



## Chef Akira Back's Healthful Tips

The executive chef at Yellowtail in Las Vegas's Bellagio Hotel cooks with health and happiness in mind.

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Once upon a time, I was a professional snowboarder. Fifteen years ago, I traded snow pants and down jackets for a chef's jacket and kitchen clogs. Despite some of the decadent indulgences on my menu, I have not forgotten how to eat like an athlete.

Many believe that food that's good for you cannot be delicious and refined. More tragically, they think that healthy dining experiences are not necessarily fun ones.

I was recently in the restaurant when one of my servers asked me to leave the kitchen to speak with a diner. The customer asked me, with sincere and slightly skeptical eyes, "What is the healthiest item on your menu? Does everything have high fat content?"

I told her, "Everything is actually pretty light." She nodded, and later, I personally served her my Jeju Domi, a line-caught red snapper, sliced thinly, and served with a sweet and tangy red-pepper sauce and orange-sesame oil. She took a bite and was surprised by the delicate but light flavor. I told her, "Take it from a former professional athlete, you can have your figure and eat cake, too."

Maybe not cake, but I believe in all things in moderation. During my time cooking at Yellowtail, I have taken this motto to heart. The style of food and the ingredients I use give my cuisine elevated but light

flavors. Often, I integrate my Asian roots, which inspired many of the meals in my diet during my professional snowboarding days.

When I was competing, my mother would always tell me, in the sweet but slightly nagging tone exhibited by many Asian mothers, "Akira, you need to eat Korean short-rib stew. It will give you strength and keep you warm."

I never dreamed that her wisdom would find a place in my kitchen more than a decade later. You may wonder how short rib can be a healthy meal, but in this classic Korean dish, the meat is boiled for many hours with ginger, and the fat is skimmed off the top of the boiling pot. I've never forgotten the spirit of my Korean upbringing. And to this day, I utilize beef as a good source of protein and ginger as an ingredient to aid digestion.

Another important facet of many people's dining experience is likely the beverage menu. Moderation is still the key. I try to drink red wine more than any other alcoholic beverage because of its health benefits. But as long as you aren't overdoing it, enjoying a cocktail at dinner is not so terrible. I also suggest to my health-conscious customers that they order their cocktails with half the normal amount of simple syrup, or none at all. The less sugary the drink, the better.

I embrace the fact that once in a while it's okay to dig into a big, juicy steak. When it comes to dining, my favorite kind of experience is one that is not overridden with guilt about calories and grams of fat. But I keep my eyes peeled for the plates that incorporate wonderful, fresh flavors: organic vegetables; subtle, buttery elements of fish; or some lean and tender chicken.

I may have hung up my snowboard, but I consider cooking (and eating) light, delicious food one very serious sport.

## Healthful Wine Pairing Tips

Every body-conscious dish can be paired with a glass of wine. Here are some of my favorite pairings for your healthy meal of choice.

- I love an aromatic, full-bodied **red Meritage** that is not too tannic or earthy alongside fresh tuna tartar with some citrus accents.
- A **California Sauvignon Blanc** that's medium dry with a nice level of acidity and some lovely tropical fruit notes pairs beautifully with a meaty fish like swordfish.
- A **white Burgundy** with a touch of oak and earth tones will work well with a lean piece of grilled chicken.
- And don't forget the veggies! Try a **Niigata junmai ginjo saké** that's medium dry with a soft finish for a clean, crisp addition to your meal.



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*A graduate of The Art Institute in Colorado, chef Akira Back trained with chefs Nobu Matsuhisa, Masaharu Morimoto and Kenichi Kanada before opening Yellowtail Japanese Restaurant & Lounge, Chef Akira Back, a Wine Enthusiast Best 100 Wine Restaurant, at the Bellagio in Las Vegas.*