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Studying the Language in Japan Leads to a Discovery of Washoku Choosing the path of chef at a turning point in life



Cho Seo-Young (40, South Korea)

Cho Seo-Young was on a language-learning trip to Japan 10 years ago when she fell under washoku's spell. Cho says she likes yakitori and other izakaya fare, but was most attracted to kaiseki cuisine. Kaiseki was different from Korean cooking, where the intrinsic flavor of the ingredients is often obscured by the strong hot taste of chili peppers, and she was attracted to its delicacy that brings out the flavor of the ingredients. The way kaiseki dishes also reflect the four seasons and are pleasant to the eye, "thrilling the eater before eating," also captured her imagination.

Cho has experienced both marriage and divorce in Japan. When she felt she had to develop a skill to put food on her table, the thought of washoku came into her mind. She had always wanted to learn how to cook in earnest, so she decided to choose the path of the chef, and knocked on the door of the TSUJI Culinary Institute. The year was 2013.

Cho cites kaiseki wan-mono (items served in bowls that include a broth) as her favorite type of washoku. The flavors of these soups are not strong—they basically use only light soy sauce, salt, bonito flakes, and kombu—but they are deep and the taste of the main food in the broth is well brought out. "In South Korea, we don't have delicate broths like the Japanese wan-mono," says Cho. "In my study of washoku, it was very difficult for me to grasp this sense of delicacy. While the cuisine is extremely simple, the flavor will change with the slightest change in balance. It was very hard to figure out just how to find the perfect flavor." What she submitted as her entry to the contest is wan-mono, of course: "Seafood with tomato and turnip in savory broth."

Oseon is a steamed and rolled traditional South Korean palace cuisine that includes a white fish, vegetables, and egg. It is an attractive dish to look at, and uses the five colors cherished by Koreans—green, red, yellow, white, and black. After thinking about how to express herself through wan-mono, she arrived at this washoku-Korean collaboration. The fish is lightly seasoned and she felt that this elegant flavor would make for a fine wan-mono.

Cho also insisted on finding a new expression for the soup. "I wanted to try to express it with an ingredient other than kombu and bonito flakes, which are the basis for the umami of a Japanese soup." She came up with a broth using tomato. She fixed her attention on the fact that tomatoes are rich in glutamic acid, which is the basis of the flavor of kombu. Tomatoes have their own unique acidity, so to tone it down, she added mashed turnip to the soup to achieve the overall balance.

Cho is currently refining her skills in the Japan Cuisine Research Course at the TSUJI Culinary Institute. She has already been tapped to start working at Nagahori, a 1-star Michelin Izakaya in Osaka after graduation in spring. Cho says, "After attaining more skill in Japan, I want to open up a washoku restaurant in South Korea in the future."



Seafood with tomato and turnip in savory broth