

CHAPTER FOUR

WATER



Celebrating Spring & the Water Element

IN CONVERSATION WITH SHUKO ODA

Words by Beccy Candice Clarke

Spring is the season of birth and new beginnings; of renewal, growth and opportunity. In nature, seeds germinate, flowers bud, leaves unfurl, and bumblebees, moths and butterflies start to make their rounds, drinking the nectar of the sweetest blooms to pollinate and fertilise. We too emerge from the slumber of winter, stretching tired limbs, excited to put into action all that we have been percolating on over the cold winter months, when rest and introspection are prioritised. Our bodies awaken, primed to cleanse themselves and throw off any stagnation that may have accumulated.

In the tradition of Ayurveda, spring is the season of water, or 'apas' in Sanskrit. It is the fourth of the five elements, evolving from ether, air and fire. During this time, the water stored in the snow and ice of winter begins to melt and trickle down from hills and mountains to quench dry soils, rivers and streams. It awakens the earth and coaxes new life. Water is seen as the gentle protector of the body. The source of our most basic nourishment, it provides relief against the heat of fire and the erratic motion of air. It soothes pain and inflammation, eases muscle tension, regulates circulation and lymphatic flow, and hydrates our cells at the deepest level. When we feel stuck, irritable or ungrounded, water inspires us to take on its versatile qualities; to embrace adaptability and to flow with the unexpected waves of life; to move organically and resist rigidity in all our actions and routines.

In spring, for optimal health, food should be fresh, light and cleansing - a way to support our bodies natural desire to cleanse. Here, bitter, sour, astringent foods are ideal with a focus on easy-to-digest ingredients. Warm, light meals take priority. Cooked grains, steamed vegetables and legumes are perfect foundational foods, while freshwater fish, shrimp, tofu, bean sprouts, miso and

hydrated seaweeds make nourishing accompaniments. Introducing these ingredients into your diet has bountiful benefits. Freshwater fish, for example, is filled with omega-3 fatty acids and vitamins, as well as being rich in calcium and phosphorous, zinc, iodine, magnesium and potassium. Seaweeds are one of the best dietary sources of iodine: an excellent thyroid support. They are also packed with vitamins, minerals and antioxidants that help prevent cell damage. Miso is wonderful too. Being fermented, it fuels a healthy gut microbiome, enhancing immune and brain function.

To mark the beginning of spring, we asked Shuko Oda to share four nourishing recipes that celebrate the water element. Shuko is the head chef and co-founder of Koya, London, a Japanese noodle bar specialising in freshly made udon and dashi. Koya first opened in Soho in 2010 and now has three locations across the city. In each, you will find a selection of authentic Japanese plates which elevate the humble udon noodle with a combination of exciting and delicious produce and techniques. I talk to Shuko about her relationship with Japanese cuisine and the importance of good quality ingredients.

Beccy: Japanese culture has a tradition of eating certain foods for breakfast that we might not automatically consider to be breakfast foods over here in the UK - miso soups, grilled fish, nattō, umeboshi plums and so on. These foods are incredibly nutritious and, in fact, make up a very balanced breakfast and a much healthier option than the carb and sugar-heavy foods we often reach for first thing in the morning. What are some of your favourite Japanese breakfast foods and traditions? How can we easily incorporate them into our diets to create healthier meals?



Image Courtesy of Koya Bar

Shuko: As you might know, rice is essential in Japanese breakfasts and is a great way to start the day as it digests much slower than wheat. An easy way to start eating rice for breakfast is to get into the habit of making okayu rice porridge in the morning. It only takes 5 minutes and is an excellent way to use up left over rice. To make it, cover your rice with water, bring it to boil, then simmer for 3-5 minutes, depending on how soft or smooth you'd like your okayu. The traditional Japanese way is to cook rice with 7-10 times the amount of water, but you can use stock instead of water if you prefer. Once the okayu is ready, serve with toppings of your choice. These can be as adventurous or authentic as you'd like, from pickles to a fried egg with chilli oil.

B: Japanese cuisine treats each ingredient with great respect, honouring the natural flavours and textures to create balanced and exciting plates, even with the simplest of ingredients. What ingredients in particular do you love to work with?

S: I love cooking Tokyo turnip. It transforms itself into so many textures and flavours and can be the star of a dish as well as an excellent support. My particular favourite is to simply salt chopped turnip and leave it for a minute before mixing into a leafy salad. The turnip's silky texture after a quick salting sits well amongst the leaves, but offers a crisp, fruity bite too. Another favourite is kabura-mushi, which is steamed fish with grated turnip and an egg-white mixture on top. It's quite a delicate dish that involves some fine tuning but the result, when done right, is exceptional - with the soft mousse-like turnip, delicate fish and dashi together.

B: What are your favourite go-to ingredients that combine both flavour and beneficial medicinal qualities?

S: Pickled umeboshi plums encourage blood circulation as well as helping to increase the appetite when unwell. Umeboshi has a high salt content, so it's not something to be eaten in excess, but is associated with many health benefits. I remember my mother would make Okayu porridge with umeboshi when I was ill as a child. I have always been a umeboshi fanatic and loved its sweet, salty, sour flavour.

B: Could you talk about the health benefits of eating different types of seaweeds and how to best prepare them?

S: Seaweed ticks a lot of boxes for me as it has multiple health benefits. It's high in calcium, magnesium and fibre, to name a few, and is essential in my cooking and diet. In the restaurants, we use 6-7 different types of seaweeds on our menu. All come fresh but salted, so the preparation involves de-salting, then either pickling or cooking them. If you can get your hands on fresh seaweed, that will be best for texture. An easy way to consume seaweed is to make dashi broth with dried kombu kelp, which can be done by simply soaking a piece of kombu in water and leaving it in the fridge. All that needs doing then is to season!

B: You were born in the UK, but moved around a lot, between London, Tokyo and LA. What were the main differences in food culture that you noticed during this time and how did these things influence the way you eat today?

S: I lived abroad at a young age, so wasn't really paying attention to those sort of things. In general, I was probably trying to assimilate whilst holding onto being Japanese too. That said, the differences in food culture were quite pronounced. Being a small child in America, I loved eating mac n' cheese, but also really enjoyed the bento boxes my mum would make for school packed-lunches - even though I was a little shy to get them out sometimes. Life, in many respects, was a balancing act, trying to adapt and enjoy what was around me, whilst also holding on to the things that had been left behind. And I'd say that's what's had the biggest impact on how I eat and think about food today. I can still see it in the food we make at Koya - a balancing act between what's around me every day and what's not.

B: Do you have a favourite childhood memory of time spent in the kitchen, or eating a particular food for the first time? Perhaps something unusual that really made an impact on you and that you still love today?

S: I remember being in a French restaurant when I was younger eating consommé soup for the first time. This clear and light soup was packed with amazing flavours and I



Image Courtesy of Koya Bar

found myself realising that we had the equivalent in Japan: dashi. I don't think you ever forget a taste and whenever I would go back to Japan after a long time away, the taste of dashi in a dish always gave me the sense of being home again.

B: Where did the idea for Koya spring from? What was your original vision and what did you hope to offer your customers?

S: We hoped to achieve a Japanese restaurant that you might find in Japan, not a Japanese restaurant abroad. Back then, most Japanese restaurants in town served everything from ramen to sushi. We wanted to specialise in one particular part of the cuisine which was udon. Our goal was to offer delicious udon and dashi, made fresh every day and showcasing authenticity as well as locality. To show London that's all you need when it's done right.

B: How important are good quality ingredients to the successful outcome of a meal?

S: Crucial. I cannot stress how important good ingredients - knowing how to care for them and how to best eat them - are.

B: You have recently started creating a series of no-waste dishes at the Hackney branch of Koya. What is the driving force behind this idea and what do you hope to create with such an initiative? How does working in this way affect the the way you curate your menu?

S: Trying to generate as little waste as possible is something we've always made effort to achieve, and I believe is something we've been pretty successful at too. For example, the dried kombu kelp and shiitake mushrooms we use in our dashi are reused in another dish after being cooked and pickled. So, when my head chef in Hackney suggested we put on no-waste dishes as specials, the answer was a straight yes. Getting into the habit of thinking about our waste ingredients — how we can reuse them, how to respect our produce and consume the whole entity of an ingredient — is incredibly important. To create a dish from as much waste as possible has been one of the most creative and challenging process we've experienced. This simple practice will hopefully bring more awareness and wholesomeness to our staff, food and customers.

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SHUKO'S RECIPES

Clams, broad beans & capers steamed in dashi butter

I cook this dish both at home and at the restaurants, as it includes three of my favourite things: clams, broad beans and dashi! This combination, along with butter, is golden and is absolutely worth the extra steps.

Ingredients

- 500ml water
- 5g kombu
- 7g usukuchi soy sauce (dark soy sauce also works)
- 4g mirin
- 5g sugar
- A pinch of salt
- 400g palourde clams or surf clams
- A handful of broad beans, podded and peeled to preference
- 2 tsp salted capers
- A handful (8-10 leaves) of wild garlic, if in season - gem lettuce or blanched kale are good alternatives
- 2 knobs of unsalted butter (about 20g)

Method

1. To prepare the dashi, wipe the kombu with a damp cloth, then soak in 500ml of water overnight. Take kombu out and put to one side.
2. Place the mirin in the microwave for 1 minute at 600W (or on the hob for 1-1.5 minutes) to reduce the alcohol.
3. Add the sugar to the mirin and mix until dissolved.
4. Add the mirin, usukuchi soy sauce and ½ the salt into the dashi and bring to boil.
5. In the fridge, soak the clams in 3% salt water for over 4 hours (for example, approximately 9g salt to 300ml water). The water should be just enough to cover a single layer of clams. Make sure they lie flat, not overlapping.
6. Desalt the capers by giving them a quick wash and squeeze.
7. When you're ready to eat, heat up 2 knobs of butter in a deep frying pan
8. with the desalted capers. When the butter is melted, add the broad beans
9. and fry for 1 minute.
10. Drain the clams and wash in fresh water. Add them to the pan along with 200ml dashi and 100ml sake.
11. Put a lid on and let the clams cook until they open. Add the wild garlic at the end.

Nori Tsukudani

This is a great way to use up old nori. The perfect topping for rice or noodles, it's also delicious mixed with butter and used as a seasoning for something like boiled potatoes.

Ingredients

- 12 nori sheets
- 150ml water
- 50ml soy sauce
- 50ml mirin
- 50ml water
- 25g sugar*

Method

1. Tear the nori sheets into small strips and add to a pan along with the water.
2. On a low simmer, gently mix until the nori sheets have dissolved.
3. Add the rest of ingredients and simmer for a further 2 minutes. When ready, it should have the consistency of a paste or thick sauce.

Pickled Wakame

Quick and easy with a silky texture and rich but refreshing flavour. Pickled wakame can be eaten on its own or with rice and noodles.

Ingredients

- 200g fresh wakame (if dried, the weight after soaked in water)
- 20g ginger
- 30ml roasted sesame oil
- 180ml kombu stock
- 60ml rice vinegar
- 40ml mirin
- 50ml usukuchi soy sauce (dark soy sauce also works)
- 15g sugar*

Method

1. Make a kombu stock by soaking 2g kombu in 180ml water overnight. In the morning, take kombu out and place to one side.
2. Peel and julienne the ginger into needles.
3. Make sure as much water as possible is drained from the wakame by squeezing them between your palms.
4. Heat the roasted sesame oil in a pan and add the ginger to stir fry for a couple of minutes before adding the wakame and the rest of the ingredients.
5. Let it come to a boil and simmer for 2 minutes.
6. Enjoy warm, straight out the pan, or cool and chill to eat later with rice, tofu, noodles or salad.

*If you would like to reduce the sugar content of this recipe, for every gram of sugar removed, add 3ml mirin.



Image Courtesy of Koya Bar

Kombu and bonito dashi

I have used a combination of kombu and bonito in this basic recipe, but you can experiment. The more you explore different dried ingredients, the more you will come to understand the subtle changes in flavour, and most importantly, recognise your preferences. The basic formula is to use 1% of a dry ingredient to 100ml of water, and infuse, simmer and season. Think of this recipe as a stock with which most vegetables will work very well - in particular, mushrooms, cabbage, daikon turnip and spinach.

Ingredients - makes 1 litre of dashi

- 10g dried kombu kelp
- 10g bonito flakes
- 15g usukuchi soy sauce (dark soy sauce also works)
- 10g mirin
- 10g sugar*
- 2 pinches of salt

Method

1. Leave the kombu to soak in 1 litre water for at least an hour, then gradually bring to just before a boil on a low heat. It's important to take your time and use a gentle heat to get the best out of the kombu.
2. Remove the kombu and add the bonito flakes. Skim the surface of the dashi to remove any scum that may have appeared.
3. Let the bonito flakes sink to the bottom of the pan, then run through a sieve. A piece of kitchen roll and colander work perfectly.
4. Place the mirin in the microwave for 1 minute at 600W (or on the hob for 1-1.5 minutes) to reduce the alcohol.
5. Add the mirin, sugar, usukuchi soy sauce and salt and bring to the boil.
6. Enjoy this soup on its own, with noodles, or as a simple wakame soup with chopped wakame, spring onion, roasted sesame seeds and grated ginger.

*If you would like to reduce the sugar content of this recipe, for every gram of sugar removed, add 3ml mirin