



***Shojin* Cuisine: Cooking from the Heart**

by Mari Fujii

Preparing food that combines [the] five tastes, five colors, and five ways of preparation [the basic concepts of *shojin* cuisine] results in a well-balanced meal. . . . *Shojin* cuisine is an art of cooking with these concepts in mind, and that is why people who partake of it say it relieves stress.

It is now 40 years since my husband, Sotetsu Fujii (1941–2006), and I started the *shojin* cuisine learning society, Zenmi-kai (Taste of Zen group). *Shojin* means “earnest application” or “devotion” and comes from the Sanskrit *virya*, a Buddhist term commonly translated as “energy,” “diligence,” “enthusiasm,” or “effort,” which reached Japan by way of China.

Zenmi-kai was set up in response to requests for lessons in *shojin* cooking from people who had read my husband’s book *Shojin ryori jiten* (Dictionary of Japanese vegetarian cuisine) (Tokyodo Publishing, 1985). My husband did a great deal of work related to Buddhism and *shojin* cuisine, writing books, giving lectures, appearing on television, and so on. This was when Japan’s rapid economic-growth period was starting to wind down and society was beginning to return to normal.

Before we were married, from the time my husband was 22 until he was 32, he lived and practiced at Zen temples. During these years he served as *tenzo*, or temple cook, at three different Zen temples. The experience he gained during these years he later shared in the form of several books.



After his 10 years of Zen training, he joined a publishing company as an editor, and later became a freelance writer. It was at this time that we married. The last temple where my husband lived and practiced was Kenchoji, in Kamakura, and when he left the temple he settled down in Kamakura.

Kenchoji temple, in Kamakura



Fushiki-an



After we were married we acquired a house in Inamuragasaki, a seaside neighborhood in Kamakura; we call the house *Fushiki-an* (The hermitage of not knowing). It's a small house, but it was our base of operations for the *shojin* cuisine cooking school *Zenmi-kai* and the studio where photographs of the cuisine were taken for books and magazines. Sometimes we welcomed foreign guests there as well.

My husband would often say, "Cooking should be from the heart." What he meant was, "Think carefully about the person who is going to eat when you prepare food." I have continued to convey this message to everyone whenever I cook and teach cooking.

Japan has four distinct seasons: spring, summer, fall, and winter. What we try to do is put locally grown ingredients in season to the best possible use while keeping in mind the person who will eat the food and whether the occasion is a festival, a ceremonial meal, or an ordinary meal, in order to create dishes that will be easy on the body and mind. We clasp our hands in prayer to express our appreciation for the people who created the ingredients and for the fields where they were grown. We try to prepare each dish on the menu painstakingly, giving heed to what my husband used to say: "Preparing food means taking good care of the mind and heart; that is what I hope to convey."

On days when cooking classes are being held at *Zenmi-kai*, students come to *Fushiki-an*, and everyone joins in to cook and taste the various dishes. At these times, both younger and older students unanimously share the same expression, seeming to feel relaxed.

Shojin cuisine comes from the Buddhist precepts against taking life. Neither meat nor fish, nor even eggs that give rise to new life are used. Strong-smelling vegetables such as green onions, leeks, and garlic are not used either. The original purpose of *shojin* cuisine was to sustain people undergoing religious training at temples. It offers neither too much nor too little, and I think it is very pleasant to eat.

The basic concepts of *shojin* cuisine include five tastes, five colors, and five ways of preparation. The five tastes are salty, sweet, spicy, sour, and bitter. The five colors are black, white, red, yellow, and green. The five ways of preparation are raw, boiled, grilled, steamed, and sautéed. Preparing food that combines these five tastes, five colors, and five ways of preparation results in a well-balanced meal. There is also the unique notion of *awai* 淡 light flavor or natural flavor, light seasoning to enhance its natural flavor, which involves avoiding strong flavoring in order to bring out the native goodness of the ingredients. *Shojin* cuisine is an art of cooking with these concepts in mind, and that is why people who partake of it say it relieves stress.

The flavorings used in *shojin* cuisine are the fermented products typical of Japan, which include soy sauce, miso (soybean paste), mirin (sweet sake), vinegar, and salt.

Stock is made with dried kombu seaweed and dried shiitake mushrooms. These are traditional Japanese ingredients. The kombu is soaked in cold water for about an hour and then brought to a boil. Dried shiitake mushrooms are also soaked in cold water, imparting umami, or savor. The softened mushrooms are used as ingredients in the cooking.

Sometimes people who are used to eating hurriedly and negligently or eat and drink so much that they feel unwell come to our *Zenmi-kai* lessons. These are people who realize the importance of what they eat only when their health has become compromised.



A workshop in London on Nov. 2012



A workshop in Paris



Cooking School in Copenhagen on May 2012

During the last 15 years or so, I have had a growing number of opportunities to lecture on *shojin* cuisine abroad. The first time I did so was after Jipango—an organization set up in Paris to introduce Japanese culture to people in France—invited me to take part in eight cooking sessions in Paris. A group of young chefs in London also took the opportunity of my visits to Paris to set up a venue for me to give a talk in London. 12 years ago the Japan Foundation, an independent administrative institution in Japan, gave me an opportunity to visit Finland, Iceland and Denmark.

In all of these countries, people expressed an interest in *shojin* cuisine as a branch of Japanese food culture, and our cooking classes and tasting events were very well received. So far, I have cooked in the United States, Italy, Portugal, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, India, Myanmar, Uzbekistan, China, Taiwan, South Korea, and elsewhere. At a cultural-exchange event in India, however, the Indian matrons found the black color of the *norimaki* (vinegared rice rolled in laver seaweed) so frightening they would not try it.

Some participants at the cooking lessons in Paris and London were vegetarians. Their interest arose from various standpoints, such as their religious backgrounds or considerations of animal welfare.

A person who attended my lecture in Singapore was Danny Chu, author of the book *Shojin Ryori: The Art of Japanese Vegetarian Cuisine*. In Danny's hometown of Singapore there are Indian and Chinese vegetarian restaurants, but he says Japanese *shojin* cuisine uses less oil and is healthier. After attending *shojin* cuisine classes in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, June Ka Lim, chef and owner of a macrobiotic restaurant there, brought out the book *Macrobiotics for Life*.

Thus it seems that more people outside Japan have come to notice that Japanese *shojin* cuisine is healthy and has a background of Zen philosophy. Notably, in May 2015 I helped prepare *shojin* cuisine meals for forty attendees at a tasting-experience event at a Zen center in Paris. The organizer, Valerie Duvauchelle, had practiced and studied cooking at *Sojiji*, one of the head temples of *Soto Zen* Buddhism, in Yokohama. The people practicing at the Zen center experienced eating in silence for the first time in conformity with Japanese Zen temple etiquette. After this experience, the participants shared their impressions. They said they found something fresh and new in earnestly conforming to ceremonial etiquette and eating in silence as a Zen practice. The *Soto Zen* sect was founded by the Zen master *Dogen* (1200–1253), who studied in China from 1223 to 1227, during the Song dynasty. After returning to Japan he drew on his experiences at a Zen temple there to write *Tenzo kyokun* (Instructions for the Zen cook). It describes the proper attitude and etiquette for preparing meals. Thanks to this work, its precepts continue to be followed to this day.

Sen no Rikyu (1522–91), the founder of Japan's Way of Tea, was also a Zen practitioner and incorporated Zen temple dining etiquette into the tea ceremony. Today there are a growing number of people around the world who enjoy the Japanese tea ceremony. As long as there is a peaceful atmosphere, people can enjoy a leisurely bowl of tea.



I also met tea ceremony teachers in Finland and Denmark. The Japanese words for the arts of tea ceremony and flower arrangement, as well as for Japanese martial arts, often use the Chinese character 道, pronounced *dō*, meaning “way” or “road,” as in judo (Jpn., *jūdō*; *jū* meaning “soft” or “pliant”). These arts with their Japanese cultural background also have a philosophical rather than religious basis and teach right conduct and thoughtfulness. These things form the foundation of the Japanese mind and heart.

Every year over 15 years, I have been making and taste testing *shojin* cuisine with people from other countries, exchanging opinions, and answering questions. I participated in a workshop with about a hundred students studying the Japanese language at Manchester University in England, at which we made *norimaki* and *miso* soup. It was the first time for many of them to try Japanese food. Food is an extremely comprehensible form of cultural experience, and everyone seemed to enjoy it. They were second-year students and were looking forward to studying in Japan the following year. I am sure they had a variety of dining experiences during that time.



Komaki Shokudo in Akihabara, Tokyo



11 years ago, our daughter opened a casual *shojin* cuisine restaurant in Tokyo's *Akihabara* district called *Komaki Shokudo*. *Akihabara* is in central Tokyo and is mainly known for its numerous electronics stores, which attract many tourists, including people from overseas. About 80 percent of the restaurant's patrons are foreigners. They have included a businessman from India who came every day for lunch during his stay in Tokyo, as well as vegetarians from Taiwan and Singapore, with whom I had some conversation. Vegetarians coming to Japan often have a hard time finding somewhere to eat.

My work enables me to communicate with people from other countries through the medium of food. I enjoy this kind of communication and am always grateful for it.

Author's profile

Mari Fujii is a specialist in *shojin ryori* (Japanese vegetarian cuisine) and teaches and popularizes it internationally. She has studied Chinese food therapy in Beijing and is the author of *The Enlightened Kitchen: Fresh Vegetable Dishes from the Temples of Japan* (*Kodansha America, 2005*) and several books in Japanese on *shojin* cuisine.

