

“Walking on Water”:

A story of a successful Japanese chef who calls South Okanagan Home

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Photo by Bill Blare

Tatsuo Kan was a very successful Catering Company owner in Tokyo. Kan's clients were well-known people in Japan, including celebrities and government officials. His business served at least five large parties a day with the biggest one of 8,000 people lucky to try Kan's creations. Business was thriving but Kan had to spend more and more time away from his family – wife, Kanako, and two small children at the time. Kanako was not happy about it. He knew that to avoid “karoshi” (life-threatening burnout) he had to change this life style.

Kan met his life partner in Arizona and ever since that time they both wanted to go back to North America. So, when the time for change arrived, they started looking into moving to Sun Valley, Idaho and opening a restaurant. Kan made an arrangement with his old friend to meet and discuss the business plan.

Just before he had to leave for the airport, Kan and Kanako sat on the couch and talked about how risky it would be to invest thousands of dollars in the business just to apply for work visas, without any guarantee of permanent residency. Kan still went to see his friend and they had a great time, but they did not discuss business.

A few months later Kan took a trip to Saskatoon to explore immigration options through the provincial program. On the way home, Kan stopped in Vancouver. At a high-end sushi restaurant he had a chat with the chef who suggested that Kan and his family move to Vancouver instead. He gave Kan a phone number of an immigration lawyer. When Kan called the lawyer he answered: “Kan, you wouldn't believe it, but I was just chatting with your wife.” Kan was surprised and relieved – his wife and him were on the same page. In June 2014 the Kan family arrived to Vancouver.

Kan worked as a manager of two restaurants and trained the teams of three restaurants. The Kan family welcomed a new child into their lives. Life was good but they wanted a quiet

life in a small community where they could bring up children and have more time to enjoy what life has to offer. On a plane over Penticton they looked at each other and smiled: “That’s it! This will be our home”.

Kan started off by taking the English classes at the South Okanagan Immigrant and Community Services (SOICS). Once they settled, they planned to open a small take-out sushi place and spend as much time as possible with their children. By chance, Kan found a venue for rent with all the equipment for a very good price. It was a much bigger venue than what he had in mind for a take-out place. In addition, it was late fall and there were not many people passing by. Kan was nervous about the outcome but decided to go for it and see what happens. On February 14th, 2017 Sushi Kojo opened its doors, and ran out of all supplies that very day... It was a tremendous success.

Kan and his team are very active in the community – they are a part of the school meal program, they support community events, and, of course, they indulge our taste buds by creating amazing food. Every time.

To accommodate the growing demand, Kan hired more staff, including a few chefs from Japan. Today he employs 28 people whom he highly values, and passes on his knowledge to. When he tried to downsize a bit, he asked the staff if anyone wanted to quit but no one did. Instead, they suggested opening one more restaurant and helping him manage it. Now there is a Kojo in West Kelowna.

Kojo has a lot of meanings but in Kan’s words it is “walking on water – faith in God and trusting that nature and people will support you”.