too many animal, and animal eat human. What you want? Human die or animal die?"

Yamamoto has a point. PETA does seem extreme in its dictates at times. I called PETA's national office in Norfolk, Virginia, to get its response to the chef's statement, but never received a call back from its representative. E-mails to its preachy Web site at [www.PETA.com](http://www.PETA.com) also garnered no reply.

Not that everyone can afford to eat like Yamamoto's clients, but if we could, the processed meat in our diet would be replaced by leaner wild game flesh. And according to both the FDA and private pro-hunting organizations such as Hunting for Tomorrow ([www.huntingfortomorrow.com](http://www.huntingfortomorrow.com)), game offers better-tasting viands that are lower in saturated fat and calories, but higher in content of EPA, or eicosapentaenoic acid, and omega 3 fatty acid, believed to reduce hardening of the arteries and the likelihood of strokes.

Yet in spite of such health benefits and Yamamoto's obvious genius for preparing such super-exotic fare, his methods are unlawful, distasteful, excessive, and, at times, leave you wondering about the chef's sanity.

In defiance of Arizona state law, Yamamoto regularly chain-saws old-growth saguaros, both on private and public property, for the Southwestern salads like the one he served for my meal at the Wrigley Mansion. This I know because I've witnessed him do it, taking down what may have been a century-old cactus, to judge from its thickness. When I query him about the Special Enforcement Division of the Arizona Department of Agriculture that exists solely to apprehend saguaro poachers, or about saguaro conservationists who would regard him as a deranged vandal, Yamamoto scoffs at the idea that saguaros require this sort of protection.

"There are so many saguaro out there," he snorts. "Go look in desert. You cannot count them, there are so many. Is only plant. Why you care so much about plant? That stupid. Arizona have cactus police force. Waste of tax money."

Then there's the way Yamamoto obtained spider monkeys and sea lions.

"The Phoenix zoo have lot of monkey," shrugs Yamamoto. "Sometime they lose one. Maybe they think it escape. Maybe they should pay their employee better. For guard on night shift, \$500 is lot of money. Same for sea lion at SeaWorld. If sea lion not perform in show, sea lion go bye-bye."

If the employees he's bribed at SeaWorld can't come through for him on the sea lion tip, Yamamoto always has the fallback of driving up to San Francisco's Pier 39 with a refrigerated truck, waiting until the wee hours of morning with two assistants, and

plugging a sea lion in the skull using a night-vision laser-scope, and a silencer on his high-powered rifle. The sea lions are wild, and come and go as they please from the docks. According to the Marine Mammal center in Sausalito, California, an organization dedicated to the rescue and study of sea mammals, the high count of sea lions at Pier 39 was 1,139 on September 3, 2001. With those kinds of numbers, it's easy to see how one fewer sea lion perched on the Frisco docks is not missed. Like whales, dolphins, manatees, and other aquatic mammals, sea lions are protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972. But that doesn't stop Yamamoto, who prizes sea lions for their blubber-bound musculature, which he asserts makes for the ultimate in pot roasts.

He's so foolhardy and headstrong, I wonder how long it will be before Yamamoto finally becomes a target for law enforcement, whether it's Arizona Game and Fish, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, the FBI, or any of another half a dozen state, local and federal agencies who might take an interest in this felonious Bobby Flay. Yamamoto says he keeps his and his girlfriend Alexis' passports current, and they both have packed bags and one-way tickets to Zurich, where they could rent a chalet and have access to Yamamoto's Swiss bank account. He brags of a clandestine network of informants here who will tip him off should the law come gunning for him.

But why did he talk to me for this story? Why give the authorities a heads-up in print, which is what this article will inevitably do? Certainly, what property he holds locally is under fake names, and a phony shell corporation with an offshore mailbox serves as his corporate address. But it's not exactly as if Arizona is overloaded with Asian males, and his face will be published on thousands of *New Times* covers. There are two answers (besides, of course, his lust for recognition). The first is that Yamamoto may already be planning to set up shop in Europe, where regulations are more lax. And the second is that Yamamoto and I already have a history, having met in Los Angeles, close to five years ago.

The first time I saw Kaz Yamamoto, he was three sheets to the wind, a half-bottle of Cutty Sark (the only Scotch he could afford at the time) in front of him as he sat at the bar at Musso & Frank, one of L.A.'s oldest eateries. A rather happy drunk, he was trying to coach the bartender on the finer points of singing the "Sukiyaki" song in Japanese, much to the old chap's annoyance. When I interrupted Yamamoto to introduce myself, he greeted me like a long-lost friend.

"Lemon-san, I so happy you come! Now I can finally have drink with Fat Man," he intoned in a spray of whiskey breath, then thumping the bar top with one hand. "A drink for Fat Man! A drink for Fat Man!"

The ancient barkeep in red jacket and black tie took my order with a snarl. Though I had slightly less girth then, Yamamoto was not referring to my waistline, but rather to a food column I penned for the now-defunct *New Times Los Angeles* titled "The Fat Man." It was written through the guise of my alter ego, a Sydney Greenstreet-like character not too far removed from the person I actually am. I had just visited the Japanese-French fusion restaurant Chaya Brasserie in Beverly Hills and given its executive chef Shigefumi Tachibe a thorough verbal bashing in print. Yamamoto was elated. He had been a line cook for Tachibe for the last three months and hated his employer with a passionate intensity.

"Tachibe-san so mad his face turn red," laughed Yamamoto, as I took my boilermaker and guided us both to a booth where we could order some food and help Kaz soak up some of that Cutty. "He say if you come in there again, he slice you in half with samurai sword. Ha, ha!"

Yamamoto despised Tachibe because he'd given the newcomer a dressing down for a rather minor oversight on his part. Yamamoto vowed revenge from that day forward, but the sting of my notice and the outrage it caused Tachibe seemed to be enough to have Yamamoto overlook his blood oath. I had inflicted a mortal blow by calling Tachibe's vittles "as French as Inspector Clouseau and as Japanese as James Clavell." Yamamoto kept repeating the line throughout the evening, even after the drinking party moved on to other, seedier watering holes.

From that night forward, a strange relationship developed between us. An uneasy, one-sided not-quite friendship in which Yamamoto would call me up to go carousing with him until he was so plastered that I had to stick him in a cab and send him on his way. It was almost as if he knew I would write about him one day. That, and I suppose I was the only sympathetic ear he had at the time.

Half-kiddingly, Yamamoto called himself "Koreanese": He was born in Osaka to a Korean father and a Japanese mother, a combination so taboo in Japan that to this day the offspring of such couplings are discriminated against in all aspects of Japanese society. Yamamoto's father had escaped North Korea with the help of his mother who was a volunteer with an international aid organization, one allowed on infrequent and highly restricted tours of the Stalinist police state in the mid-'70s. Yamamoto's dad was a lieutenant in the North Korean army, fluent in Japanese, assigned to chaperone Yamamoto's mother and her delegation so that they did not speak to any North Korean citizens unobserved.

A love affair ensued, and Yamamoto's father defected to Japan and married Yamamoto's mother. As is Japanese law and custom, the twentysomething former military man Chang-Su Park adopted a Japanese name, Ryoji Yamamoto, and Kaz's mother Misako also took that last name. Ryoji became a consultant with the Japanese self-defense force, otherwise known as the JDA, or the Japanese Defense Agency. Misako kept house at home, and soon became pregnant with the couple's only child in 1978, a boy they named Kazuki, meaning "First Hope" in Japanese.

Keeping his half-Korean lineage a secret was impossible for Kaz in the insular world of Japanese grade school. When his father walked Kazuki to school one morning, the suspicions of his classmates were confirmed by his dad's heavy Korean accent, one the children mocked and imitated with a guttural "chok-chok-chok." Kazuki fought his first fistfight that day, one of many schoolyard scuffles he would endure for years to come.

"They call me 'hafu' or 'ban chopari,'" explained Kazuki once. "Hafu mean 'half,' and 'ban chopari' mean half-Korean/half-Japanese, like calling Mexican guy 'wetback.' Whenever those kids say 'ban chopari,' I hit biggest guy in face and they shut up. I learn to use my fist very, very good."

Though Kaz's test scores were above average, his prospects following graduation from secondary school were dim. His penchant for pugilism, justified though it may have been, followed him in his permanent record, as did an arrest for joyriding a motorcycle when he was 16. The Japanese university system frowned on such behavior, and the fact that Kaz's father was Korean probably didn't

help matters. But his dad's connections with the JDA got him accepted into the JMSDF, the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force, the only "navy" allowed the Japanese following the American occupation of Japan after World War II. Kaz signed on to the AEGIS destroyer *Kongo* as a seaman, third-class, and volunteered for the galley. He took to the kitchen like a baby octopus to salt water, and two years later, he was seaman first-class in charge of all baked goods on board.

"In the navy, I decide I want to be great chef," Kaz tells me. "All really great chef are French, so I decide to go to France."

After being honorably discharged following three years of service, the young Yamamoto bought a Japanese-French phrase-book and a one-way ticket to Paris, City of Light. He had learned a little English in the navy, enough to befriend a Brit expat from Liverpool who ran a small hotel on the Left Bank, and rented him a room at half the going rate. Eventually, he applied and was accepted into Le Cordon Bleu Paris, the most prestigious culinary academy in the world. By day he learned the art of chocolate, patisserie, haute cuisine and French and regional cooking. Late into the night, he washed dishes at a bistro nearby his flat to help pay the tuition. His parents wired him Japanese yen from Osaka, which converted at a profitable rate into francs. And he had a little savings left over from his time as a sailor. He was poor, but determined to graduate with honors.

After nine months of intensive schooling, he was awarded Le Cordon Bleu's Le Grand Diplôme, the school's highest honor, certifying that the recipient has had the most comprehensive training in classic French cuisine and pastry techniques available. Yamamoto wanted to remain in his adopted city, and had several leads on positions in Parisian restaurants. But his father had been diagnosed with cancer, and he felt obligated to return to Osaka.

The year 1999 turned out to be the worst of Yamamoto's life. His father passed away, leaving him and his mother behind. While living with his widowed mom, Yamamoto took a job at an Osaka sushi restaurant that specialized in serving fugu, or blowfish, a deadly delicacy in Japan. The fish's internal organs contain lethal doses of tetrodotoxin, a neurotoxin that can cause general paralysis and death from asphyxiation. Scores of people die each year in Japan from eating fugu that has not been prepared properly, yet the thrill of ingesting the poisonous puffer fish draws diners like moths to a flame. The tingle they first feel on their tongue may just be harmless, trace amounts of tetrodotoxin, or it may be the onset of an unusually gruesome demise. If the latter, the victim will die in less than 24 hours, remaining conscious the entire time as the poison slowly incapacitates him.

"This idiot salaryman, Nobu Sato, he come in all the time, always pinch waitress butt," Yamamoto stated during one late-night drinking session. "Real asshole. So I give him extra taste of fugu liver. Just to scare. But I make mistake and give him too much."

Long story short, the salaryman died, and Yamamoto's name was not only Mudd in the restaurant biz, but he was wanted by the police. He had no choice but to give himself up, and there was a trial in which famed Tokyo lawyer Bennie Matsukawa argued that the death had been accidental, merely a hazard of eating the dangerous delicacy. It worked; Yamamoto was acquitted, but Japan's tabloid press took up the tale. The *Mainichi Shinbun*, one of the largest dailies in Japan, printed Yamamoto's photo and called for him to commit seppuku, or ritual disembowelment, in disgrace. People would throw garbage at him when he would show his face in public. Yamamoto fled to Los Angeles, leaving his mother behind, and was soon knocking around the glitzy L.A. restaurant scene. He'd stay at one gig for a few months, then quit and drink up his savings until he had to go back to work. Being disgraced in Japan had taken a heavy toll on his psyche, and he self-medicated himself for depression with the aforementioned cheap Scotch.

This is about the time I ran into Yamamoto. But after six months he fell off my radar screen. He stopped calling me, and the one time I tried his cell, it had been disconnected. I continued with *New Times Los Angeles* as "The Fat Man" until 9/11 happened, and the paper's advertising dried up. The paper folded in 2002, and after being courted by my old boss, now the editor of *Phoenix New Times*, I accepted the position of staff writer and restaurant critic with the Phoenix tabloid, not thinking that I'd ever see Yamamoto again.

I'd heard whispers of Le Menu in Phoenix restaurant circles, but nobody knew for sure if the super-secret supper club really existed. I was initially convinced the whole thing was an urban legend until Yamamoto called me out of the blue one day.

"I thought Phoenix too hot for Fat Man," chuckled Yamamoto over the phone. "You wanna meet me at Chez Nous?"

Chez Nous and the Pink Pony, these are the sort of watering holes Yamamoto loves to frequent. In the eye-numbing darkness of Chez Nous, Yamamoto spun me a fantastic tale, one that would be difficult to believe if the proof were not soon to follow. Le Menu did, in fact, exist. It was Yamamoto's brainchild, first conceived in Hollyweird, where all things are possible, then later moved to Phoenix, where the contraband catering service could continue to operate below the radar.

"I serve Mr. Jack Nicholson in his home in Hollywood Hills," Yamamoto said, grinning. "He have dinner party, and they eat whole dolphin! Nicolas Cage and his wife there. She really hot Korean chick. Larry David [of *Seinfeld* and now *Curb Your Enthusiasm*] there, too, but it Passover and he say he not eat dolphin because it not kosher."

As seems appropriate in a town built on celluloid dreams, the concept for Le Menu came from a film, 1990's *The Freshman* starring Matthew Broderick and Marlon Brando (a neighbor of Nicholson's whom Yamamoto later served a forbidden delicacy that will be explored later in this piece). Yamamoto had rented the video from Blockbuster, and watched it in his Studio City apartment while doing bong hits on a ratty sofa. Maybe the cheba was especially potent, but Yamamoto was inspired. The comedy involved a Mafia-run restaurant that served everything from Komodo dragons to Bengal tiger meat for an exclusive clientele.

It was as if Yamamoto had glimpsed his future.

"That film kinda boring, but idea good," related Yamamoto, sucking back a single-malt Glenlivet, an improvement over the Cutty of days past. "I know I can do this. In Japan and Asia, we eat lot of crazy shit. Here in U.S., you don't eat too much crazy shit. Big problem is money for first meal. But I figure this one out, too."

Yamamoto partnered with a Brentwood wine merchant to do a tasting involving exotic meats. Nothing too crazy, or even illegal. Just antelope, zebra, and hippo, all of which, according to the FDA, are legal to import -- as long as the animals were raised on African farms and not in the wild. These meats weren't cheap, but Yamamoto borrowed money from a Century City loan shark, procured the

viands and produced a stellar menu for the tasting, one that included ravioli stuffed with ground antelope, hippo rilletes, and tournedos of zebra wrapped in hippo bacon.

The tasting was a hit. Yamamoto handed out his cards, and told the vino-swillers he was available for private functions. He and the wine merchant planned another event, and when Yamamoto's loan shark learned of what the cash had been for, he forgave the 100 percent interest in return for an invite to the next tasting. By the time that rolled around, the phone calls were pouring in to Yamamoto's answering service. Le Menu was born.

As the parties became more and more extravagant, Yamamoto felt the pressure to outdo past repasts. He kept upping the ante, moving into riskier territory, with endangered species and shady, black-market suppliers. His staff grew to 14, and he began hunting some of the animals himself to ensure the quality of what he was receiving. He devised an ingenious, self-cooling "black box" wherein he could ship some meats overnight to his upscale new home in Encino after butchering them on the spot. FedEx was none the wiser.

However, things were getting out of hand, and Yamamoto's business venture was growing too fast for him to keep up with it. He barely had time to breathe, with all of Le Menu's banquets and cocktail parties, booked several months in advance. Yamamoto turned to cocaine to continue the frenetic pace, and was soon doing an eightball every day. Then there was a series of close shaves. He was stopped at the U.S.-Mexican border with a suitcase containing a dozen live chinchillas from the Peruvian Andes, and was forced to relinquish them to customs agents. He had planned to roast them like suckling pigs for a backyard barbecue at the estate of film producer Harvey Weinstein. Fortunately, the customs agents believed him when he told them he had intended the priceless, endangered rodents as pets for his 6-year-old daughter, terminally sick with leukemia, and he was not arrested.

But when he returned chinchilla-less to La-La Land, Miramax mogul Weinstein was livid, and threatened to rat him out to the feds if his guests weren't wowed. Thankfully, Yamamoto had half a gorilla left in his freezer and placated Weinstein by roasting it alfresco on a spit for him. That night after the cookout, Yamamoto suffered a mild heart attack, brought on by the excessive use of nose candy and his nonstop schedule. Doctors warned him it would happen again if he didn't curtail his drug abuse, and ease his work load.

These factors, along with the risk that he had become too well-known for his illegal spreads in the media capital of the universe, made him decide to move to Arizona. He was already rich beyond his dreams, and his accumulated loot would go much further in the desert. Moreover, he could maintain his Hollywood client base, as Phoenix is only an hour's flight from Los Angeles International Airport. Also, Phoenix is sleepier, less high-profile. At least the move would buy him some time in his newfound career, and perhaps lead to a healthier lifestyle as well.

The past three years have been a boon to Yamamoto. He's stayed away from the drugs, and has a much bigger house than he could ever afford in expensive Los Angeles. A year and a half ago, he met the alluring Alexis, who has a head for business; she keeps the books for him and helps him with service during more intimate soirees. They seem truly devoted to each other, and Alexis is convinced of Yamamoto's brilliance in regard to all things alimentary.

"I'd follow Kaz to the ends of the Earth," she explains to me. "He's the man I want to have babies with. I want him to have the acclaim he deserves, but if America rejects him, there are other countries that will be more hospitable to a man of his talents."

In fact, like some East Coast La Cosa Nostra don who's moved his operation to the desert, that Damocles sword of the law is always hanging over Yamamoto. Could it be that at the tender age of 28, Arizona's most talented and least-known chef is ready for a career move, one that takes him to an international stage?

"In France they eat horse meat, and in all Europe, it is legal to eat any kind of game at restaurant," Yamamoto tells me. "Sometime, on menu, they warn you to watch out for buckshot when you eat game. They more sophisticated in Europe. Like Japanese or Chinese."

The Valley does have some other peddlers of exotic eats. Down Under Wines in Chandler regularly does wine tastings pairing Aussie vino with roo meat. And since 1982, Rick Worrilow of Gourmet Imports in Phoenix has provided the local hospitality industry with everything from camel to caribou, all quite legal and aboveboard, by the way. The Stockyards serves calf fries, which are veal testicles, and VooDoo Daddy's Magic Kitchen serves alligator. At Lee Lee Oriental Market in Chandler, you can purchase frozen Thai cockroaches, canned crickets, thousand-year eggs, and duck embryos, among other Asian delicacies. And such items as elk and venison are not too difficult to find on menus around town.

As discussed previously, the interest in extreme cuisine is on the rise nationwide, as the American palate becomes more experienced and curious. Food Network and Travel Channel programs showing the hosts eating roasted guinea pigs in Machu Picchu, deer penis soup in Singapore or the still-beating hearts of cobras in Vietnam are now run-of-the-mill. This is still mostly voyeurism on our part; Americans tend to be fairly squeamish about anything unusual. Older cultures are not so particular about their provender.

Yamamoto hails from a country surrounded by water, and nothing in the sea is off limits to the Japanese, including sea urchin, whale meat, and dolphin. I myself ordered whale meat in Tokyo once, and though I didn't think it terribly appetizing, I was intrigued by how easy it was to find in the bustling Japanese capital. As mentioned, Yamamoto is half-Korean, and Koreans continue to delight in the taste of canines, often served in a hearty soup. Dog meat is also popular in China, but then the Chinese really do eat just about everything under the sun, from bird's nest and snake bile to monkey brains and the bronchial tubes of cows.

But Yamamoto is going beyond the pale, traversing boundaries at which even his fellow Asians would surely balk. Everyone's heard about Tom Cruise joking (supposedly) about noshing his newborn baby's placenta and umbilical cord. But placentophagy is nothing new, nor is it illegal to chow down on some umbilical carne asada, as long as it's postpartum, of course. Placenta pâté has long been a part of Yamamoto's repertoire, but it's not the only human flesh he's willing to prepare for customers eager to experiment with cannibalism.

"There many Mexcan immigrant need money," confides Yamamoto during my inspection of his Anthem residence. "Sometime they

sell me kidney, arm or leg, or just slice of liver. Very, very expensive. These Mexcan never have to work for year, I tell you. And Mexcan liver with onion? Is sooo deleeshus. You must try."

How could I resist? Actually, at another of his clandestine spreads, Yamamoto presented me with three plates, one with a slice of human liver sautéed with onions, another with a hunk of muscle torn from a human leg that had been deep fried, and a third of a side of poached hufu, a faux human flesh product that bills itself as the "Healthy Human Flesh Alternative" (available online at [www.eathufu.com](http://www.eathufu.com)).

"I give the hufu to people who don't wanna eat Mexcan," claims Yamamoto. "Hufu not bad, but nothing like real Mexcan."

I sample a bit of each, and I must admit that Yamamoto is correct. Mexican liver is exquisite, a thousand times tastier than its bovine counterpart. The leg muscle was a little chewy, sort of like gnawing on a fried chicken gizzard, but not bad. ("Marlon Brando and Phil Gordon only person who really love leg muscle; they like on bone and then rip off with teeth. Moan in pleasure, then spit out gristle. I serve Brando many time at Hollywood home. Mayor Phil very good customer here. Say Mexcan better than osso buco.") As for the hufu, it was awfully gelatinous in places, and blubbery. I don't think broiling was the best way to go, but Yamamoto says hufu is too fatty to fry, though sometimes he does this, and ends up with bits of meat similar to lardons, which he will then add to a salad.

The whole thing seems so *Sweeney Todd*-ish to me. Like something out of that 1973 sci-fi cannibal flick *Soylent Green*. But apparently, there have been precedents in real life as well. Why, *New Times*' own Paul Rubin, recent winner of the Arizona Press Club's Virg Hill Journalist of the Year Award, wrote a series of articles beginning in April 2003 ("[Rent a Patient," April 24, 2003](#)") exposing a health-insurance scam involving Mexican immigrants receiving unnecessary surgeries for cold, hard cash. The only difference here is that the desired organs are refrigerated for later consumption.

As if these revelations were not bizarre enough, I'm a bit grossed out by Yamamoto's admission that he has an unsavory agreement with some local mortuaries to harvest kidneys and other internal organs for him from children and teenagers who have died in car accidents. But Yamamoto's ultimate desire to prepare the most unthinkable of dinners is what really sends shivers down my spine.

"One day I hope I can cook whole Mexcan," sighs Yamamoto. "Maybe baby Mexcan that mother sell to me. Then I make for my good friend Jon Kyl. I know Senator will like to eat Mexcan. He only like Mexcan when on his dinner plate."

I at first hoped he was joking, but Yamamoto was not smiling.

Despite the patronage of Senator Kyl, I suspect the days of Le Menu are numbered, but until Yamamoto flees for Europe, one step ahead of Sheriff Arpaio or the feds, his black-market banquets will continue unabated for those with the bankroll and gall to consume endangered species and even human flesh with all the aplomb of swells sipping rare vintages at the Pointe Hilton or The Phoenician. As Yamamoto knows, when it comes to pleasing adventurous palates, pretty much anything goes.