**Kyoto Cuisine (*Kyo ryori*)**

**[COLUMN]**

Kyoto is an ancient city that was the capital of Japan and the nation’s cultural epicenter for more than a thousand years. Its rich culinary heritage has been heavily influenced by aristocratic culture and religious practices, particularly those of Buddhism. In fact, Kyoto cuisine, or *kyo ryori*, can be considered an amalgam of the culinary traditions of the imperial court, high-ranking samurai households, and Buddhist temples.

The sparse use of meat in *kyo ryori* reflects the Buddhist tradition. Buddhist monks traditionally live on vegetarian diets, as their religion prohibits them from killing live creatures. The main source of protein in the Buddhist cuisine known as *shojin ryori* is tofu. The dictates of *shojin ryori* specify that there should be five colors and five flavors in every meal. This led temple cooks to pursue a balance of flavor and presentation that continues to influence *kyo ryori* today.

The aristocratic, samurai, and Buddhist influences come together in the traditional multicourse meal known as kaiseki, which consists of small portions of highly seasonal dishes. The season affects the choice of ingredients and dishes as well as their presentation. Kaiseki as it is known today is thought to originate with Sen no Rikyu (1522–1591), who is considered the founder of the formal tea ceremony. As part of such a ceremony, the tea master would serve his guests light yet highly refined meals that were just substantial enough to satisfy.

Over the centuries, kaiseki developed from an element of the tea ceremony into a formalized dining experience in its own right. Though kaiseki is no longer exclusive to Kyoto, true *kyo ryori* kaiseki can only be enjoyed in the city itself. This is because the local ingredients are what distinguish *kyo ryori* from kaiseki in general.

Several restaurants in the Nishijin area serve *kyo ryori*. As reservations are essential for such a meal, visitors are advised to ask for more details at their place of accommodation.