

Shojin Ryori

Shojin ryori can be translated as “food for devotees.” The main ingredients used are local wild plants and vegetables, including nuts, mushrooms, roots, bamboo shoots, flowers, rice, tofu, and miso. This diet is associated with ascetics who follow Shugendo, an ancient tradition of mountain asceticism that is associated with Dewa Sanzan. They followed this diet to remain humble and become one with the mountains.

Shugendo ascetics have trained at Dewa Sanzan since the late sixth century. They valued self-sufficiency and resourcefulness and used anything edible on the mountains. They would salt, pickle, and sun-dry the foods they gathered to obtain sustenance for their mountain training.

Heavy snowfall on Mt. Gassan in winter creates snowpack up to 30 meters deep, which lingers for much of the year. These conditions worked to the ascetics’ advantage. Gradual snowmelt means that the same plant species grow at different rates across the mountain, helping to extend the season during which they could forage.

Eating seasonal plants from the mountains was not only a survival tactic. They believed they could purify their bodies by eating such plants, thereby harnessing the energy of the mountain and giving them a better affinity with and appreciation for the surrounding environment. This familiarity with the mountain vegetation gave them insight into the healing properties of some plants. They shared this knowledge with residents of nearby villages when remedies were needed.

Even today, this mountain diet is closely associated with Dewa Sanzan, and pilgrim hostel lodgings (*shukubo*) serve this cuisine, called *shojin ryori*.

Shojin ryori is one reason that the city of Tsuruoka, located near the Dewa Sanzan mountains, was named a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy in 2014. The city’s cuisine continues to be influenced by its spiritual roots, with locally sourced mountain vegetables and plants playing a significant role.