

Monk Food

JAKI FISHER samples two vegetarian restaurants with the Zen element – one in its food and the other, its décor



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HEN I got this assignment, I confess I already had the story written. Monk food: bland and tasteless but leaves you feeling virtuous & holy – end of article. Monks and food don't usually go together in my mind, aren't they just supposed to eat what's offered and sometimes not at all? Isn't food just another form of craving which always leaves us dissatisfied and wanting more? Apparently not.

Perhaps, on the contrary, food can be used as a method to teach the Dharma – especially since we all love it so much, and cooking for people can be a powerful form of service and care. And, if two 'monastic' dining experiences in Singapore are anything to go by, the Sangha seems to have just as many culinary options as we lay folk do. So if you're planning to get ordained – make sure you don't forget your apron.



ENSO KITCHEN

Frankly, I was wary about trying the Zen monk food served up by Enso Kitchen, which actually isn't a restaurant but a mobile food 'experience' run by two Singaporeans. Even the name of the cuisine, 'Shojin Ryori' was intimidating – I was sure I'd be chomping through acres of macrobiotic gruel while being whacked with a big bamboo stick and staring single pointedly at one spot on a wall...

The story

Shojin Ryori is a Japanese vegetarian cuisine which originated in Zen temples around the 13th century. Now rarely found even in its homeland – what's it doing being served up on this tropical island that's definitely not a known Zen-monk hang out?

Preparing and serving this food has become the calling and passion of Danny Chu, an 'average' Singaporean guy who

found out he wasn't so average after he became a Buddhist and jumped off the corporate ladder, heading to Japan in 2005 to learn the art of Shojin Ryori.

"Consciously, I began practicing mindfulness and motivation in everything I do. Even eating became part of my spiritual training," he says. "Through a friend, I was introduced to Shojin Ryori. I faced numerous difficulties in obtaining information about it in Singapore; even the Japan embassy told me to give up trying to learn this art in Japan, as I am not Japanese. Fortunately, through the help of my friends, I managed to gather some leads."

He discovered that preparing Shojin cuisine is an aspect of Zen spiritual training, involving the entire personality, not just the ability to cook.

These training involve learning to cook mindfully and as an art – not just in terms of the look of the finished meal, but as part of the process of preparing the food. Cooks are careful not to waste food. They attempt to use the entire vegetable in their creations, throwing nothing edible away and they cook in harmony with nature using local produce according to the seasons.

There is also an emphasis on protecting life, meaning that not only are the dishes wholly vegetarian, they are also not overcooked, so that the vegetables retain freshness and life themselves.

The Experience

In keeping with their philosophy of minimum waste, Enso Kitchen isn't actually a place.

On Sundays at lunchtime it can be found at an exquisite dining gem, Goto Japanese Restaurant, in Ann Siang Hill in Chinatown, making use of the premises when the resident restaurant is closed.

Chinatown at midday on a Sunday is like a town with secret – deserted, as though everyone's hiding. So, it's not hard to feel like you're entering a magical world. This continues as Danny and his partner Graeme, welcome you into the contemplative stillness of the restaurant, offering tea and outlining the Five Reflections chanted in Zen temples before eating, encouraging us to keep them in mind as we dine. Thus we were to reflect on: "the effort



Photos: COURTESY OF ENSO KITCHEN

that brings us this food; our imperfections as we receive the meal; our aim of being free from attachment, anger and ignorance; taking the food as medicine to sustain good health, and finally on the fulfillment of our practice as we accept the offerings."

I can't say that we were wholly successful in this, especially once our taste-buds got all excited, but it certainly set the tone for a meal which is more like an edible tea ceremony where a range of intriguing creations is presented on a tray setting in beautiful ceramic dishes each with a different and visually arresting colour and glaze – so that you feel quite satisfied just looking at the food even before you put it in your mouth.

The Food

"Shojin" means vigour or energy and "Ryori" means cuisine. And it's true – Zen may stand for restraint and simplicity but this food is bursting with robust flavour and is surprisingly hearty considering that another Zen tenet is that few spices are used, allowing the natural flavours to hold sway. It's also hard to believe that the food is completely vegan, as it is filling and not at all 'watery'.

Every meal created by Enso Kitchen is unique and ours began with the delicate King of Vegetables—a root veggie, topped with sesame and offering up a gentle nutty taste and soft, chewy texture—unlike anything I'd ever really eaten. This quiet introduction was followed by the substantial main course—boasting at least five dishes—including a *chawanmushi* (steamed egg) but made of a smoky flavoured, almost rough hewn kind of tofu embedded with mushroom and nuts; nutty, hearty rice with an almost tangy pickle flavour; an assortment of springy vegetables such as asparagus, a Japanese spring veggie, and cabbage and an impressive pan fried mock steak made from marinated wheat flour with an almost sweet flavour. As my fellow diner rhapsodized, the flavours sing together.

Dessert was not forgotten either—Danny's own locally influenced creation—organic pumpkin, sago and coconut.

Perhaps my favourite part of the meal occurs

when you've finished eating. Taking the remains of your soup, you pour it from one bowl to the next, like doing water bowls on your altar. This ensures that no food is wasted and once you reach the final bowl, the soup has taken on a richness that you can almost sink your teeth into.

A criticism of Japanese food is that it is often fussy and pretentious or macrobiotically bland, but for me the most endearing quality of Enso Kitchen's meals is that they are very real – you can almost feel the ingredients nourishing you as you swallow and you leave feeling renewed, happy, healthy and refreshed; and all without any bamboo stick whacking or staring at white walls for hours on end.

Price

The Shojin Ryori experience will set you back about \$50 per person so it probably won't be a weekly event. However, it doesn't seem an exorbitant amount to pay for an experience you've never had before.

Other Tidbits

Enso Kitchen can bring the Zen eating experience to you. They regularly cater for private residences and for offices. And if you want to cultivate a serene monk-like demeanour without having to shave your head, there are also cooking classes.

Cooking Classes @ Palate Sensations Singapore

Tel: 6479 9025

E-mail: info@palatesensations.com

Getting There

MRT: Alight at Chinatown and walk up to South Bridge Road; cross over and then head up Ann Siang Rd to Ann Siang Hill.

Contact

Sunday Lunch @ GOTO Japanese Restaurant Singapore

Every Sunday; 11.30am to 2.30pm (last order 1.30pm)

Reservation required

Tel: 8133 1182; Email: admin@ensokitchen.com