



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph Weaver is a former captain in a Michelin-starred restaurant and an avid photographer who set out to find a solution for breakage of china in fine-dining restaurants. Little did he know as he set out to join broken pieces of pottery that by melding his creative passions, he was striking out on a brand-new journey. He shares his story of following a new creative interest and transforming into an accomplished kintsugi artisan.

THE PRECIOUS SCARS OF KINTSUGI

BY JOSEPH WEAVER

*A fracture that's healed
becomes its greatest source of pride.
There's now a bright highlight
where once there was only broken space.*

I've been a photographer for a long time. Longer than I can remember. What I find interesting about being behind a camera is that you're not really creating something, your role is more of an interpreter. You can share what you see with others, and you can appreciate its beauty from where you stand. But at the end of the day, the subject is the subject whether or not you are there. There is a landscape, a flower, a bowl of food, no matter if anyone is there to photograph it. If a plate of lobster sits in front of a diner without a camera, does it still taste as

sweet? It does. It's still there, no matter if I am. As the photographer I just capture one moment of its existence.

But the photographer does have a role as an artist. By capturing the landscape, or the flower, or the lobster, we are making that moment known to future observers. We are sharing its fleeting existence and adding our own eye. We dodge and burn the image, modify it in the darkroom or on Photoshop. We have the power to cover up imperfections in the image, to cut out what parts of it we don't like. Our medium is silver gelatin, or digital pixels, which are almost infinitely editable. We interpret the realities of what may be in front of us to make it more beautiful.



Maybe there are two kinds of artist. There are creators and then there are interpreters. Think about the monks who spent their lives illuminating manuscripts. The words they were working with existed before them. They took those words from a holy text and they made them beautiful. They added their own interpretation of how that book should look, how it should be read. The creator was whoever penned those lines, the interpreter made them visually attractive. To me, both roles are important for contributing to what we consider beautiful.

The other art that I've pursued is called kintsugi. Very basically, it's the art of fixing broken ceramics with lacquers and precious metals. It's more of an interpretive role. The ceramicist is the original creator of a piece, and I only get involved if it breaks. The ceramicist is the writer of a beautiful text, the creator of something new in the world. I am an interpreter. I am taking the subject – a piece that exists, that was created out of nothing – and reimagining it. The broken pieces are brought together with glue and gold into something new, my interpretation of the original piece, which existed before I ever touched it.

It's not a perfect parallel. I haven't found the perfect parallel for kintsugi. It's a complex art form with a long history. As far as my research has led me, it originated in Japan in the 15th century. There was a shōgun, Ashikaga Yoshimasa, who sent a broken teacup to China, where it had been made, to be rebuilt. It came back to him mended in the style of the time, using thick metal staples to keep the pieces of ceramics held together. This lacked a certain grace in his eyes, and he tasked his artisans with coming up with a new method.

Kintsugi means "to join with gold." That's what they started doing with broken pottery, often ceramics used in the tea ceremony. The method that they developed piggybacked off of Japan's history for lacquerware which involved using resin



from the Lacquer Tree, *Toxicodendron vernicifluum*. That resin, called urushi, acts as an incredibly strong binding agent if it is cured and oxidized correctly. When the urushi is dry, a layer of colorful powder, usually gold, is sprinkled on. This becomes the illumination of the fracture.

Urushi-based kintsugi became a celebrated art form in Japan, most associated with the tea ceremony. It's a way to transform broken pottery into something imperfectly beautiful. Urushi though is a concentrated source of urushiol, a toxic compound also found in poison ivy and poison oak. Working with urushi can be hazardous to the skin and lungs if it isn't cured properly. Plates that aren't perfectly cured are unsafe to use. The poison can remain on the surface. Because of the danger, most kintsugi is art, and rarely used in kitchens.

I started to learn about the art of kintsugi almost a decade ago. I was working as a Captain at Quince in San Francisco. Now it has three Michelin stars, at the time it had one. Chef Michael Tusk was running an incredibly tight restaurant, aiming to be one of the best in the city.

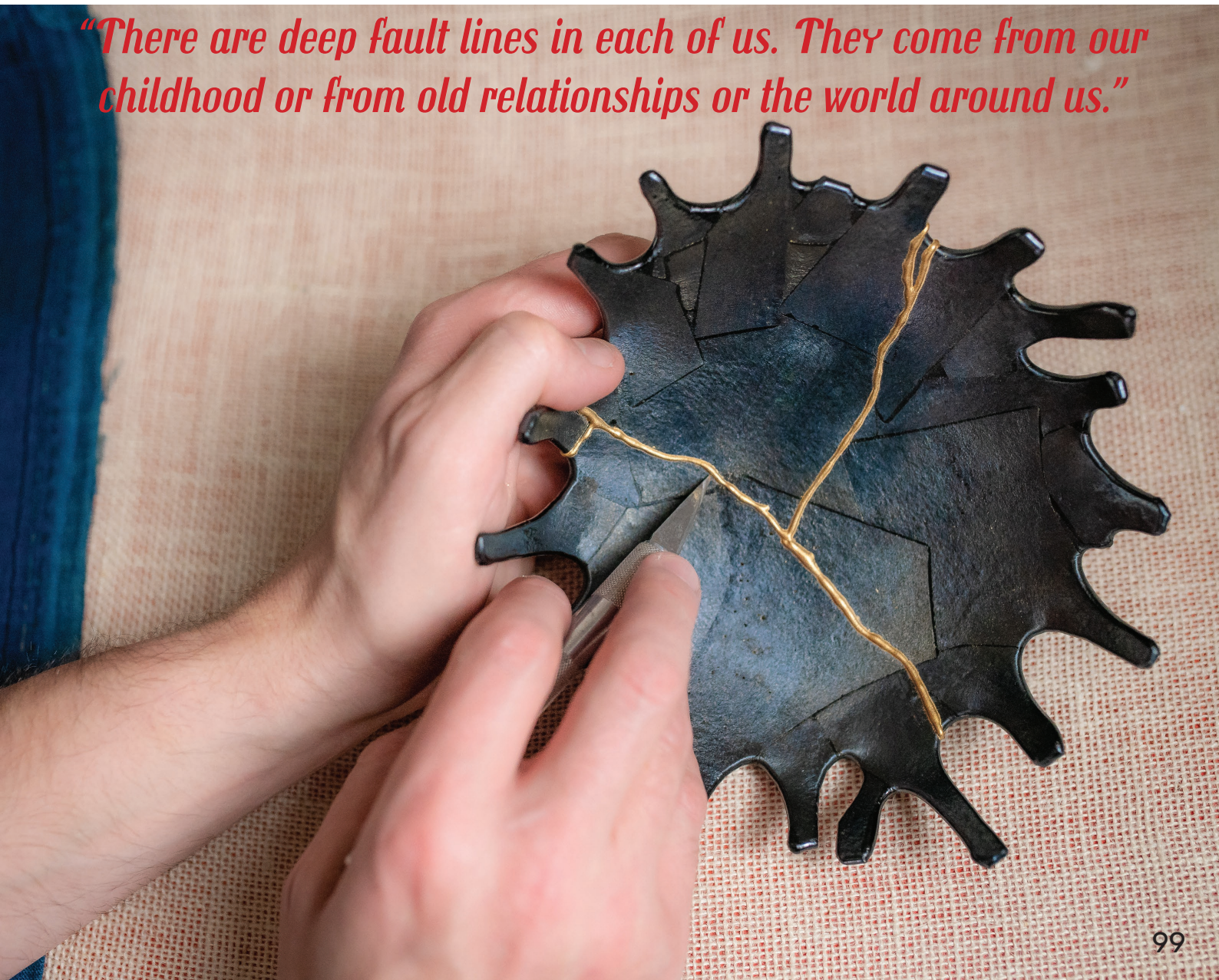
He brought in beautiful ceramics for his dishes. As at all restaurants, breakage was a problem. It's a really negative thing at restaurants, especially when they're using really expensive plateware. We, like many restaurants, had a place to record breakages. There are very good reasons for doing this, but regardless the staff always starts looking at these as a "Log of Shame." It creates this sort of culture of fear – no one wanted to be ostracized by their coworkers or written up for breaking a handmade bowl. It becomes a reputation thing.

One day, Mike brought a bag of broken ceramics to a staff meeting and laid them out on a table. He has a background as a visual artist, so he suggested the only thing to do with these once-valuable

objects was an art installation. I started imagining what could be done to resurrect these beautiful pieces with nowhere to go. I had seen pieces in museums as well as DIY attempts on social media. I decided to start working on it myself.

Kintsugi is a method that people can take their entire lives to master. I thought about apprenticing with someone in Japan, which is the best way to deeply understand the traditional approach. But I also thought, maybe there's a different way to do it – while still adhering to the traditional philosophy behind it. I knew the end result of what I wanted. I just needed to figure out how to get there. I took it on as a complete neophyte. For a long time it was like feeling around in the dark. I tested out hundreds of different materials, adhesives, epoxies,

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colors, trying to replicate the style. I ended up creating a new formula and a new process for what I needed. Some of the main lacquers I use are actually custom-made for me, it's strong enough to go under a salamander, through a wash, be heated up to 650oF. This is a new approach to an old art.

In 2015 I started working at Saison in San Francisco. The chef, Joshua Skenes, was constantly pushing us, pushing himself to be better. He brought in some of the best product in the world, and served it on some of its most beautiful, profound ceramics. He favored two artists in particular, Jin Yamanaka from outside of Tokyo, and Lynn Mahon from Napa. Each piece they make is a work of art. Each one is also incredibly fragile – Jin's especially, some of it feels almost like a piece of paper.

One day during service at Saison, the Chef de Cuisine, Scott Clark, mentioned to me in passing that Joshua was looking for someone to pursue kintsugi for Saison. Joshua recently told me his own thoughts on why. "It started because not only do I find it even more beautiful than the original plates, it was also a way to salvage our tableware that was ridiculously expensive and precious in the sense that it took a craftsperson months to make. I hated the idea of letting all that effort and money go to waste." I completely agree. I've seen some incredible, unique masterpieces that otherwise would go into the trash. It's not just wasteful, it's painful. Imagine throwing away a Van Gogh because the canvas cracked. It just doesn't make sense.

With my prior experience with kintsugi, I felt up for the challenge. I began fixing pieces that broke at Saison. This became an amazing platform for my work. I can't think of many restaurants that would be crazy enough to hire someone for this purpose – the process is so time consuming that it's often far cheaper just to buy a new piece. I also was able to contribute to the culture of the restaurant. At Quince and at Saison,



just like at many high-end restaurants around the world, there is intense pressure to perform. Part of my job now became to relieve that pressure. When I fix a broken plate, there is no longer judgment aimed at the server or cook who broke it. There's no longer need for a Log of Shame. Instead, we are all part of a transformation, the life cycle of a piece. Sometimes a plate will break again and I will have another chance to work on it. I know this plate, I've had a history with it, I can see the breaks on it and I can remember the hours I've spent on it. It feels almost like an old friend coming home to tell me their story.

When I was younger, I believed that perfection is what comes out of the factory, looking flawless just like everything else. As soon as it's damaged, it's become null. Any utility it may have had is now gone. Now I think that perfection is a moving target. At the end of the day, perfect is not truly attainable. But I know what is not perfect: objects that come straight out of a factory. They are a blank slate, an object in a state of floating out in the ether. They are not interesting. It is actually only when an object in that state breaks that its true history is revealed. That's when it becomes something more than it was at its birth. That's when you can start to see it for what it is.

Much of the beauty and tradition of kintsugi is rooted in the Japanese concept of wabi sabi. Wabi means poverty, but it also means humble and simple. Sabi means solitude, but also the beauty that time gives to something or someone, like the weathering of an old object. The core of wabi sabi is a recognition of beauty in what is imperfect and impermanent. There's a sense of comfort and wonder in the whole lifecycle. An object may be born beautiful but may also find a deeper beauty in a state of fracture or repair. Death may come, but with it is the opportunity for an even more striking rebirth.

Kintsugi to me is one of the most visually stunning representations of wabi sabi. It accentuates the damage done to an object: a fracture becomes a point of pride, showcasing the beauty of its history. I will sometimes look at a new piece of ceramics and be uninterested in it. It might be a well-designed and well-made piece, but it has no inherent energy for me. Sometimes I will look at a crack, though, and see something profound. I studied math in college and I still see the world as matrices. The intrinsic structure of an object often only will reach its truth when its natural state, and its inherent weaknesses, are revealed. Those weaknesses are a path to an even more profound state. The scars themselves become precious.

I don't think I'm overly romanticizing the beauty in kintsugi. I have seen time and time again that there is something alluring about the art to other people. Sometimes when I am in service at Saison I will put down four plates for a table, each with the same dish from the kitchen. The only different is that one of the plates was rebuilt with kintsugi. Invariably everyone at the table notices the rebuilt plate first. The quiet, undeclared beauty of the fracture line draws people in. They see what I see: beauty in the imperfect.

In a way, kintsugi provides additive value to a ceramic. I recently worked with a ceramicist from Los Angeles who was putting a show together for a gallery in





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San Francisco. A few of the pieces broke while travelling. The artist reached out to me to see if I wanted to work on them. The broken pieces, the ones that I fixed with kintsugi, sold out almost immediately. Instead of throwing away the pieces, or needing to re-fire them, we were able to make something more, create something new. In this way, like a photographer with a beautiful subject, or a monk illuminating a well-constructed text, I am a collaborator, the role of the interpreter who can add value to something already beautiful.

Recently, I was contacted by a man who had a set of priceless antique German ceramic mugs from the 19th century. His young daughter had broken one of the cups while playing. The father told me that she was inconsolable – she was filled with shame for having broken something so meaningful to her father. The man himself was inwardly frustrated that his priceless mug was broken, but he also didn't want

that frustration to bleed out and make his daughter even more ashamed. He knew of my work, and sent me the broken pieces. After fixing it and sending it back, I heard from the man that not only was the cup more aesthetically beautiful than it had been before. It also helped heal their relationship. The cup was no longer a source of anger and shame. It had become a new point of connection.

This sort of profound interpersonal change to me is the true value of kintsugi. From what I've seen in my time working at Saison, and now as a captain at Joshua's new restaurant, kintsugi has the power to change restaurant culture. There can be so many toxic aspects of restaurants, especially when perfection is the ultimate goal. This small artistic and practical addition to the restaurant, something as simple as gluing plates back together, has created a more profound cultural shift. It can make a restaurant a less worrisome

place to work. There is nothing negative about breakage now. Sometimes it's even almost positive – we are all part of a story of birth and rebirth, each of us an integral part in the lifecycle of the object.

I also have felt a deep shift in my own self through the process of learning about and practicing kintsugi. This was a difficult couple of years for me on a personal level. I buried myself in learning more about the art, pursuing an ever-greater understanding of it. It became a source of stability for my mind and for my soul as I worked to rebuild. I was able to see the fractures for what they were, and in a way illuminate them. I'm stronger for it.

There are deep fault lines in each of us. They come from our childhood or from old relationships or from the world around us. We go through life and collect our broken

pieces, but it's not easy to figure out how to fix them. I think there's something profound to be learned from kintsugi, from the ideas of wabi sabi. If we can take those fractures and illuminate them – highlight them with gold, let them shine – we can be more resilient. Some of the pieces I've worked on I've seen broken three, four, five times. Never is the break in the same place. Every time I fix a piece, it gets stronger. Maybe it's not getting more perfect, but I know that it's getting more beautiful.

