

Shojin Ryori – Food for the Soul

In the 13th century, Zen monks from China made popular a form of vegetarian cuisine in Japan known as *Shojin Ryori*. The practice of preparing delicious meals with seasonable vegetables and wild plants from the mountains, served with seaweed, fresh soybean curd, and seeds, is a tradition that still exists in Zen Buddhist temples today. Stemming from the Buddhist belief that it is wrong to kill animals, including fish, *Shojin Ryori* is completely vegetarian. Buddhism prescribes partaking of a simple diet every day and abstaining from drinking alcohol or eating meat. Such a lifestyle, together with physical training, clears the mind of confusion and leads to understanding.

Dining in the *Shojin* style means much more than just eating. Food is approached as a vehicle, a part of a much larger daily practice that is the path to enlightenment. It is an opportunity to reflect on how the food was prepared and brought to the table and whether one is truly worthy and deserving of accepting it.

With a canvas of light stock, the *tenzo*, or temple cook, uses the five methods -- boiling, grilling, frying, steaming and serving raw -- to present the six tastes -- bitter, sour, sweet, hot, salty and delicate -- in a way that will delight those partaking. While preparing temple food, the *tenzo* and his or her apprentice -- who stands beside the hearth and chants the sutra while the master cooks -- focus on contemplating the task at hand.

This conscious reflection and contemplation is what really separates *Shojin* from the laissez-faire vegetarianism practiced in the Western world today. As much as it survives as a way of cooking and dining, *Shojin* is, at its heart, a way of life. While we may not all have the patience or commitment to devote so much energy to our food and its preparation, there is much to be learned from simple, elegant *Shojin Ryori*. At least once, take the trouble to seek out a meal of quiet and contemplation -- and feed your soul.

Definition

The word “*Shojin*” means a devotion to pursue a perfect state of mind banishing worldly thoughts and making efforts to keep striving for limitless perfection at each stage. In Buddhism this is the pursuit of enlightenment. The word “*Ryori*” means cooking.

Shojin Ryori Basics

- Part of the daily Zen Buddhist practice for spiritual growth
- Simple vegetarian cooking using fresh seasonal vegetables
- Principle of harmony with nature
- Ingredients prepared with great care and love
- Emphasis on tradition
- Strives for subtle, developing flavours
- Tries to harmonize the six tastes: sweet, salty, vinegary, bitter, hot and a delicate aftertaste
- No alcoholic beverages. No eating of all types of meat (including fish) as well as the five strong-smelling herbs of the lily family (garlic, scallions, onions, shallots and leeks)
- A typical meal normally included rice, soup, Japanese pickles, 2 or 3 savory protein and vegetable dishes
- An effort is made to waste nothing
- Green tea is usually drunk at the end of a meal and on special occasions fresh fruit would be eaten too
- Desserts not usually eaten
- Served in separate small bowls and plates rather than on one plate so that the different flavours can be appreciated
- Served on a tray with legs called a *hozen*
- Usually eaten in complete silence