

food forum

Kikkoman's quarterly intercultural forum for the exchange of ideas on food

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Shojin Ryori

History

This new series explores the complexities of the deceptively simple plant-based Buddhist cuisine shojin ryori, beginning with its historical context.

—
by Shoshi Takanashi

Shojin ryori is Buddhist cuisine made entirely using plant-based foods. Cooks select their ingredients from among vegetables, edible wild plants, seaweeds and grains, while avoiding meat and fish products. How does *shojin ryori* differ from vegetarian food, one might ask? The origins of *shojin ryori* began in Buddhist temples, thus the cuisine itself is fundamentally characterized by religious elements.

Religious roots and practice

Buddhism, one of the world's major religions, was founded about 2,500 years ago in ancient India by Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, who drew up a list of precepts that believers were expected to follow as a guide to their faith. According to those precepts, which were intended to distance believers from desires related to possessions and wealth, those

who pursued religious training were forbidden to engage in labor, which included cooking. In order to feed themselves, devotees practiced mendicancy, making the rounds of the homes of believers in Buddhism to receive offerings of food. It was a time of widespread turmoil with many wars and conflicts among small countries, and amid the strife, no one could be particular about what kind of food might be received. They ate whatever they were fortunate enough to be given. In those early days of Buddhism, therefore, the concept of *shojin ryori* did not exist. The custom of mendicancy is still practiced by some Buddhist groups in Southeast Asia even today.

Buddhism later spread to China, where it gained a widespread following and eventually split into various sects based on varying interpretations and policies regarding the original teachings. The number of followers who went through

religious training greatly increased to the point that obtaining enough food by begging for alms proved infeasible; temples found it increasingly difficult to sustain themselves.

One of the sects, Zen, underwent a major change in its interpretation of the received doctrine. The doctrine had forbidden monks to engage in labor, but the Zen sect lifted this restriction by altering its own interpretation, wherein certain essential labors, such as cleaning, maintenance and field work, were referred to as *samu* (work/task), considered important forms of religious training. At the same time, zazen seated meditation was positioned as the center of that discipline training; monks were expected to follow the teachings of the Buddha with the body and the mind as a whole.

Allowing practitioners to gather food and cook whatever they wanted to eat, however, would have greatly diverged from

the purpose of training intended to control human desires. The sect therefore developed its own rigorous rules of conduct, part of which prescribed the ingredients to be used for cooking and various instructions for preparing food. These instructions stipulated the appointment of a *tenzo*, or head of kitchen. Restrictions on ingredients extended to certain pungent vegetables; for example, garlic, Chinese chives, long onions and round onions were forbidden for causing bad breath and arousing unnecessary energies in the body. Thus the Zen sect came to regard cooking not simply as a daily chore, but as an important form of spiritual training—and this brought *shojin ryori* into being.

Shojin spirit

Even before the introduction of Buddhism here in the sixth century, Japan had a long tradition of purifying the mind and body through ablutions and simple eating. This purification, called *kessai*, derives from Shinto observances; food related to *kessai* is essentially vegetarian. The influence of Buddhist philosophy during the sixth-century Asuka period prompted Emperor Tenmu to issue a decree in 675 banning the consumption of meat. Surprisingly, that ban was upheld for about 1,200 years—at least, ostensibly—until early in the Meiji era (1868-1912). A vegetarian diet had become well-established among common people, resulting in a sort of secular *shojin ryori*. Their diet, however, should probably be more accurately described as “vegetarian food.” The meaning of *shojin* in Buddhism is to make an “effort” and “progress” in pursuit of the Buddha’s teachings. Food prepared or consumed without such commitment could not be labeled as *shojin*, even if it consisted of only plant-based ingredients.

During the Kamakura period (1185-1333), the Japanese Zen master Dogen traveled to China and studied Zen Buddhism. He learned the essence of Zen through

the role of *tenzo*, assuming responsibilities for food preparation as a form of religious training. Master Dogen later authored *Tenzo Kyokun* instructions for Zen cooking, which include important teachings on spiritual discipline acquired through cooking, as well as guidelines for food preparation. With this instruction, Zen temples in Japan became central to the steady development of *shojin ryori*.

Enterprises specialized in serving food and drink have to run a profitable business. Even in a household, there are many tasks



Japanese Zen master Dogen (1200-1253)
Courtesy of Eiheiji

to be performed, limiting the time that can be devoted to cooking alone. In the temples, however, monks in charge of preparing meals had no need to stint on the amount of time they spent trying new methods and developing new recipes, as this was perceived as spiritual training. They could lavish as much time and effort as they thought was needed. Thanks to this *shojin* spirit—an assiduous devotion to cuisine, no doubt enhanced by Japanese sensibilities and manual dexterity—they made improvements in cooking

techniques and implements, and so developed a wide variety of *shojin ryori* recipes.

Preparation and presentation

Over long centuries of relative peace throughout Japan during the Edo period (1603-1867), various societal rituals became customary. For instance, during Buddhist memorial services for funerals or death anniversaries, after visiting the gravesite following sutra readings, participants partake of *shojin ryori* to commemorate the deceased. This tradition has become the norm, just as serving *shojin ryori* on tray tables used at such gatherings, and the menu itself, are now well-established. These customs were viewed as a means of offering solace to the deceased and were interpreted as what Buddhism considers part of training in Buddhist teachings, making the meal not simply “vegetarian,” but *shojin ryori*.

Today in Japan, Zen monks prepare *shojin ryori* every day in temple kitchens and dine in that style. Although there are limited opportunities for those outside this practice to dine on temple cuisine, it is still the custom to serve *shojin ryori* at memorial services, so almost everyone in Japan is familiar with this cuisine. 🍱

Photo on page 2

The *shojin ryori* pictured on the preceding page reflects the spring equinox. Seasonal dishes include (clockwise from left): rice with kidney beans; simmered *nagaimo* yam; green pea *chakin-shibori* dessert; boiled canola flower-buds and *shimeji* mushrooms with vinegared miso; a green pea dumpling in dashi soup; cabbage pickles at center.

On the cover Ripe strawberries, featured in Spirit of the Seasons, page 5; and simmered turnip stuffed with burdock root, carrot, spinach and *yuba*.

Author's profile

Shoshi Takanashi was born in 1972. Currently head priest at Soto Zen temple Eifukuji in Gunma Prefecture, he is also a specialist in *shojin ryori* and studies the spirit and techniques of this cuisine. From 2001-2005, he served at Daihonzan Eiheiji Tokyo Betsuin Chokokuji Temple, where he was *tenzo* (head of kitchen). His publications include *Hajimete no Shojin Ryori: Kiso kara Manabu Yasai no Ryori* (Beginner's guide to *shojin ryori*: basics of vegetable cooking; 2013).

Kintsugi

Regarded as both a craft and an art form, *kintsugi* is a centuries-old Japanese technique for repairing broken ceramics. The term *kintsugi* means “gold seams,” a process involving patching chips, cracks and shards with lacquer and powdered gold. Japanese lacquer, made from refined lacquer tree sap, is a natural resin with durable, water-resistant adhesive properties. This is used to fill in and re-join damaged areas, which are then dusted with powdered gold—literally illuminating the repair, rather than hiding it. Indeed, *kintsugi* restorations are intended to highlight flaws and draw attention to the beauty that lies in imperfection—a reflection of Japanese aesthetics.

While lacquer was used to join pieces of broken earthenware as early as some 9,000 years ago, the origins of *kintsugi* are thought to have sprung from the repair of precious ware used in the tea ceremony, which became popular around the fifteenth century.

Kintsugi evolved beyond the simple mending of a broken vessel into the creation of new and unique artistic forms, and came to be appreciated as a way of honoring the history and emotional value of a cherished teacup or bowl.

The specialized, time-intensive *kintsugi* process takes months to complete and is carried out by a lacquer artist or professional *kintsugi* craftsman—yet its influence has expanded beyond traditional applications. In recent years, *kintsugi* has been incorporated into the practice of some contemporary artists and, as it gains wider recognition both in Japan and overseas, the trend has sparked a global market for simplified home kits and workshops. While *kintsugi* is unique to Japan, the concept is now being applied not

Kintsugi embodies sustainability



Kintsugi repair work

only to ceramics, but to glass, jewelry and even furniture around the world, thus infusing a distinctively Japanese aesthetic into otherwise unrelated objects.

The embodiment of sustainability, *kintsugi* is a subtle response to society's consumerism, in that it avoids waste by extending the life of vessels, particularly those that may have personal meaning. Furthermore, as *kintsugi* draws greater awareness, its embrace of imperfection has also become a metaphor for resilience and recovery. ◆



The delicate *kintsugi* process



A tea bowl takes on new beauty.

Nukazuke

This year, *Fundamentals 101* looks at Japanese tsukemono pickled vegetables and their various preparation techniques, starting with nukazuke fermented pickles.



Nukazuke pickles are made using *nuka* rice bran, the powdered hulls resulting from the polishing of brown rice. Fresh vegetables are pickled for several hours or even days in pickling paste called *nuka-miso*, which is made by fermenting a mixture of *nuka*, salt and water. Fermentation takes place thanks to lactic acid bacteria and yeast which break down sugars and proteins in the vegetables. This fermentation in turn generates glutamic acid, the component of umami, which imparts the distinctive taste of mild acidity and natural sweetness in *nukazuke*. The *nuka-miso* fermentation bed is placed inside a lidded container where it matures over time and, with care and attention, can be reused for many years. In the past, individual households had their own signature *nuka-miso* bed passed down from generation to generation, resulting in each family's pickles having a unique taste. ◆

Making and care of *nuka-miso*

To make *nuka-miso*, place rice bran, salt and water in a container and mix well to encourage fermentation. Chili peppers (for antiseptic purposes), and kelp (for umami) may be added. The *nuka-miso* requires careful attention to sustain and balance its fermentation agents. Mix the *nuka-miso* by hand once a day, shifting the *nuka-miso* on the bottom of the container to the surface repeatedly. Store the container in a cool dark place or refrigerator.



Preparing *nukazuke*

Rub salt over the vegetables before placing them in the *nuka-miso*. Cover them completely with *nuka-miso* then flatten the surface of the *nuka-miso* bed. After a few hours, overnight, or longer, take out the now-pickled vegetables (*nukazuke*); flatten and press down the surface of the bed to expel air after removing them. Wipe off excess *nuka-miso* from the *nukazuke*, rinse under cold water and cut into bite-size pieces. A few drops of soy sauce may be applied to enhance flavor.



Nukazuke

Strawberries



Cake with strawberries

Strawberries, pictured on our cover, are one of Japan's most popular fruits. At one time, they were grown outdoors from March to May, but now most are raised in greenhouses throughout Japan and enjoy an expanded season from December into May. Strawberry-studded sponge cake laden with whipped cream is a culinary Christmas tradition in Japan, and demand for the luscious berries increases around year-end and the New Year's holidays.

Japanese strawberries are characterized by their large size, sweetness, and the fact that they are best eaten fresh—in fact, this country's fresh strawberry consumption is the highest in the world. Japan also tops the number of cultivated varieties, numbering some 300, as from around the year 2000 many regions began to develop their own local brands. Major regional producers are Tochigi Prefecture, the birthplace of Tochtome, a pioneering variety in Japan; and Fukuoka Prefecture, with its Amaou variety. New cultivars continue to yield new varieties. One of the latest successes includes the Tochi-Aika variety from Tochigi, characterized by its enhanced sweetness and low acidity.

Japan's delicate strawberries are always packed in special containers, and as they are becoming better-known overseas for their superb quality, exports have increased in recent years, particularly within Asia. ◆

Ginger Pork with Oyster Sauce

Serves 3

490 kcal
Protein 30.3 g
Fat 34.1 g
(per serving)

Ginger sauce

- 2 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1 ½ T oyster sauce
- 3 T sake
- 3 T Kikkoman Manjo Mirin*
- 2 T ginger, peeled and grated

- 400-450 g / approx. 1 lb. pork shoulder
in 2-3 mm- / 0.1 in.-thin slices
- 1/2 T vegetable oil
- 3 C iceberg lettuce, cut in 1.2 cm /
1/2 in. strips
- Mix of tangy leafy greens and
sprouts; e.g., arugula, cress, mizuna



Ginger pork, a popular Japanese dish, is typically made with a sauce of grated ginger, soy sauce, sake and mirin; the use of oyster sauce here creates richness and complexity. Instead of the usual accompaniment of shredded cabbage, the pork is served atop a mixture of fresh lettuce and piquant baby leaves so that the diner can first appreciate the robust, gingery meat alone, and then experience the well-balanced flavor of the pork accented by crisp leaves.

- 1 Mix together the ingredients for the ginger sauce in a bowl and set aside.
- 2 Cut the thin-sliced pork into 5-7 cm- / 2-2.5 in.-wide pieces.
- 3 Heat vegetable oil in a 26 cm / 10 in. non-stick frying pan and cook half of the pork quickly over medium-high heat until the meat is just cooked; remove from pan. Cook the remaining pork slices in the same way and remove.
- 4 Pour the ginger sauce into the frying pan and heat over high heat. When it starts to bubble, return all the pork slices to the pan; mix the meat with the sauce until it is well-coated.
- 5 Remove meat from the pan. Lower heat to medium and reduce the remaining sauce in the pan by half, or until the sauce consistency becomes slightly syrupy.
- 6 Arrange a mixture of lettuce, leafy greens and sprouts on a serving plate. Place the pork on top of the leaves and pour the reduced ginger sauce over the meat.

* May substitute 3 T sake + 1 T granulated sugar for mirin

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto

1 C (U.S. cup) = approx. 240 ml; 1 T = 15 ml; 1 t = 5 ml



Oyster sauce

Oyster sauce is commonly used as a seasoning in Chinese cuisine. Made of condensed oyster extract, it adds a distinctive sweet-savory depth to meat, seafood and vegetable dishes. Kikkoman sells oyster sauce products in Japan and overseas.





Kikkoman Singapore Plant Hosts High School Students

A plant tour introducing Japanese food science and culture



Students from NUS High School of Math & Science

In November 2024, KIKKOMAN (S) PTE LTD (KSP), Kikkoman's production base in Singapore, and KIKKOMAN MARKETING & PLANNING ASIA PTE. LTD. (KMPA), our R&D base, provided students from the NUS High School of Math & Science with an opportunity to visit the KSP plant.

In order to promote the school's policy of STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Mathematics) Education, the Japanese language classes run a holiday program called "JAPAN WEEK" with the support of a foundation overseen by the Japanese Chamber of Commerce & Industry, Singapore. JAPAN WEEK provides valuable cultural learning opportunities for Japanese language students, allowing them to experience Japanese culture and interact with Japanese companies and schools. KSP organized this plant tour to support the program and provide educational initiatives for students, thus raising awareness of both the Kikkoman brand and food manufacturing in Singapore.

Eighteen Japanese-language students and two teachers from NUS High School participated in the plant tour. The interactive half-day event involved quiz-style events and discussions, as well as an introduction to KSP, a presentation on soy sauce production and a tasting of Kikkoman Group products.



Kikkoman plant tour



Tasting Kikkoman products

Comments from KSP and KMPA staff attending the tour included: "I was impressed by students' curiosity about Japanese seasonings and food culture. Their interest in food production was greater than I had imagined, based on their questions and comments about food science and technology." Participating students commented positively about Kikkoman; for example, "I gained a deeper understanding of the company," and "I am interested in food science and would like to learn more about Kikkoman." Other participants expressed admiration for Japan's unique culture and commitment to technology with remarks such as, "I felt Japanese hospitality when I saw how kind and courteous the employees were," and "I was impressed by the use of cutting-edge technology to produce Kikkoman Soy Sauce, a traditional Japanese seasoning, outside of Japan."

We believe this event helped to encourage a greater understanding and appreciation of Japan. In accordance with the Kikkoman Group's management principle, "To become a company whose existence is meaningful to global society," KSP and KMPA will continue to place importance on communication with young people and others in the surrounding communities, aiming to promote community-based corporate activities and plant operations while enhancing brand awareness. 🍡



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