

*be my guest...*

# Uplifting Body





# And Soul

A Zen-inspired menu by shojin ryori chef Danny Chu elevates a relaxing session at a spa to a multi-sensorial experience. *Jolene Limuco* finds out how.

Photography Rory Daniel



be my guest...



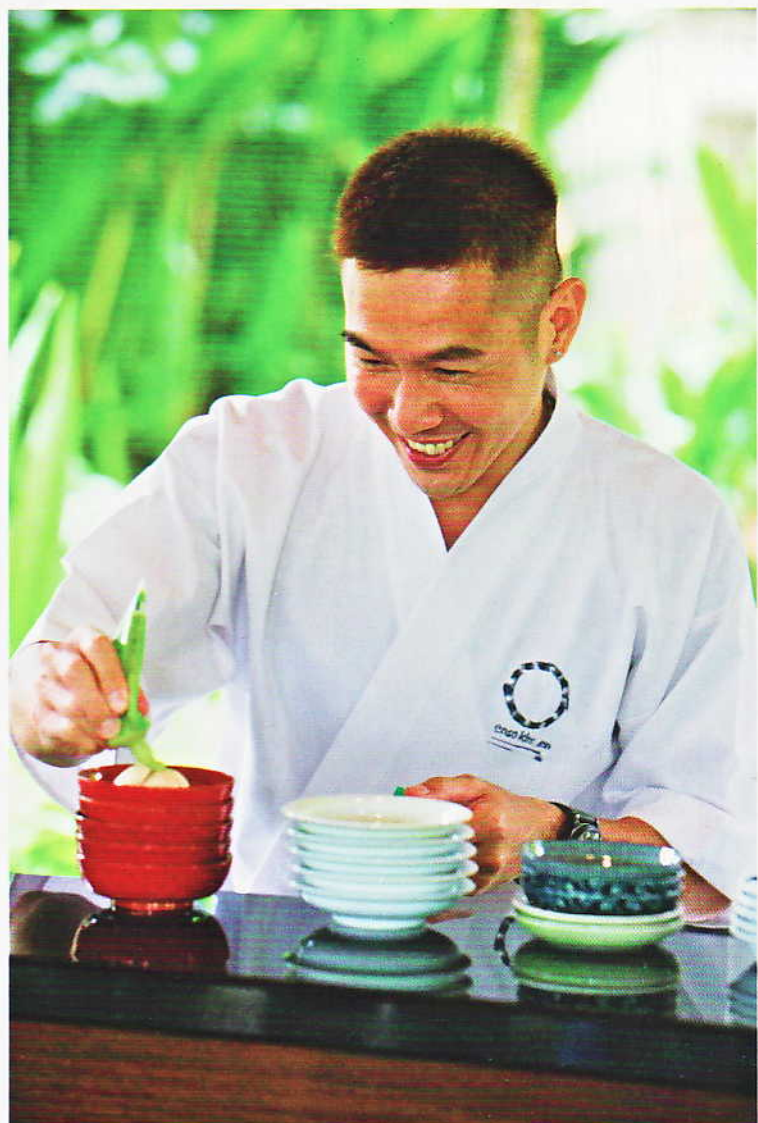
From right: Chef Danny Chu takes pride in presenting *shojin ryori*; little touches like these make a trip to *Spa Botanica* unforgettable

Previous page: *Spa Botanica*'s spiral labyrinth

**C**ooking with a monk did not feature on Danny Chu's itinerary when he first went to Japan a few years ago. But then a friend there introduced him to *shojin ryori* and so enamoured was the Buddhist with the Zen-inspired temple cuisine that he returned soon after to explore this further with a monk from a temple in the Kanagawa prefecture, just outside Tokyo.

Two years on, Chu runs a successful home catering service, *Enso Kitchen*, offering exquisite Zen temple cuisine made from only the finest seasonal vegetables and plant-based ingredients.

Inaugurated in February 2006, *Enso Kitchen* has won itself many fans, thanks to Chu's meticulous preparations and acute palate. As it is based on a philosophy of no killing, *shojin* cooking is vegan in nature. This



gives it an appeal that has led to the recent collaboration between *Enso Kitchen* and *Spa Botanica*, offering spa-goers a holistic experience that pampers them from within the body. Guests receive a 90-minute massage treat in a private villa, followed by a *shojin ryori* lunch.

"*Shojin ryori* embraces the philosophy that I practise every day," Chu explains as he prepares a six-course meal for his guests at *Spa's* Japanese-style teahouse. "As a Buddhist and vegetarian, I was most interested in how I can extend my practice of Buddhism into a way of life."

Sheila McCann, Director of Spas at *The Sentosa Resort & Spa*, explains why she is happy working with Chu: "We wanted to create a different kind of experience that synergises the benefits of both spa and healthy cuisine. Many of our guests are more conscious and interested in what they are eating—we want to lavish our guests with a holistic experience."

## THE PERFECT ESCAPE

To celebrate his new project, Chu has invited close friends, Elizabeth Lee, Tara Melwani and Nadya Hutagalong to enjoy a day at the spa. "I want them to be the first to experience my new partnership with *Spa Botanica*. It is a great example of how Zen cooking can be a complement to a way of life," the amiable chef enthuses.





A shojin ryori meal appeals to all senses



be my guest...



Top: The ladies are spoilt for choice when selecting massage oils

Bottom: The high mineral content in volcanic mud has a purifying effect on the skin

Situated in a verdant cul de sac off *The Sentosa Resort & Spa's* principal site, *Spa Botanica* is an oasis built for de-stressing and resting. Indonesian-style spa villas are strewn throughout the 6,000 sq m compound that includes a lap pool, a mud pool and a well-equipped fitness centre. The ladies collectively concur as they step onto its premises that they instantly feel calmer and less tense.

Melwani and Hutagalung tell us that they are familiar with the Zen temple cuisine, having previously asked Chu to cater for their dinner parties. Lee met Chu at a *dhama* class and both are more than happy to share with us their views on Chu's cooking.

"I'm glad Chu went to Japan to learn *shojin* cooking," says Lee. "When he asked me to try his food, I wondered why anyone would give up sashimi for something like this. But I was impressed. As a meat

lover, I don't feel short-changed at all. In fact, I will go as far as to say that this is a great introduction if you want to go vegetarian."

A recent convert to vegetarianism, Hutagalung admires the principle of *shojin ryori*. She says: "The philosophy of not harming living things and giving thought to what goes into your body appeals to me."

The three ladies are joined by Hutagalung's good friend, Juliet Smythers, a vegetarian of 23 years who has yet to try *shojin ryori*. Every Japanese restaurant she has been to, she says, has always accommodated the fact that she is vegetarian. "However, I feel that I'm not catered for. It feels like the food is simply thrown together." This is why she is excited about trying Chu's cooking.

Chu explains that the temple cuisine is based on five tenets of Buddhist philosophy, adding: "*Shojin ryori* is a way of life. The cooking process has to be mindful so that wastage is minimised and no animals or plants are killed."

## TREAT FOR THE SENSES

After their 90-minutes treatment, the ladies stroll into the teahouse glowing from head to





toe. As they leisurely take their seats beside a *koi* (carp) pond, they chat with Chu about the day's menu.

"An element of *shojin ryori* is that the chef has to use ingredients that are locally available," Chu points out. "The philosophy suggests that only seasonal products are used, so I use ingredients that are freshly available from my surroundings."

Many people have the misconception that Zen temple cooking uses Japanese ingredients because it stems from Japanese cooking.

Disputing this notion, Chu says that he goes to the market in the morning to suss out what is available and devises a menu based on that.

On the day's lunch menu is miso soup with crushed tofu, Japanese rice cooked with soy beans, eggplant with sesame dressing, handmade sesame tofu, edamame beans and *konbu* kelp relish with parboiled chrysanthemum leaves and sake simmered kumquats. Illustrating all the principles

of *shojin ryori*, each course has been carefully thought out and executed. For example, Chu leaves the tofu to be crushed at the very last minute before being added it to the soup to ensure that everyone gets an equal share.

"This is the practice of equanimity, one of the principles of *shojin ryori*," he explains. The use of seasonal kumquats reflects another principle of temple cuisine—showing an awareness of local surroundings. During the Chinese New Year period, kumquats are used as decorative fruit.

"I wanted to show that *shojin ryori* makes full use of ingredients that are in season," says Chu. "Most people would also throw the fruit away after using it as a decoration. By cooking it, I'm making sure that it does not go to waste."

### FOOD FOR THE SOUL

"In today's diet, there is so much processed food and it is very difficult to find tasty and

healthy food," Melwani observes contemplatively after sampling Danny's miso soup.

"*Shojin ryori* is prepared using the freshest ingredients, so little seasoning is used. What distinguishes this from other vegetarian food is that Danny embodies the values of his cuisine—it really shows in his food."

The ladies agree that after a relaxing massage, it is a treat to sit down and enjoy healthy food that is both visually appealing and light. Hutagalung sums it up succinctly: "The idea of sitting down in a tranquil space and enjoying delicious vegetarian food is great. It's about taking time to treat ourselves—first physically—to remove the toxins from our bodies, and then eating this food to nourish (ourselves) from the inside out. I think we can all get used to the whole philosophy of taking stock of time and appreciating ourselves."

## DANNY'S RECIPES

### Simmered kumquat

Serves 4

#### Ingredients:

8 kumquats  
1½ cup water  
5 tbsp sugar  
2 tbsp sake  
pinch of salt, to taste  
mint leaves (optional)

#### Method:

Simmer kumquats in water for 10 mins to remove bitterness. Discard water. Place kumquats and the rest of the ingredients in a saucepan. Bring to a boil and then simmer for 20 mins. Cool and let it rest in the pot overnight. Garnish with mint leaves.

### Miso soup with tofu

Serves 4

#### Ingredients:

5 cups water  
10cm *konbu* kelp  
4 tbsp white miso  
1 block silken tofu  
sesame seeds, to taste (optional)

#### Method:

Place water in a large pan and add *konbu*. Bring to a boil and then simmer for 30 mins. Slowly mash the tofu into the *konbu* dashi. Then dissolve the miso. Sprinkle sesame just before serving.



Simmered  
Kumquat