

the zen of food

Imagine a way of cooking and eating food that is so gentle and mindful, it nourishes not only the body, but also the soul.

■ photography YAP CHEE HONG





MANY Zen monks start their day with a ritual of grinding sesame seeds to a paste in a *suri-bachi* (ceramic mortar) while chanting a mantra. While the right hand moves the *surikogi* (wooden pestle) in a circular motion to grind the seeds, the left hand is placed flat on top of the *surikogi* to keep it steady – and complete the circle formed by the arms. This is known as the “Shojin movement”, used to develop spiritual character in Zen temples.

The circle, *enso*, is the symbol of supremacy in Zen. In its emptiness, the circle represents absolute fullness, simplicity, completeness, endlessness, and perfection of harmony. The circle can also be a sweet rice cake.

The concept of culinary meditation is central to Shojin Ryori, a little-known vegetarian cuisine found in Zen Buddhist temples, especially around Kyoto. It was brought into Japan by Buddhist monks from China in the 13th century. Outside Japan, this culinary tradition is rarely practised.

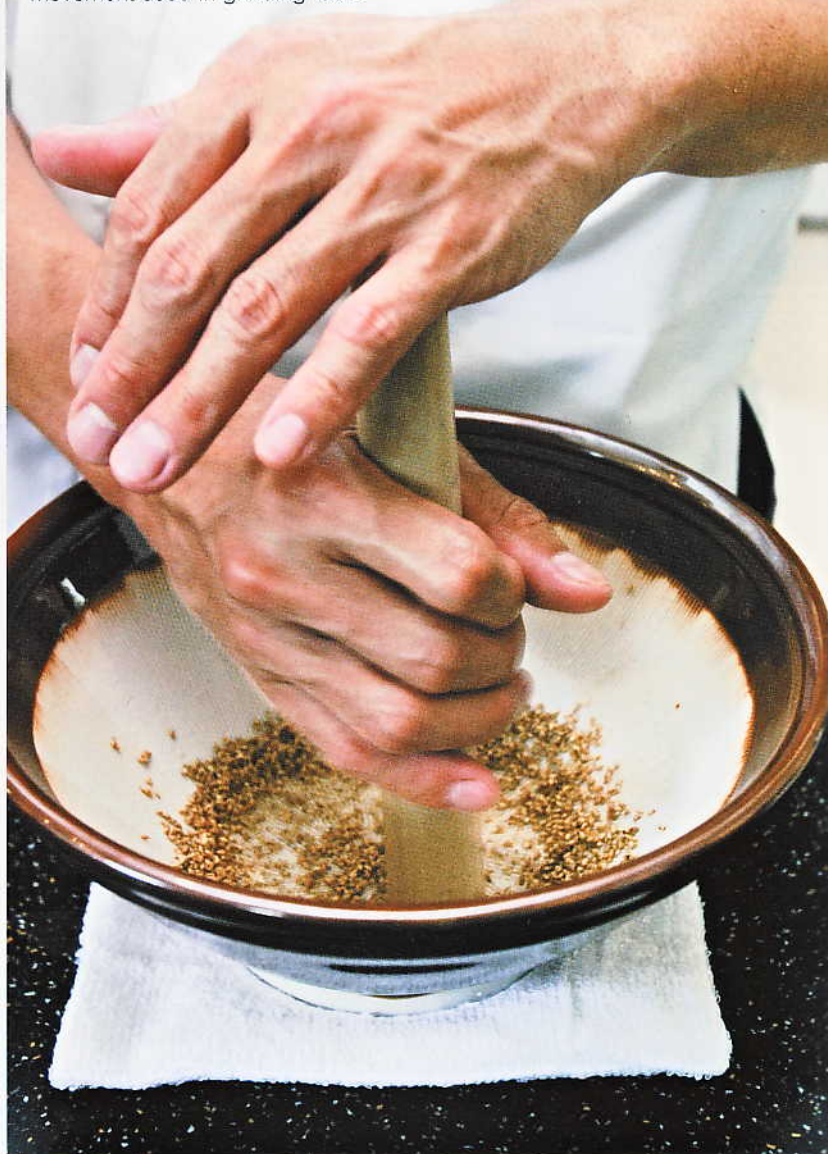
Danny Chu, of Enso Kitchen, believes he is the only Shojin proponent in this neck of the woods. “Outside Japan, you can experience Shojin food in New York, and now in Singapore,” said Chu, who gave up his wheeling-and-dealing ways as a forex dealer to learn Shojin Ryori. He said the cuisine is now enjoying some popularity in Japan, where it can be experienced in Zen temples, with many having a three-month waiting list. Chu was in Kuala Lumpur recently at the invitation of Geetha Jayabalan of Culinary Capers, to conduct two culinary workshops.

You will find many interpretations for the term “Shojin”. To Chu, it means energy or zeal, and “Ryori” refers to cuisine. To the monks, the daily cooking routine is an important way to practise religious discipline, reflecting their zeal for getting to the enlightened stage.

Religious dogma aside, Shojin Ryori is a beautiful way to approach food – both in the way it is prepared and imbibed. It is a way of cooking that is mindful of the environment and the changing seasons, the beneficence of Nature and the crime of wastage.



1. Danny Chu in the kitchen of Culinary Capers. 2. The meditative Shojin movement used in grinding food.





1. Chu and Gaetha Jayabalan. 2. Tableware should be chosen to relate to the seasons to create awareness of the seasonality of nature. 3. Grated lotus root mixed with mashed tofu. 4. The hands-on session.

The emphasis is on using vegetables that reflect the season. All vegetables, except the five strong-smelling herbs of the lily family – including garlic, onion and leek – are usable when they are in season. Little seasoning is used, so that one can enjoy the pure taste of the food. Forest shoots, mushrooms, soy beans, grains, nuts and seeds form the remaining core ingredients of the cuisine.

Chu explained that in Shojin Ryori, the process of cooking is as important as the result. Only simple implements and methods of cooking are used. “My teacher cooked using only one stove,” he said. “Use whatever is convenient as cooking shouldn’t be a chore.” One should also not waste – this will result naturally when the cook is mindful of the hard work of the farmer in growing the vegetables. Vegetable peelings and rice washing water are often recycled

for another use or another dish.

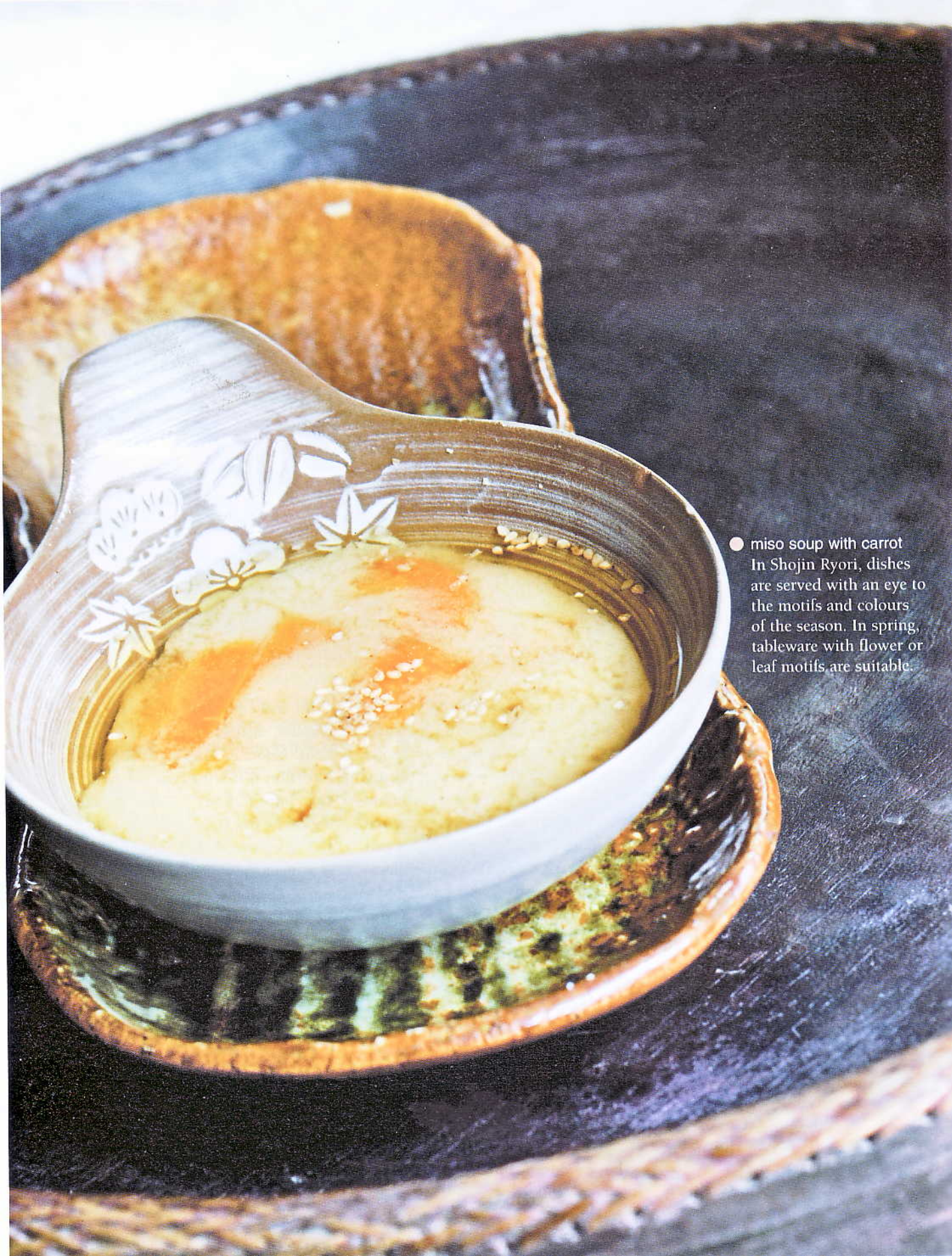
In a cuisine where purity is upheld, cleanliness is also pursued. Shojin chefs have been known to start the day by sweeping the street their restaurant is on. Concern and care for the natural environment is a way of life. It is part of the pure mind and action philosophy of Buddhism in relation to food – if the life journey of a Buddhist is to reach a state of higher consciousness or enlightenment, one must clear the clutter in life.

Even if one is not inclined to meditate while cooking, Chu advocates cooking with a calm mind, as negative energies will reflect on the taste of your food. The food should be eaten not only with gratitude to those who prepared the dish and to the farmers who produced the vegetables but, above all, with respect for nature.

To make the act of eating more mindful, meditate on the “five reflections” before tucking in. Reflect on: 1. The effort that brings you this food, 2. Your imperfections, 3. Your mindfulness to be free from attachment, anger and ignorance, 4. Receiving this food as a medicine to sustain good health, and 5. The fulfillment of the faith. You are then ready to appreciate the amazing taste of simple food that is in harmony with Nature.

To join a Shojin Ryori class in Kuala Lumpur, contact Culinary Capers at 03- 2095 3636/2093 5789. Website: www.culinarycapers.com.my

To have Enso Kitchen cook for you at home or sample Shojin Ryori in Singapore, contact Danny Chu +65 8133 1182. Website: www.ensokitchen.com



● miso soup with carrot
In Shojin Ryori, dishes are served with an eye to the motifs and colours of the season. In spring, tableware with flower or leaf motifs are suitable.

● lotus root tofu dumplings



Close your eyes and take several long, deep breaths to calm the mind before you start cooking...

MISO SOUP WITH CARROT

An important starter to any Japanese meal, miso soup helps warm the stomach. Never overboil miso soup, or you'll destroy its delicate flavour. The konbu should not be washed; to maintain freshness, keep leftover seaweed in an airtight container in the freezer. The vegetarian stock is made without bonito flakes. Japanese soup is always served lukewarm and drunk from the bowl. (4 servings)

1 piece dried konbu
4 1/2 cups water
1 carrot, peeled
4 tablespoons white miso
roasted sesame seeds

To make the stock: Use a damp cloth to wipe away the white powder (if any) on the surface of the konbu. Place the konbu and water in a pot over medium heat. Simmer until the volume of the liquid is about 4 cups.

To make miso soup: Cut the carrot into desired shapes and boil in the konbu stock until soft.

Place the miso in a large strainer and hold it at the surface of the simmering stock. Using meditative circular motions, stir and press the miso through the sieve into the stock. (Cooks-in-a-hurry can place miso in a mixing bowl and add a ladle of hot stock; stir to dissolve and add to the pot using a strainer.)

To serve: Ladle soup into bowls and sprinkle with roasted sesame seeds.

LOTUS ROOT TOFU DUMPLING

This is one of the first dishes Danny learnt in Japan. No flour is needed to bind the dumplings; the lotus root provides sufficient starch. Make it a point

to boil the dumplings using water recycled from washing the rice grains (rice ball recipe) to eliminate wastage. (4 servings)

200g lotus root, peeled
1 block silken tofu
muslin cloth and string for wrapping

miso & sesame sauce

4 tablespoons sweet miso
2 tablespoons sesame paste (tahini)
2 tablespoons sugar
2 teaspoons cooking sake
shichimi flakes (Japanese red pepper flakes)

To make dumplings: Grate the lotus root finely using meditative circular motions. Place the grated lotus root in a sieve and let the liquid drain until the dripping stops. Using a suribachi – or fork – mash the tofu and mix it with the drained grated lotus root. Form into lime-sized balls (do not squeeze) and wrap in cloth; tie to secure.

Bring the reserved rice-washing water (or water) to boil. Boil the dumplings for about 10 minutes, remove and unwrap.

To make sauce: Mix all the ingredients together, adding more water or sake to get the desired consistency. Serve with lotus root tofu dumpling sprinkled with shichimi.

RICE BALLS WITH BEEFSTEAK PICKLES (4 servings)

Beefsteak pickles add a pleasant, tangy accent to the rice. They are made from the shiso or purple perilla plant. Use plastic rice ball shapers available at Japanese supermarkets to shape the rice balls. If your cooked rice is a bit hard, add a dash of sake to soften it and give it a lovely aroma.

2 cups short-grain rice
2 cups water
1 piece dried konbu
beefsteak pickles (mishima yukari seasoning)

To cook rice: Wash rice, reserving the rice-washing water for another use. Place rice, water and konbu in an electric rice cooker pot; set aside for 30 minutes. Remove konbu; cook the rice.

To shape rice: Fill the rice shaper with cooked rice. Sprinkle beefsteak pickles on the rice. Push the lid down at the same time pressing the bottom of the shaper to compact the rice. Lift lid and push the rice out by pushing the bottom flap of the rice shaper.

GINGER & MUSHROOM TEMPURA (4 servings)

Zen practitioners often serve tempura with just a sprinkling of salt as sauces are considered extravagant and generate extra dishes for the clean-up – which is wasteful of water.

batter

equal portions flour and water
pinch of salt

vegetable oil for deep frying
90g young ginger, cut into julienne
12 small shiitake mushrooms or
6 large shiitake mushrooms
salt for sprinkling

To prepare batter: Combine the ingredients and stir to form batter.

To make tempura: Heat oil. Using chopsticks, pick up some ginger julienne, dip into batter and deep fry (not more than 1 minute) until crisp. Repeat with the mushrooms. Drain on paper towels to remove excess oil. Sprinkle with a little salt.

A square meal: (Clockwise from top)
miso soup with carrot, lotus root tofu
dumpling, ginger and mushroom tempura,
and rice balls with beefsteak pickles

