



万願寺唐辛子のおかか和え *Manganji Tōgarashi no Okaka Aé*

Skillet-Seared Peppers,
Tossed with Smoky Fish Flakes

OKAKA is a culinary nickname, of sorts, that became popular during the Muromachi period (1337 to 1573 AD). At that time, the language of courtesans, referred to as *nyōbō kotoba*, was filled with special words of endearment. *Okaka* is one of many such archaic words that remain in common use.

In the classic Japanese kitchen, many vegetables are BRIEFLY treated to heat – either by blanching (spinach, asparagus, green beans) or skillet-searing (peppers, leeks and onions, mushrooms) and finished off with a garnish of *katsuo-bushi* (fish flakes). The flakes are dry-roasted to heighten their smoky flavor and to make them easier to crush to a powder. The flakey-powdery fish infuses the vegetables with deep smoky flavor (somewhat like adding bacon bits to a salad). *Okaka* dishes make good *obentō* fare because the addition of dry fish flakes absorbs excess moisture (prevents “weeping”)

It may be difficult to source *manganji tōgarashi* outside Japan. In which case I suggest you use this recipe as a as a point of departure, for creating your own *Okaka Aé* dishes from whatever seasonal produce you have on hand. *Piman* (sweet green, red or yellow peppers) are wonderful prepared *okaka*-style; colorful, sweet peppers are readily available in many markets. Japanese *shishitō* peppers, increasingly available in even non-Asian markets, provide a bit of fire.

Makes 4 *obentō*-sized portions.

- 6-8 *manganji tōgarashi* OR 4 large *piman* (sweet red, yellow or green peppers), about 250 grams/9 ounces
- 1/4 cup, packed (about 10 grams), *katsuo-bushi* flakes
- 1/2 teaspoon *goma abura* (aromatic sesame oil)
- pinch coarse salt
- 1 tablespoon *saké*
- drop *mirin* (syrupy rice wine) or honey; optional

Slice the peppers in half, quarters, or strips, lengthwise. Remove and discard (compost) fibrous ribs and tough seeds. Set aside the pepper pieces.



Heat your skillet over a low flame and add the fish flakes to the skillet to dry-roast them. Jiggle the skillet to keep the flakes from scorching. When the flakes begin to

wiggle (warm air currents in the pan cause the light-weight flakes to dance about) and become slightly aromatic, remove the skillet from the stove. Crush the flakes (they should be quite brittle) when cool enough to handle; either coarse or fine flakes are fine. **Set aside** the dry-roasted flakes and “clean” the skillet by wiping a dry paper towel over the surface to remove residue. **DO NOT RINSE** the pan.



Return the skillet to the stove and add the sesame oil. When it becomes aromatic, but NOT SMOKING hot, add the green pepper pieces and sauté until they seem to be coated with the oil. If you like, you can turn up the heat and hold the peppers down with an *otoshi-buta* to sear and blister them.

Sprinkle with salt; toss, and then add the *saké*. A cloud of steam will rise as this de-glazes the pan. Jiggle the pan and tilt to the side so you can taste for seasonings. If necessary, adjust with a few drops of *mirin* or honey to add sweetness (balance the saltiness). Remove from the heat. Sprinkle in about 1/4 of the reserved flakes & toss to distribute well.

Just before serving (or placing in *obentō*) toss with some more flakes. Set aside any remaining flakes for future use. A glass jar or other non-reactive container is the best for storage. Refrigerate for up to 2 weeks. Lightly re-roast just before using.



VARIATIONS: Make the dish with (slightly spicy) *shishito* or *Manganji* peppers. Trim tops of peppers and either slit and scrape out seeds, or leave as is (the seeds are slightly bitter and lend some heat, too, but are fine to consume). Or, Cut into circular slices, or wedges.



You can use sweet red (and/or yellow) peppers, too.