



Shojin Ryori

cuisine

A visual feast perfect for delicate tastebuds By Jessie Kok

In terms of Sunday lunches, many would consider long, leisurely afternoon affairs of buffets, or make a quick trip to the local diner. But if you have been contemplating a spiritual vegetarian alternative to make up for those nights of over eating and indulgence, replenish yourself inside out with Shojin Ryori – a form of philosophical dining which is practiced by Zen monks in various monasteries across Japan.

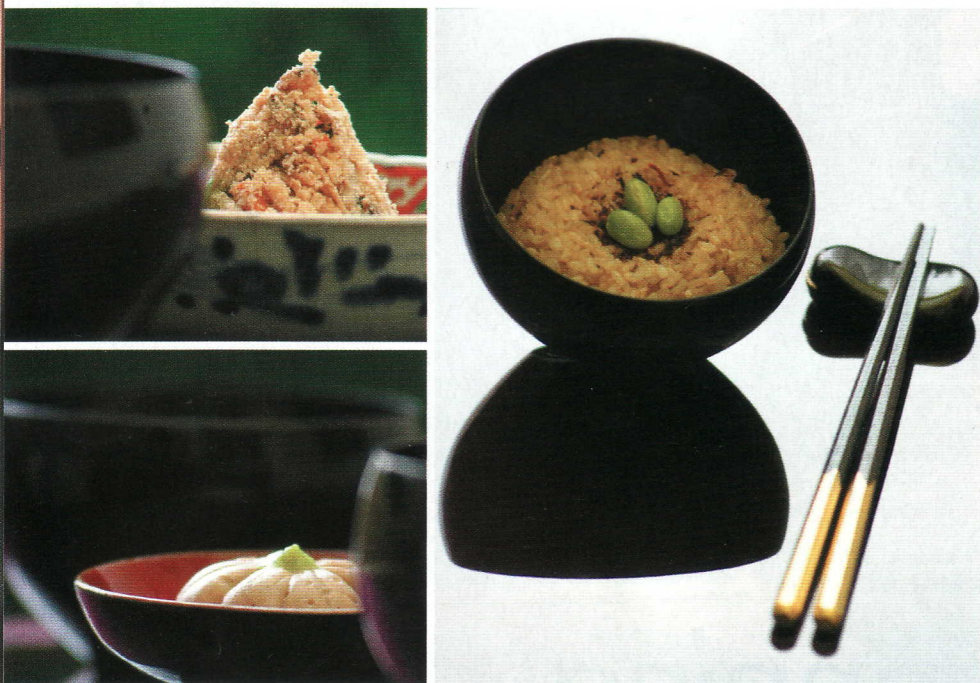
The art of spiritual dining was brought into Singapore by Chef Danny Chu, executive chef of Enso Kitchen, after he journeyed up to the mountain shrines in Kyoto and received spiritual culinary training from one of the masters. It may sound like a spin-off from some Hollywood Kung-Fu culinary movie, but Chef Chu is passionate about the philosophy behind the teachings of Shojin Ryori, which centres around

respect for all living things and overall appreciation of life. The art of Shojin Ryori is a spiritual practice to the Zen monks and is not so much of them praying, but rather, being more mindful of the philosophy behind the form of vegetarian cooking. This includes minimizing wastage during the cooking process while banning food products like eggs, dairy, garlic, and onion. Due to the four seasons in Japan, seasonal ingredients are used to ensure freshness and to remain in harmony with nature's blessings. Little condiments are used, because it is believed that food should be eaten at its purest form possible for greater appreciation of every subtle taste that is evoked.

The idea of consuming food at its purest form may bring forth notions of bland, tasteless and colourless meals to mind; but what was presented on the tray was actually a myriad of colours in

tandem with the vibrant hues of nature that spring induces – from the fresh mint green of the Japanese Salad to the orange pink tones of sweet, starchy roots, right down to the earthy shades coming from the bowls of brown rice and miso soup all beautifully presented on black lacquer ware.

Chef Chu starts the meal by serving up his specialty of Goma Tofu, a springy latte-coloured Japanese delicacy shaped like a mini bun that has gotten many Japanese customers going back to him for more. Known as the “King” of Shojin Ryori Cuisine, Goma Tofu has an initial savoury light taste that is best brought out with a dallop of wasabi mixed in soya sauce, and coolly dissolves to leave behind nuances of arrowroot. It is considered the most covetable dish of the cuisine not just for its price but also because it uses the least amount of ingredients for maximum natural flavour.



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Chef Chu says that only two ingredients, Kuzu (arrowroot) and sesame, are used in the laborious making process that can take from two to six hours just for a small portion, contributing to the exorbitant price Japanese dining houses usually charge for a small serving. But this is not the case with Chef Chu, who believes that beautiful cuisine must always be shared, and should be served in a more generous portion per pax.

The kind portions are not just limited to the Goma Tofu itself. The whole set is satisfying enough for normal eaters with its nutrition content, taste and freshness and adheres to the zero-wastage concept of being filled without overeating.

Chef Chu uses imported Japanese greens called mizuna for his salad which is adeptly balanced with seasonings of soya dressing. The thing that strikes you about the salad is how minty fresh its individual blades of leaves look. The tomatoes are crunchy and red, while sprays of green mizuna lends the colour of spring in the flower-patterned bowl it is served in. This is nicely contrasted by the bowl of well-cooked brown rice with

green endamame beans neatly perched one upon another next to it. Brown rice has the tendency to turn out hard and grainy if not done properly, and this bowl serves to refute that. The individual beads are chewy without being soggy, and there is no grainy element to the smooth finish that the simple replenisher can give.

Simplicity with spiritual thought make up the crux of Shojin Ryori dining. So while vegetarian dining originates from the precept of no killing, Shojin cooking takes it even further by not "killing" the vegetables as well, meaning the cook takes extra caution against overcooking them. No salt nor msg is added during the cooking process, and naturally derived condiments like shoyu, vinegar, and cooking sake are used instead to bring out the natural flavour of every dish so as to maintain its purity. This, and the Shojin Ryori philosophy of no wastage is best displayed through Okara (pronounced as o-ka-la), a type of tofu residue made from Burdock root, which contains medicinal properties to purify the blood. Chef Chu says that the Chinese usually throw away the residue

while making tofu, but one can actually cook it with mushrooms and carrots to form a nutritiously yummy dish. And for those with a sweet and sour tooth, the sweet potato with Japanese cucumber makes a welcome change. Warmly dressed in raw sugar and vinegar, the dish is very refreshing to the palate and the presence of sweet potato adds a bit of natural saccharine starchiness to an otherwise tangy dish.

The understanding of purity and minimal wastage is just part of the entire concept of Shojin Ryori. As we eat, Chef Chu tells me that anyone who partakes the meal in a Zen temple has to wait in silence while a monk chants the five reflections:

- Appreciate what you have today
- Recognizing that we are not pure and all human beings have shortcomings
- Recognizing these shortcomings means working to get rid of all impurities
- Recognizing that food is a nourishment to the body; and
- Only with a healthy body can you achieve the goals you have set for yourself.

There are of course restrictions in performing the ritual within the premises of Goto Restaurant where Enso Kitchen operates every Sunday, but the affable Chef Chu is so passionate about the art of dining that he will spread the spiritual teaching of Shojin Ryori to anyone who shows interest in the philosophy behind its cooking. And boasted by the authentically Japanese surroundings of the Goto Restaurant, it is no wonder that his list of clientele ranges from ladies-who-lunch to nostalgic Japanese expats who need a slice of their homeland on any given Sunday. So if you are looking for something authentically Japanese with a touch of spirituality that will leave you more appreciative of life amidst the hustle and bustle of city life, Shojin Ryori cuisine might just be the temple of Zen for you. ♥

Enso Kitchen operates every Sunday at Goto Restaurant, 14 Ann Siang Hill, through reservations. Chef Chu changes the menu every quarter for seasonal freshness. Visit www.ensokitchen.com for more information.