

Dewa Sanzan - Shojin Ryori

The place

More than 1,400 years ago, monks practicing Haguro Shugendo, a form of mountain asceticism that is a highly syncretic religion dating from 593, would make a pilgrimage of spiritual rebirth to the Dewa Sanzan (three sacred mountains of Dewa): Mt. Haguro, Mt. Gassan, and Mt. Yudono, in central Yamagata Prefecture. To complete the pilgrimage, these monks, otherwise known as *yamabushi* (mountain wandering ascetic monks), trained and traveled in sacred spots that were often highly remote. The practice in which it is thought that while still alive you can be reborn as a new soul became popular among the public during the Edo period (1603-1868) as a way to reclaim youthful vitality, and was when the ritual called San-kan San-do (three gates, three passages) in Haguro Shugendo came to be known as a “journey of rebirth”.

To subsist, the monks would forage for edible wild plants including mushrooms, bamboo shoots, grasses, roots, nuts, and flowers. They also created ways to preserve naturally occurring foods using methods such as salting, sun-drying, and pickling.

With the passing of millennia, the practices of these monks came to form part of the foundation of Japanese food culture. Many of the methods of preparation and ingredients are still in use today, as they were centuries ago.

The background

The vegetarian cuisine typically consumed by monks at Zen temples is known as *shojin ryori* (ascetic cuisine). The two *kanji* characters that make up the word *shojin* literally mean “to refine” or “to focus” (*sho*) and “progress” (*jin*). The combined term, *shojin*, can therefore be described as “making spiritual progress” or “those who pursue or devote themselves to spiritual progress.” The second term (*ryori*) means cuisine, thus *shojin ryori* can also be expressed as “cuisine for devotees.”

The *shojin ryori* of the Dewa Sanzan is an integration of Buddhist philosophy, the self-sufficient lifestyle of Shugendo’s *yamabushi*, and Kyoto’s culture brought over by *kitamaebune* trading ships. It is characterized by an abundance of wild mountain vegetables and mushrooms that grow in the Japanese beech tree forest of Mt. Gassan. The cuisine has evolved to become a cuisine of its own. Its existence was a major factor in the certification of Tsuruoka as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy in 2014.

Shojin ryori is a central component of the Dewa Sanzan pilgrimage. According to tradition, pilgrims undertake a *shojin kessai* (purification ritual) that involves changing into robes, putting on a *shime* (spiritual necklace), eating *shojin ryori*, and praying at the altar for safe travel before heading into the mountains. The most common dishes served are *goma dofu* (sesame tofu) and *gassan dake* (Mt. Gassan) bamboo shoot

Since the past, the dishes served in Dewa Sanzan *shojin ryori* is named after places that are connected or have spiritual significance to the Dewa Sanzan faith. Before the pilgrims depart for the mountains, they will listen to explanations about each dish that represents the sacred places and beliefs of Dewa Sanzan while partaking *shojin ryori*. By eating Dewa Sanzan *shojin ryori*, the pilgrim is able to taste the “Spring of Life” offered by the holy mountains.

Even today, there are about 30 *shukubo* (pilgrim’s lodgings) located in a stretch of about 1 kilometer from the foot of Mt. Haguro to the gate of Dewa Sanzan Shrine. *Shojin ryori* is served at these *shukubo*.

The food

As *shojin ryori* is connected to Zen Buddhism, it features no fish or meat. The killing of animals is believed to corrupt the spirit, which would interrupt meditation. For this reason also, strong flavors like onions or garlic are avoided in *shojin ryori*. Seasonings and flavorings, such as *konbu* (dried kelp) used in *dashi* (basic stock), vinegar, soy sauce, sesame oil, *nihonshu* (sake), and *mirin* (sweet sake) are used sparingly, just enough to bring out the natural flavors of the ingredients.

A key component of Dewa Sanzan *shojin ryori* is *sansai* (wild mountain vegetables and mushrooms). The diverse collection of mountain-foraged produce includes *gassan* bamboo shoots, mushrooms, chestnuts, and walnuts, as well as more obscure ingredients like Japanese mugwort, bracken fern fiddleheads, butterbur, *itadori* (Japanese knotweed, *Reynoutria japonica*), ostrich fern fiddleheads, the Japanese herb *shiso* (Perilla, *Perilla frutescens* var. *crispa*), *akamizu* (*Elatostema japonica*), *zenmai* fern (*Osmunda japonica*) and *udo* (*Aralia cordata*). These seasonal items are combined with centuries-old techniques to create the cuisine's eclectic mix of flavors and textures. Dishes are prepared with great care, with cooks making every effort not to waste anything. All of this care and attention is rooted in respect for the earth and the spiritual power it provides humans through food.

Methods to prepare and store the ingredients are also important. Salting, drying, and pickling allow items to be stored for longer periods of time. Many *sansai* in their raw form are too bitter to eat, but these processes render even the toxic ones edible. The preservation methods also give the same ingredients different textures and flavors, providing variety in the meal. Many of these methods are still in use today, centuries after they were originally devised.

The traditional meals provided to pilgrims in training are quite basic, usually consisting of rice, miso soup, and some pickled vegetables. The dishes of this meal are made using recipes that have been handed down for generations. Each pilgrim lodge has its own style of preparation. The most famous dish is *goma dofu* (sesame tofu), a sesame paste cooked with starch which hardens to the consistency of tofu when cooled. It is served with a topping of sweet-savory thick soy sauce called *an*.

One destination to experience *shojin ryori* is Saikan, a former temple at the top of Mt. Haguro that provides devotees with all the requirements for their pilgrimage including an altar for prayer, lodging, and *shojin ryori*. Today it serves not only the devout *yamabushi* it has accommodated for centuries, but also tourists wishing to explore the rich history of the region.