

和食ワールドチャレンジ2015 決勝戦出場者

Foregoing Spices to Acquire a Japanese Palate One chef's quest for Japanese authenticity in the Middle East



Wasala Thusharath Mudiyansele (45, Sri Lanka)

Wasala Thusharath Mudiyansele first discovered washoku when he graduated from culinary school in Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital, and answered a wanted ad in the newspaper. At the time, though, he gained no opportunities to learn cooking; his duties were menial tasks like cleaning. Little wonder that he did not develop a special interest in washoku at that stage.

The big change came around twelve years ago when Mudiyansele was working jobs at teppanyaki and Sri Lankan restaurants. He heard from a friend about an opening at Kiku, the Japanese restaurant in Le Meridien Dubai, a hotel in the United Arab Emirates. Taking up the offer, Mudiyansele worked under a Japanese head chef who, he recalls, “taught me all about Japanese cuisine and changed my life.”

Kiku serves traditional Japanese cuisine, and is frequented by Japanese people seconded by their companies to work in Dubai. Mudiyansele's time there began with an order from the head chef to refrain from eating food containing spices for six months. The only condiment he was allowed to use was soy sauce; the only liquors, beer and saké. It was a drastic move, but necessary if the Sri Lankan was to understand the Japanese palate.

“Like Japan, Sri Lanka is an island country,” explains Mudiyansele. “And like Japan, we eat a lot of fish and even use dried bonito shavings in our cuisine. But every dish is flavored with lots of spices. Chef didn't make recipes, so I had no choice but to watch and learn. I had to give up the spices I was so used to, or I would not have been able to discern and recreate his subtle flavors.” Mudiyansele says that he began to tell the different flavors of soups and pickles after two months of abstinence, and he remembers vividly the day he won approval from the head chef for his miso soup. He has risen to the position of senior sous chef at Kiku now.

Mudiyansele's entry in the Washoku World Challenge is Simmered Sauries with Pickled Plums. His decision to use saury was influenced by the seasonality of Japanese cuisine: saury is an autumnal fish, and would be in season right around the time of the Washoku World Challenge primary examination. Indeed, stewed saury with pickled plums is a washoku classic, which Mudiyansele chose as a symbol of his quest for Japanese authenticity in the Middle East and his devotion to the vocation of Japanese cuisine.

The dish contains saury in two styles for variation: one flavored with “needle-cut” ginger, and the other with thinly sliced *shiso*.

“One day I'd like to open a cozy little ramen noodle house,” says Mudiyansele, who is also looking forward to using his time in Japan for the WWC finals to sample some local food that cannot be found in Dubai.



Simmered Sauries with Pickled Plums