

ZEN & NOW

*Zen temple food, based on a 600-year tradition,
is innovative, satisfying and supremely elegant*

by Berwyn Lewis

Japanese Buddhist temple food or Shōjin Ryōri (from the Chinese, meaning "food as medication") is prepared and eaten by monks and nuns in Buddhist temples throughout Japan. Using all land and sea vegetables and plants, Shōjin Ryōri contributes to the health, pleasure, longevity and grace of everyone who cooks and eats it. The preparation is exacting, the flavours are distinctive and refined according to the tastes of the Imperial Family and the food is light and completely satisfying.

This ancient culinary tradition was preserved by the daughters of the Imperial Family, who were often sent to temples to lead lives of celibacy and contemplation in order to avoid marriages to lowly families.

Today this rare cuisine can be experienced at the Sankō-in Temple, Tokyo, where nuns and priests learn to cook in order to complete their spiritual training.

According to Abbess Kōei, this part of their training takes ten years to perfect and requires a calm mind, dedication and attention.

When speculators sold off 23,000 square metres of the temple after the Second World War, bankruptcy was threatened. Due to the inspiration of the former Abbess, Sōei, who began to serve Shōjin cooking to the public, the temple was able to survive.

Nowadays, reservations have to be made up to one month in advance for lunch, which is served at noon and at two every afternoon except Thursdays. It is, as they say in Japan, worth 1,000 blessings to make your way there.

The bustle of Tokyo's streets dissolves at the gates of the temple's ancient garden with its gnarled trees, emerald mossy outcrops and sense of eternal peace.

My initiation into the temple began when I removed my shoes at the doorway and was ushered into a room which, by western standards, was empty. By Japanese standards, however, it was filled with space in calculated proportion and relationship to a spray of red berries arranged in an alcove.

Waiting cross-legged on the soft tatami mat floor, we silently contemplated the beauty of the ancient Zen garden through partially open, rice-paper screen doors, as incense spiralled from a black urn and chanting drifted up the corridor.

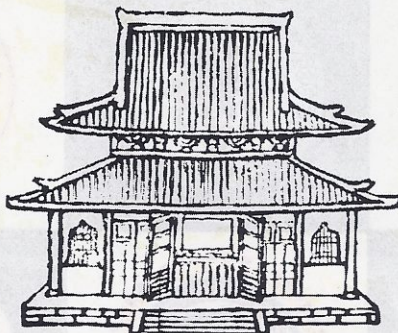
Suddenly the stillness was parted — as opposed to broken — by the appearance of Abbess Kōei.

Shaven head gleaming, a gauzy apparition in black summer kimono, Kōei's energy literally poured into the room as she entered, scattering smiles, greetings and bows. Her alert eyes sparkled intently, yet she retained an expression of detachment.

Resident of the temple for the last thirty-five years, since she was eighteen years old, Kōei explained why she joined:

The Verse of the Three Morsels of Food

The first morsel is to destroy
all evils,
The second morsel is to practise
all good deeds,
The third morsel is to save
all sentient beings —
May we all attain the
Path of Buddhahood.



"I didn't have a big lost love. I was brought up in very religious circumstances. I felt life was in vain. What is the purpose of life? I decided the temple was the best way for me to spend my life and this is where I met my teacher, the former Abbess, Sōei Yoneda*."

Our meal began with the arrival of hot towels and the ceremonious presentation of tea, which was stirred to a creamy froth with a bamboo brush. Sake, which means "sacred water of wisdom", followed.

The Abbess Kōei pointed out how the food conformed to strict principles relating to the selection of ingredients, preparation, conduct while dining and the simplicity and directness of Zen religious life.

Each dish was arranged to represent a landscape — a mountain topped with icy-looking grated horseradish, a riverbank, bridges,

fields, roads and forests — as well as reflecting seasons. Shapes, colours and textures were also taken into consideration, along with the laws of harmony and balance of all the senses.

We were presented with a lacquered tray of dishes, including sesame seed tofu (difficulty in cutting is a sign of excellence), regular tofu (with its jelly-like consistency) accompanied by light miso and spinach, star-shaped robai (a fried wheat gluten) with seaweed strips, eggplant marinated in a delicate sauce, grated zucchini garnished with maple leaf-shaped cucumbers (to symbolise the cool shade of summer) and a dish of Japanese pumpkin.

My favourite dish, a small wiry-looking ball which resembled a bird's nest, consisted of finely shaved strips of lightly fried seaweed. This melted on contact with the tongue.

A succession of exquisite dishes followed: mountain yam wrapped in seaweed, green asparagus marinated in water chestnut, aubergine in sweet miso paste and a distinctive leaf, shiso, which has a very fragrant herb-like tang and is refreshing to the palate.

The more substantial and filling dishes appeared towards the end of the meal — a thick soup with red beans and a smoky-flavoured "tea" made from brown rice.

We completed our meal with the aristocrat of all teas, "sip tea", so called because it has to be sipped very slowly to savour its extraordinary delicacy. It was accompanied by tiny hand-carved confections made of melt-in-the-mouth sugar.

We were in the process of refilling our cups when Abbess Kōei restrained us.

"Do not be left with the worst and most diluted taste. The good taste must linger."

Emerging from the peaceful temple into a humid Tokyo afternoon we felt intoxicated by food and fine spirits. It had been almost sacrilegious to eat Abbess Kōei's handiwork.

We had left her in the kitchen, sleeves rolled up, about to plunge into the spirit of washing up.

How to get there:

Take the Chuo Line train to Musashi Koganei station then a short walk to the temple: 1-36, Hon-machi 3-chome, Koganei city, Tokyo. Phone: (0423) 81 1116 (No credit cards).

*Sōei Yoneda, author of *Good Food from a Japanese Temple, a 600-year tradition of simple, elegant vegetable cookery*, published by Kodansha International.