

# Japanese Food: Spring Veges

September, 2008

Seasonality is one of the cornerstones of Japanese cuisine, and in Spring (as it is here now in the southern hemisphere), produce that is evocative of spring like bamboo shoots, taranome, and kinome appear on restaurant menus and in food outlets in Japan. A lot of spring vegetables are bitter—a sign of vitality, as they have to push up through the snow and fight off the last chill of winter.

## Kinome

Kinome is the fragrant green sprig of the Szechuan peppercorn tree (genus: *Zanthoxylum*) and is called Sansho in Japanese. It's not of the pepper family, but the "pepper" is the outer pod of the fruit. In Japan, the sansho powder (ground Szechuan pepper) is often sprinkled on Unagi (eel) dishes and Yakitori. The sprig or kinome is available only in Spring, and Kei's tree in Sydney began to sprout vibrant green leaves right on cue in the first week of September.

We pick the sprigs before they get too big (no more than about 5cm) and use them as garnish in soups, grind them and mix with miso for kinome miso. To release the flavour, we just clap them in our hands before adding to soups. It's mostly the kinome scent, though the flavour is prized for evoking seasonal nuance.

Unfortunately, kinome is not available readily in Australia, but if you have a friend who has a tree, spring is the time to renew that friendship, as it's only available for a short time.

## Taranome

A bitter and rather unattractive vegetable, taranome is the budding shoot of the Tara tree, a deciduous shrub (*Aralia Elata* or Japanese Angelica tree). It is considered a delicacy and often served as tempura. The hint of bitterness is considered evocative of spring.

Again, hard to obtain, though some Japanese growers, like our friend Tami Ohnuki at Terania Creek, next to Nightcap National Park in northern New South Wales grows some.

## Fuki

Fuki is a variety of coltsfoot and has a subtle flavour and crunchy fibrous texture like celery. Preparation is a bit of a chore—first remove the big round leaf and roll the stalks with plenty of salt on a

chopping board using the palm of your hand. This process is called Itazuri. Immerse in boiling water and boil for about 5 mins, or until the fuki is a bright green. Wash under cold running water, and peel the membrane. It should be tender by now. Simmer in Dashi, usukuchi soy sauce, sugar and salt for a delicately flavoured simmered dish (nimono) or cook with chilli in oil like kinpira. with Itazuri salt. Boiling water boil. Colour will be green. Running water, wash, peel.

## Bamboo Shoots

There are many varieties of bamboo shoot, but the general rule is that they must be harvested just as the tip of the shoot breaks the ground. It's a pain to dig, but once removed from the ground, cut the tip and score vertically with a knife through the skin. Just peel a few of the outer woody skin, and place in cold water with a little chilli and rice bran and bring to the boil. Boil for at least an hour, or until the shoot is tender and leave in the water overnight until cool. Then peel the skin and slice the tender bamboo shoot and enjoy as sushi, cooked in rice, sauted or stir fried or however you like. Bamboo shoot is versatile and delicious.

There have been many attempts to harvest bamboo shoot in Australia, and there may be trial commercial crops, though the ones we've come across in Sydney have not been very palatable.

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