

food forum

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Shojin Ryori

Intrinsic Flavors

This second part in our series describes the complexities and commitment involved in making this traditional plant-based Buddhist cuisine.

—
by Shoshi Takanashi

Vegetables used in *shojin ryori*

Many people have the unfortunate impression that *shojin ryori* is rather bland. But on the contrary, in the hands of a well-trained and skillful chef, this cuisine is full of rich and robust flavors.

Natural taste

Shojin ryori is prepared using only plant-based ingredients such as vegetables, edible wild plants, seaweed products, grains and so on—in other words, no meat, fish or other animal ingredients are used. Inevitably, its flavors may not be as rich and strong if meat or fish were to be used, as plant-based elements naturally lean toward a lighter taste. When dining on *shojin ryori*, the true taste experience can be best appreciated if one does not compare it to the standards of ordinary fare. With *shojin ryori*, the natural taste of the ingredients themselves must be regarded as the standard for

goodness. A carrot just pulled from the earth, for example, is extremely sweet. Rice is sweet. Do we really know the fresh taste of a just-picked cucumber, daikon or cob of corn?

Shojin ryori does not employ strong seasonings or heavy sauces that may override the true flavors of individual ingredients. Rather, this cuisine focuses on extracting their distinctive and intrinsic flavors and seeks to communicate that essence. Flavor acquired in such a way is referred to as *tan-mi*; literally, “light flavor.” *Tan-mi* represents a kind of ideal concept that goes beyond the five basic flavors set out in principles of Japanese cuisine referred to as *Gomi, Goho, Goshoku*: Five Flavors, Five Methods, Five Colors (see diagram). *Tan-mi* is what seekers of enlightenment strive to achieve in their daily devotion to Zen precepts. Neither insipid nor lacking in flavor, the elusive notion of *tan-mi* goes beyond “light flavor”: it is the result of

drawing out the essential quality of each ingredient.

Essential stock

The fundamental procedure that is indispensable in eliciting that inherent nature is the creation of dashi stock. Soaking kombu and/or dried shiitake mushrooms in water overnight creates what is called *ichiban-dashi*, or “primary stock.” This is a clear liquid with a beautiful tawny tint and refined umami. It also has a pleasant aroma, so it is used for dishes such as clear soups and vinegared salads, where the flavor of the dashi can be savored directly. *Niban-dashi*, or “secondary stock,” is made by slowly simmering the same kombu/shiitake that was used in making the *ichiban-dashi* stock in a fresh pot of water. Umami-rich *niban-dashi* can be used in the preparation of dishes that possess comparatively stronger tastes; for example, foods prepared with oil, or recipes that involve the addition of miso

or mustard. Just as when constructing the foundation of a building, if these two basic dashi stocks are not prepared well, they cannot draw out the flavors of the ingredients at their fullest strength. Therefore, properly prepared *ichiban-* and *niban-dashi* are essential when making *shojin ryori*. Using the dashi as the starting point, taste can then be adjusted using appropriate amounts of mirin, soy sauce and/or salt, whose respective umami elements interact to create flavors with depth that, although ostensibly simple, are quite complex.

Distinctive variations

Beyond the concepts and applications of flavor, as described above, the classic *shojin ryori* menu is predicated on the aforementioned principles of *Gomi, Goho, Goshoku*. Appropriate balance and combinations of these flavors, methods and colors are taken into consideration to prevent food from being bland and monotonous. *Shojin ryori* menus are carefully planned, based on these principles, so as to achieve distinct variations in combinations within each dish, within each course of the meal, every day.

Outside a Zen temple, one may notice a stone pillar carved with the words, "Stimulants and alcoholic drinks are prohibited within these premises." "Stimulants" refers to pungent ingredients that unnecessarily arouse the energies of the body. These include, for example, Chinese chives, garlic, and long and round onions. Along with alcoholic drinks, such foods are unnecessary for those practicing Zen in temples, and are therefore not used in *shojin ryori*. (Sake that has been heated and dealcoholized may, however, be used in cooking.)

Principles of *Gomi, Goho, Goshoku*

Gomi Five Flavors	Goho Five Methods	Goshoku Five Colors
Sweet	Boil	Green
Sour	Bake	Yellow
Bitter	Steam	Red
Salty	Fry	White
Spicy	Raw	Black



Mekabu root of wakame seaweed and nameko mushroom clear soup



Stir-fried lotus root and kombu

Spiritual process

Finally, the most important point in making *shojin ryori* is the spiritual mindset of the person who is cooking the cuisine. *Shojin ryori* is not about the creation of "fine taste" in a gourmet sense; one must not seek out a so-called gourmet food experience. If too much emphasis is placed on pursuing an elevated sense of taste or "deliciousness," that notion then becomes an unattainable desire, which can descend into a form of greed: two concepts

which, in Buddhist tradition, are believed to obstruct one's path toward the right way of living and, ultimately, enlightenment.

What *shojin ryori* aspires to, rather, is a commitment to carefully and resourcefully bringing out the flavors of available ingredients in ways that result, quite simply, in good taste. In other words, the crucial difference between ordinary cooking and *shojin ryori* is the spiritual process experienced by the individual preparing the food, a process that involves focusing on the ingredients without distraction, rather than aiming for the fulfillment of any personal desires.

And so, while the resulting flavors may resemble those in "ordinary cooking," what is significant is the spiritual experience that informs the preparation process. For the cook, recognition and acceptance of this distinction are what transform kitchen work into an integral element of *shojin*—part of one's progress toward an understanding of Zen teachings. ■

On the cover Fresh melon, featured in Spirit of the Seasons, page 5; and kombu and dried shiitake used for preparing dashi stock.

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).

Hiyashi Chuka

Chilled Chinese Noodles

Each year, summer in Japan is heralded by the arrival of colorful *hiyashi chuka*—literally, “chilled Chinese noodles.” This refreshing dish involves cold ramen noodles garnished with a selection of julienned vegetables, ham and omelet, all topped with a light, sweetened vinegar-soy sauce or a richer sesame sauce.

Although its name suggests Chinese origins, *hiyashi chuka* was conceived in Japan in the 1930s-1940s in restaurants specializing in Chinese cuisine. Preparation calls for repeatedly rinsing boiled noodles and chilling them down in cold or ice water to remove excess starch and firm them up. These rinsing and cooling steps are not typical of traditional Chinese cuisine, affirming that *hiyashi chuka* is one of Japan's more uniquely inventive dishes.

By the 1960s, *hiyashi chuka* was broadly accepted throughout the country and had become a standard summer menu item. Although ramen soup noodles are well-known for their regional distinctions and creative variants, most *hiyashi chuka* involve similar ingredients and styles nationwide—only the name differs, depending on region. In Hokkaido it is called “chilled ramen,” while in central Kansai region one orders *reimen* “cold noodles.” And while this refreshing dish originated in response to the hotter months,

Refreshing,
uniquely
inventive noodles

some restaurants now serve it year-round by popular demand.

Upscale Chinese restaurants might offer it topped with pricey ingredients like lobster or crab, and diners can seek out artisanal *hiyashi chuka* with colorful specialty noodles, such as those kneaded with seaweed or spinach. More economical options available at casual eateries and ramen shops—just as delicious—typically include processed meats and local vegetables. During summer, markets and convenience stores sell instant and quick-prep *hiyashi chuka* alongside ready-to-eat *hiyashi chuka* bentos.

With so many accessible variations of this well-balanced dish of carbohydrates, protein and vegetables, it's no wonder that *hiyashi chuka* is a true Japanese classic. ◆



Hiyashi chuka with light, sweetened vinegar-soy sauce



Poster “Summer has arrived—*hiyashi chuka* now available”

Shiozuke

Our focus on tsukemono pickled vegetables takes a look at shiozuke salted pickles.



Hakusai-zuke pickled
napa cabbage



Umeboshi pickled plums

Japan's oldest pickling method is called *shiozuke*: simply, *shio* refers to salt, and *zuke* means pickle. *Shiozuke* vegetables and methods vary depending on region, but coarse, mineral-rich sea salt is commonly used. ◆

Hakusai-Zuke Pickled Napa Cabbage

Napa cabbage (*hakusai*) is harvested from late fall to early winter. Fresh napa contains a lot of water: to draw off this moisture, use 2 percent to 4 percent salt per cabbage weight when pickling. Cross-cut at base and divide the cabbage into four large pieces. Set these in the sun for a half-day to reduce water content and bring out natural sweetness. Layer salt on the bottom of a container and arrange alternating layers of napa with salt. Add kombu and red chili pepper and seal with a lid. Place a weight twice that of the cabbage on the lid to press down, and set aside the container in a cool dark place. After a day or two, as water rises above the lid, reduce the lid weight by half. *Hakusai-zuke* is ready to eat after two or three days and can be stored in the refrigerator for about a week.



Napa pickled in a container

Umeboshi Pickled Plums

Umeboshi are made with ripened Japanese *ume* plums (actually a variety of apricot), harvested from mid-June to early July. Pickle the plums with salt in a container covered with a weighted lid and store in a cool dark place for two to four weeks. Remove the plums and place in a colander to dry under the sun for two to three days. Store the dried plums in a fresh airtight container in a cool place or refrigerator for several months. Known for their intense acidity and saltiness, for centuries *umeboshi* have been considered a superfood that counters fatigue and contributes to well-being, thanks to the high citric acid content. They are also valued as a long-lasting emergency food. Healthier low-sodium varieties are now popularly available.



Plums drying in the sun

Melon



Yubari melon

Our cover features melon,

in season from May to July. The fruit grows best in well-drained soil in a climate with significant temperature differences between day and night—conditions found in some parts of Ibaraki, Kumamoto and Hokkaido prefectures, which account for about half the country's melon production.

Over thirty melon varieties are grown throughout Japan. They are categorized primarily by rind (smooth, reticulated), flesh color (light green, orange, white), and cultivation method (greenhouse, outdoors).

Melons with reticulated rinds and light-green or orange flesh are the most widely marketed types, notably the popular green-fleshed muskmelon, prized for its rich, juicy and aromatic sweetness. The Crown melon is perhaps Japan's most recognized gourmet muskmelon: just one fruit on each vine is selected and matured for one hundred days. Hokkaido's luxury brand Yubari is the best-known orange-fleshed variety with a reticulated rind. High-end melons like the Yubari and the Crown are often presented as gifts, each carefully nestled in its own special box. ◆

Eggplant with Fresh Tomato Sauce

Serves 4

259 kcal

Protein 16.6 g

Fat 13.9 g
(per serving)

- 500 g / 1 lb. Japanese eggplants
- 1 t salt*

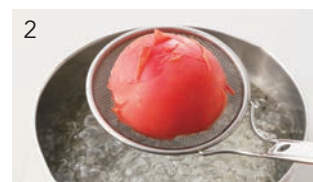
- 500 g / 1 lb. ripe tomatoes
- 2 T pure olive oil
- 1/2 clove garlic cut in half
- 4 T chopped onion
- 4 T chopped green bell pepper

- 20 or more fresh basil leaves,
set aside a few for garnish
- 1/2 t curry powder
- 8-10 cherry tomatoes,
cut in half lengthwise
- 1/4 t dried oregano leaves
- 2 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 3 T extra virgin olive oil
- 12 large shrimp, boiled and peeled
- 12 small fresh mozzarella balls



This Japanese-fusion ratatouille serves up a hint of umami, thanks to its use of soy sauce. The full, rich flavor of summer tomatoes plus a touch of curry powder creates a dish with complexity and depth. It can be served warm over rice or at room temperature as an appetizer with a crispy baguette.

- 1** Remove the stems of the eggplants. Cut into 1.5-2 cm- / 0.6-0.8 in.- cubes. Sprinkle these with salt and set aside for 20 minutes. Squeeze out excess moisture (1).
- 2** Cut a small shallow X on the bottom of the tomato skins. Plunge each tomato separately into boiling water for about 30 seconds or until skins begin to split (2). Transfer immediately to a bowl of cold water then peel. Slice the tomatoes into 1 cm- / 0.4 in.- thick slices.
- 3** Heat ½ T pure olive oil in a frying pan. Sauté the eggplant over medium-low heat until softened, remove and set aside (3). Add 1 ½ T pure olive oil to the same pan to sauté garlic slowly over low heat until fragrant, then remove garlic. Sauté the chopped onion and green bell pepper over low heat until the onion turns transparent.
- 4** Add the sliced tomatoes to the pan and spread evenly to heat over medium heat until softened, then press and crush them with a spatula (4). When tomatoes turn saucy, reduce heat to low. Add torn basil leaves, curry powder and eggplant cubes. Stir occasionally until sauce is reduced.
- 5** Mix in the cherry tomatoes but avoid crushing them. Rub the oregano between the palms of your hands and sprinkle into the sauce (5). Stir in the soy sauce and extra virgin olive oil; adjust amounts to taste. To serve, spoon the sauce onto a serving platter and top with boiled shrimp and mozzarella balls. Garnish with fresh basil leaves.



* Salt amount for eggplant prep is 1 percent salt to eggplant weight; e.g., 500 g eggplant=5 g salt.

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto

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

Japanese eggplant

There are many varieties of eggplant in Japan. The most popular is 12-15 cm (5-6 in.) long with firm, fine-textured flesh that turns soft when cooked. Eggplant is often pre-treated, either with salt to draw out excess moisture and bitterness, or soaked in salted water to prevent discoloration and remove bitterness.





Kikkoman India Hosts Annual Culinary Experts Meetup in Kolkata



Participants in KID's third Annual Culinary Experts Meetup

In March 2025, Kikkoman India Private Limited (KID) hosted its third Annual Culinary Experts Meetup at the Institute of Hotel Management (IHM) in Kolkata. Kikkoman India began operations in 2021 with the mission to place a bottle of Kikkoman Soy Sauce in every kitchen in India.

To enhance its brand presence, KID has held this annual meetup event to generate new ideas and interaction among culinary professionals. This year's participants included professional chefs, restaurateurs, culinary opinion leaders, and students from culinary schools throughout India. Highlights included keynote speeches, a cooking competition, and relevant discussions on food-related topics.

This third annual event focused on the theme, "Evolution of Chinese Cuisine in India—Best Ingredients, Best Skills, Best Know-How." Participants gathered in Kolkata, the birthplace of Chinese cuisine in India, and explored the rich history, current trends and future possibilities of Chinese cuisine. Keynote speeches and panel discussions delved into how Indian-Chinese

cuisine has evolved over the years, and how it has been influenced by local ingredients, consumer preferences and globalization. The event offered an opportunity to consider the importance of enhancing the quality of each dish by refining and elevating flavors using choice ingredients and seasonings, including Kikkoman Soy Sauce.

Chef Ryosuke Tamura, CEO and Executive Chef of Itsuka, a Michelin-starred Chinese restaurant in Japan, presented his original version of the Chinese dish Ran Mian Burning Noodles, which he made using Indian ingredients and Kikkoman Soy Sauce. As a Japanese chef, Chef Tamura shared his approach to Chinese cuisine in that he emphasizes the importance of respecting and enhancing ingredients, rather than overpowering them. He highlighted the skills needed when using Kikkoman Soy Sauce to ensure harmony among flavors.

With its over three hundred years of history, Kikkoman remains committed to India and to the creation of delicious new experiences into the next century. 🍡



Cooking competition



Michelin-starred Chef Ryosuke Tamura prepares his original Ran Mian Burning Noodles.

