

## **【Buddhist Vegetarian Cuisine (*Shōjin Ryōri*)】**

*Shōjin ryōri*, or “devotion cuisine,” is the vegetarian diet adopted by Buddhist monks in keeping with the principle of *ahimsā*, a Sankrit word meaning “nonviolence” or “compassion for all things.” There are two types of cuisine that can be called *shōjin ryōri*: the daily meals of monks-in-training, and the luxurious, multi-course meals offered to guests of the temple. Both are vegetarian and emphasize fresh, natural flavors. However, the monks’ regular meals are prepared entirely from items received by donation and from the fruits, vegetables, and nuts that they grow or collect themselves. Nothing is purchased. Such self-sufficiency, combined with strict minimization of waste, has allowed monasteries to survive during lean times.

In contrast to the austere meals eaten by the monks, the *shōjin ryōri* served to guests is a display of culinary artistry. The dishes are served on vivid scarlet lacquerware arranged on a scarlet tray. There may be three, five, seven, or more of them, but the meal always consists of an odd number of dishes.

Each meal balances the five flavors of sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and umami by including a food representing each. They are arranged with both flavor and color in mind to combine ingredients of red, green, white, black, and yellow. These five colors symbolize the Five Buddhas of Wisdom (*godai nyorai*) and appear in other Buddhist contexts such as mandalas and prayer flags. Within *shōjin ryōri*, they are believed to provide complete nutrition.

The use of seasonal ingredients is also a key part of *shōjin ryōri*. Spring meals might feature wild fiddlehead or rapeseed greens; in autumn, sweet potato and chestnuts are common highlights. The preparation of *shōjin ryōri* is time-intensive, partly because of the labor involved in creating substitutes for meat: fresh tofu, fried tofu strips (*aburaage*), wheat gluten (*fu*), mochi, and konjak jelly are used to give texture and substance to dishes. The vegetables are also treated with care. Vegetable tempura, for instance, undergoes an extra step: the vegetables are marinated in miso prior to being battered, giving them more flavor. The fundamental seasonings of *shōjin ryōri* are soy sauce, miso, sake, and sesame, but chefs are careful not to overpower the natural flavors of the fresh ingredients. The meal is concluded with a bowl of matcha and a small dessert, usually fruit.

In Japan, *shōjin ryōri* was popularized along with Zen Buddhism during the Kamakura period (1185–1333). Meat consumption, like alcohol and other mind-altering substances, was thought to cloud the mind and obscure religious insight. It could also stimulate worldly desires that distracted monks from their practices. During rigorous

training, the monks' food and sleep—and as a result, their energy—were intentionally limited to help them focus solely on their daily religious activities. Eating meat, therefore, was not only contrary to *ahimsā* but disruptive to training.

The monk Dōgen (1200–1253), founder of the Sōtō school of Zen, wrote two influential essays on cooking and eating: “Instructions for the Zen Cook” (*Tenzo kyōkun*, 1237), based on food preparation practices he had observed at Chinese monasteries, and “The Dharma for Taking Food” (*Fushuku hanpō*, 1246) on formal procedures for serving, receiving, and eating food. His works helped to codify many of the principles that define *shōjin ryōri* today.

Visitors interested in trying *shōjin ryōri* should contact Taiyōji Temple in the Ōtaki area of Chichibu. Reservations can be made by phone.