food forum

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THE JAPANESE TABLE

Shojin Ryori Temple Cooking

by Shoshi Takanashi

kikkoman

Priests' breakfast served in *oryoki*, right to left: rice porridge, *takuwan* and *umeboshi* pickles, a mixture of sesame seeds and salt

Shojin Ryori

Temple Cooking

In the third part of our series on the traditional plant-based cuisine of shojin ryori, *we examine how this food is served in Buddhist temples in Japan.*

—

by Shoshi Takanashi

In Japan, many zazen seated-meditation halls, known as Zen *dojo*, are situated within the precincts of Buddhist temples. Novice priests entering the Zen Buddhist order are assigned to one of several organizational divisions within the temple, where they assume specific duties. These divisions may include reception, visitor guidance, inventory management, Buddhist services, zazen supervision, and, invariably, kitchen duty. The kitchen division of a temple is referred to as the *tenzoryo*, taking its name from *tenzo*, the person who supervises all kitchen activities.

Serving Buddha

Those priests serving in the temple kitchen prepare a number of different meals. The foremost of these are the offerings: a tray of dishes presented to the principal image or statue of Buddha at the temple, and to the deceased. The kitchen staff arise at first light of dawn, so as to have these offerings laid at the altar before the rest of the priests awaken and assemble for morning prayers. Of course, the Buddha does not actually consume the meal, but it makes no sense for this offering to be simply a decorative formality. As part of their training in Zen practice, the priests prepare what they consider the best possible dishes as an act of piety, dedicated to the being in whom they place their faith and highest respect. After morning services conclude, the tray is taken down from the altar and the highest-ranking priest consumes it in place of the Buddha.

Serving guests

Kitchen staff then prepare meals for visiting worshippers and guests, some of whom may include high-ranking priests from other temples. These meals are served on elevated lacquered tray-tables, and comprise assorted dishes that include simmered and/or dressed seasonal vegetables *(see cover photo)*. Close attention is paid to their appearance and detail, so as to express hospitality and convey respect. The centerpiece of these guest meals is *goma-dofu*, sesame tofu, which is made in a series of deliberate and meditative steps: first, sesame seeds are carefully toasted to bring out their aroma, then ground with mortar and pestle into a very fine powder, which usually takes about an hour. *Kuzu* starch and kombu dashi stock are added to the powdered sesame. The mixture is stirred for another hour in a large pot over low heat as it forms a thick, smooth consistency; it is then poured into a mold and cooled in water overnight. It is finally cut into squares and served with miso sauce and grated wasabi.

While performing the time-consuming processes of grinding and stirring, if the cooks are distracted by unrelated thoughts brought on by fatigue, the *goma-dofu* may lack the proper consistency, so that it cannot be cut into clean shapes. Beautifully shaped blocks of *goma-dofu* result only if the cooks concentrate wholly on their work with the same clarity as if they were practicing zazen in their formal robes. *Goma-dofu* made by a master cook has a firm set shape, yet is very soft and viscous; it yields easily when divided with chopsticks. As soon as it enters the mouth, *goma-dofu* dissolves and releases the rich flavor of sesame.

After removing *goma-dofu* mixture from the pot, the cook is careful to

scrape out any remnants and set them aside. These, along with vegetable trimmings from the preparation of other dishes, are used to make *goma-ae*, a vegetable dish dressed with seasoned ground sesame. Often, it is the food peels and trimmings that contain the greatest concentration of nutrients, and these can be made into tasty dishes that reveal no hint that they were leftovers. One of the characteristics of *shojin ryori* is that very little waste remains.

Serving priests

Finally, most food made in temple kitchens is prepared for the daily meals of the priests. In very large Zen practice halls—at the head temple of a particular school of Buddhism, for example—there may be several hundred mouths to feed. In contrast with those meals served to guests, daily temple fare is composed of only a few very simple dishes, with little attention paid to appearance; yet one can find a refined beauty in these practical, day-to-day meals.

Typical menus might be as follows: for breakfast, rice porridge *(okayu)*, a mixture of salt and sesame seeds as a topping, and a side dish of pickles; at midday, steamed rice mixed with barley *(mugimeshi)*, miso soup, pickles, and one or two side dishes; and for the evening meal, steamed white or mixed rice, miso soup and pickles, accompanied by a few additional dishes. The type and number of dishes vary according to services being performed on a particular day.

Utensils and etiquette

When dining, priests use *oryoki*, a nested stack of five to seven bowls of varying sizes. Each priest has their own stack of bowls. These are usually of lacquered wood, and are wrapped up in a cloth with chopsticks, a spoon, and a spatula. At mealtime, the priest unfolds the cloth and places an appropriate amount of food into each bowl. The term *oryoki* connotes a bowl that corresponds to the appropriate amount of food—or "just enough"—for one person, with no waste. The word itself combines the characters for "receive (just enough)," "amount" and "vessel."

To make *goma-dofu*, toasted, aromatic sesame seeds are ground in a mortar to a very fine powder.

Goma-dofu mixture is stirred for nearly an hour over low heat as it forms a thick, smooth consistency.

Goma-dofu

Before beginning to eat, the priests chant a sutra that commits them to respect the food of which they are to partake, gratitude to those who have prepared it, and a sense of indebtedness to all things in the world. It calls on them to reflect whether, by their actions and behavior, they are worthy of receiving the meal before them, and reminds them that they eat, not to satisfy mere desire, but to maintain their health sufficiently to pursue training.

Zen table manners for priests are very intricate and are expected to be strictly observed. Details extend to every aspect of the meal: the movements and position of one's fingers handling the bowls, the way chopsticks and spoons are held to bring food to the lips, how the wrapping cloth should be folded, the pace of eating, and sounds permitted while eating. At the end of the meal, a small spatula is used to meticulously scrape out any remnants of food that may be left in the bowls. These are consumed, thus ensuring that there is absolutely no waste. It usually takes about one month for priests-in-training to master these forms.

The etiquette for temple meals is elaborated in *Fushuku Hanpo*, "The Dharma of Taking Food," written by Zen master Dogen, the first abbot of Eiheiji Temple. It instructs priests to put on formal robes and sit in the zazen meditation posture during meals, as eating itself is regarded as an important form of training. It calls for asking yourself what you can do to serve others, using the energy received from the food. For priests, each meal is a scene for reflection and renewal of their commitment to the precepts to which they are pledged. In this sense, therefore, preparing food, as well as consuming it, is integral to Buddhist instruction; these activities are not merely processes or tasks, they are training in the true sense of the word, as reflected in the phrase, "Zen training in the kitchen."

On the cover Shine Muscat grapes, featured in Spirit of the Seasons, page 5; and *shojin ryori* for a guest served on elevated lacquer tray-tables.

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).

Kitchen Cars

At lunchtime in Tokyo's office districts, office workers flock to colorful food trucks parked in courtyards and side streets for convenient, fresh-cooked meals. In Japan, these mobile kitchens are called "kitchen cars."

As early as the late eighteenth century, temporary food stalls called *yatai* appeared on the streets of old Edo (Tokyo) selling "fast food" like sushi, tempura and soba noodles. During the post-war period, *yatai* sold inexpensive but filling foods such as ramen and yakitori, before making way for engine-powered mobile-food vehicles. In the nineties, food trucks sold light snack foods in recreation areas and special venues. By the early 2000s, kitchen cars with more sophisticated cooking equipment hit the streets offering menus diverse enough to draw office lunch crowds, especially those with no taste for crowded restaurants or pre-made lunch boxes.

It was the pandemic, however, that helped trigger Japan's current gourmet kitchen car boom. Thanks to a new wave of creative, entrepreneurial chefs, today's trucks offer a mouth-watering variety of reasonably priced cuisines, from Japanese to international to fusion. Foodies can opt for kitchen car BBQ, tacos, kebabs, Thai and Hawaiian foods, and more. While local classics like curry and rice bowls remain popular, truck chefs post their unique concepts on social media, alongside appealing imagery and menus that involve novel recipes plus healthy ingredients.

Japan's kitchen cars are small, thanks to constricted parking, and the fact that such elaborate foods are being made in such tiny kitchens seems almost impossible. Yet truck chefs rely on innovative technology to create authentic food comparable to brick-and-mortar restaurants: one can savor pizza baked in an imported Italian stone oven, or naan made in an authentic tandoor. This mobile-dining trend is making inroads with enthusiastic suburban gastronomes and beyond, as some municipalities are capitalizing on flexible mobility by offering kitchen car rentals for local marketing or regional produce events. Other localities have found the cars to be crucial in the aftermath of natural disasters, making fresh hot food for evacuees.

Fresh meals, on wheels

Kikkoman's "FISH A WEEK" kitchen car

The "kitchen car effect" on Japan's food and restaurant scene cannot be overstated. Famous chefs are holding kitchen car pop-up events; food companies are positioning branded kitchen cars as mobile marketing venues, touring Japan with free tasting events; and talented young chefs are pursuing their dreams with low overheads in a tiny kitchen car.

Lunchtime at a kitchen car

Assorted lunch car foods

Traditional *Tsukemono*

Our focus on tsukemono pickles continues with seasoned variations.

Japan has a long-standing tradition of preserving vegetables in various seasonings. These include *Nara-zuke* salted gourd or ginger pickled in sake lees; *senmai-zuke* turnips pickled in a vinegar-based seasoning; and *fukujin-zuke*, various vegetables including daikon radish and eggplant pickled in soy sauce-based seasoning. These traditional *tsukemono* have long been a cherished complement to Japanese cuisine.

Nara-zuke

Nara-zuke are salted vegetables, typically oriental pickling melons, pickled in sake lees; this particular *tsukemono* is famous for the distinctive flavor imparted by the lees. Its name originates from the Nara region, known for its long history of sake brewing and use of sake lees in *tsukemono*. During pickling, the sake lees are replaced multiple times, which gives the vegetables a rich amber color. Fermentation times vary, depending on season and producer, but typically range from six months to over a year.

Nara-zuke

Senmai-zuke

Senmai-zuke, "thousand-slice pickles," are made with one of Kyoto's heritage vegetables, *Shogoin* turnips. The name derives from its paper-thin slices that appear to number in the thousands. Turnips are peeled and thinly sliced, sprinkled with salt, pressed under a weight for a day, then drained. The pickling liquid is a simmered mix of vinegar, mirin and sugar, which creates a gently sweet, mildly sour taste. Turnip slices, kombu and chili pepper are marinated in this, then pressed under a weight for about a week.

Senmai-zuke

Fukujin-zuke

Fukujin-zuke are made with an assortment of vegetables such as daikon radish, eggplant, lotus root and sword beans, along with ginger, *shiso* perilla and sesame seeds, all pickled in a lightly sweetened soy sauce-based marinade. They are finely chopped, salted, drained, then briefly cooked in a marinating liquid made of soy sauce, sugar and vinegar. The cooked vegetables are removed and the liquid is reduced. The vegetables are then pickled in the reduction for a few days. Crunchy, slightly sweet and tangy *fukujin-zuke* are a popular condiment for Japanese curry.

Fukujin-zuke

Shine Muscat Grapes シャインマスカット

Shine Muscat tart

Shine Muscat grapes, featured on our cover, were developed in Japan in the early 2000s. This premium grape cultivar represents over thirty years of crossbreeding between European and American varieties, and was designed specifically to suit Japan's climate. Harvested from around August to October, Nagano and Yamanashi prefectures are the primary growing areas for the Shine Muscat, having climates that offer significant temperature differences between day and night.

The seedless green Shine Muscat has earned a reputation as one of Japan's signature luxury fruits, and is much sought-after in both domestic and overseas markets. The skin of the Shine Muscat is delicate and not bitter, and its flesh has high sugar content with low acidity. The grape skin has a gentle, crisp bite that pops to release a succulent burst of sweet juice and fragrant aroma.

The name of this large, distinctive grape reflects its glossy, lustrous appearance and beautiful yellow-green color; indeed, some Shine Muscat enthusiasts maintain that a more yellowish hue indicates ripeness and sweeter flavor. It is unsurprising that fresh Shine Muscat grapes are popular luxury gifts, and are also used to add a delectable and elegant touch to both Western and Japanese confectionery.

Fish *Agebitashi* with Shine Muscat Grapes

Serves 2-3 as an appetizer
313 kcal
Protein 13.0 g
Fat 13.8 g
(per serving)

- 200 g / 7 oz. white fish fillet, e.g. cod or halibut
- 1 t white wine
- Salt

Marinade
- 1/2 T pure olive oil
- 2 T chopped onion
- 3 T apple cider vinegar
- 3 T dry white wine
- 180 ml / 3/4 C dashi stock, or diluted *shiro dashi* (*see next page*)
- 1 ½ T Kikkoman Light Color Soy Sauce
- 2 T + 1 t light brown sugar*
- 2 T grated ginger

- White pepper
- Cornstarch
- Vegetable oil for deep-frying

- 12-16 Shine Muscat grapes, or seedless green grapes
- Fresh spearmint

Agebitashi *is a classic dish of deep-fried* (age) *vegetables or fish, marinated* (bitashi) *in a seasoning sauce. Savory yet delicate, this dish can be served warm, at room temperature or even chilled the next day. If serving chilled, remove grapes from the marinade and refrigerate separately to maintain their freshness. Spearmint adds a fresh touch to taste and aroma.*

1 For white fish preparation, remove skin and coat both sides of the fish with white wine, then sprinkle with a pinch of salt. Refrigerate for 20 minutes. (1)

2 To make marinade, heat olive oil and sauté onion over medium-low heat in a small saucepan until transparent.** Add apple cider vinegar and white wine, and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the liquid to half then turn off heat. (2)

3 Add dashi stock, light color soy sauce and light brown sugar to the saucepan and quickly bring to a boil, then turn off heat. Squeeze juice from grated ginger by hand into a bowl. (3) Add this juice to the pan and mix well. Set aside.

4 Pat dry the fish with a paper towel and cut into bite-sized pieces. Season with white pepper, coat with cornstarch and shake off any excess. Heat vegetable oil in a fryer to about 170 °C / 340 °F and deep-fry the fish until thoroughly cooked. (4) Briefly drain the fish on a paper towel, then steep in the marinade in the saucepan.

5 Cut each grape in half lengthwise and add to the marinade sauce for 10 minutes. (5) Serve the fish and grapes with the sauce on a serving platter. Garnish with fresh spearmint.

* May substitute white sugar
** Use a small saucepan about 16 cm / 6-7 in. in diameter to reduce sauce. If pot is too large, ingredients will boil down too quickly.

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto

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

Shiro dashi

Shiro dashi is a concentrated dashi-based seasoning known for its transparent, light amber color and umami-rich flavor. This versatile seasoning can be used as a substitute for dashi by diluting with water, or it can simply be added to any dish to enhance flavor. Kikkoman Kaori Shiro Dashi is made of dashi stock from kombu and bonito flakes, light color soy sauce, mirin, and sugar. In this recipe, Kikkoman Kaori Shiro Dashi is diluted with water at a 1:8 ratio.

Discover Kikkoman #1

Kikkoman Soy Sauce Museum

In our new series "Discover Kikkoman," come with Kikona, Kikkoman's official brand mascot, and explore our facilities around the world. We travel first to the Kikkoman Soy Sauce Museum in Noda, Chiba Prefecture.

The Kikkoman Soy Sauce Museum (Kikkoman Monoshiri Shoyukan) is located inside its soy sauce plant in the town of Noda, the longtime home of Kikkoman. The museum welcomes guests to tour and discover everything about soy sauce, one of Japan's most iconic seasonings.

There is so much to explore here! Visitors can experience the color and aroma of soy sauce while learning how soy sauce is made, including all about the fermentation process of *moromi*, a mixture of salt water and soy sauce *koji*, which is made from soybeans, wheat and *koji* mold. Another highlight is touring the historic imperial soy sauce brewery, known as the Goyogura. This is where soy sauce for the Imperial Household has been brewed for generations using the *honjozo* traditional brewing method. The Goyogura includes a fascinating exhibition that showcases traditional soy sauce production.

Aging of *moromi*

Goyogura

Afterwards, stop by the enjoyable gift shop and relax with refreshments at the cheerful Mame ("beans") Café, to try out Kikkoman's special soft ice cream made with Kikkoman Soy Sauce. Ice cream and soy sauce? Absolutely! It's amazing how a hint of saltiness from soy sauce complements the sweetness of ice cream, creating a delicious "contrast effect."

Mame Café

Gift shop sells special Kikkoman products including popular Kikkoman Goyogura Soy Sauce, and original goods featuring the Kikkoman logo and Kikona.

The museum hosts enthusiastic visitors from around the globe. Vacationers from Saipan in the Mariana Islands commented that, in their region, soy sauce is generally referred to as "Kikkoman," rather than as "soy sauce"! Mr. Akira Kikuchi, the museum director, explained that guests enjoy learning all about Kikkoman Soy Sauce. This museum tour is an exciting, must-visit experience that overseas travelers definitely won't want to miss.

For visitors to the greater Tokyo area, the Kikkoman Soy Sauce Museum is a worthwhile day trip. The museum provides audio guides in English and Chinese.

Kikkoman Soy Sauce Museum
9:00am-2:30pm
110 Noda, Noda-shi, Chiba 278-0037, Japan, located inside the Kikkoman Food Products Co. Noda Plant

*** Reservations required**
* 3-minute walk from Nodashi Station on the Tobu Urban Park Line

More Information & Reservation:
www.kikkoman.com/en/culture/foodeducation/plant.html

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