



Umani 旨煮

SOY-SIMMERING MUSHROOMS & ROOT VEGETABLES

Literally “deliciously simmered,” the word *umani* describes a method of slow-simmering that insures deeply flavored, tender morsels. Most versions include dried *shiitaké* mushrooms either alone or in combination with various root vegetables. Some variations include chicken, pork and/or *tōfu*. Below I offer a classic *shōjin* (temple vegetarian) version that uses the liquid that is a by-product of softening dried *shiitaké*.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.

Sankai Dashi (Kelp & Dried *Shiitaké* Stock)

Ingredients

- 1 generous quart (1 liter) cold water
- 8 to 10 square inches (20-25 sq cm) *kombu* (kelp)
- 6 dried *shiitaké* mushroom caps (break stems off and set aside for when you want stock but are not cooking mushroom caps)

Method

Place *kombu* and *shiitaké* caps in a 2-quart glass jar and fill with water. Soak for at least 20 minutes (and up to 12 hours). The jar can be left at room temperature unless it is a very hot day, in which case I recommend you place it in the refrigerator and allow at least 2 hours to draw out flavor. After extracting flavor, the stock can be kept refrigerated for up to 4 days. The cold water infusion is highly flavorful and can be strained (to remove any gritty material that might have been clinging to the dried mushrooms) and used as is. Once the mushrooms are soft, cut each in half.

Umani (Soy-Simmered Mushrooms & Root Vegetables)

Ingredients

- 12 pieces softened *shiitaké* mushrooms (from above)
- 3-4 ounces *gobō* (burdock root), scrapped and cut into a dozen chunks AND/OR
- 3-4 ounces bamboo shoots, parboiled and cut into a dozen chunks
AND/OR
- 3-4 ounces *renkon* (lotus root), peeled, cut into chunks and soaked in water to which a spoonful of vinegar has been added. Drain and rinse before using.
- 3-4 ounces carrot, scrapped or peeled and cut into a dozen chunks
- 12 fresh snow peas, strings removed & blanched; cut in half on diagonal

Seasonings

- 1 tablespoon *saké*
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce

Method

Place the softened, sliced *shiitaké* caps in a shallow but wide pot. Add *sankai dashi* (stock), *saké* and sugar and bring it to a simmer. Froth (scum) will appear in large clouds; skim away. Maintaining a steady but gentle simmer, cook the mushrooms for 3 to 4 minutes. Cover the vegetables with an *otoshi-buta* (dropped lid; see notes at the end of this recipe) for best results.

Add the burdock root, bamboo shoot and/or lotus root to the pot and continue to simmer for 5 more minutes. Add more stock (or water) if the vegetables look in danger of scorching. Test the root vegetables for tenderness: a toothpick should meet little or no resistance when inserted. Add the carrots and simmer for another minute or two.

Once all the vegetables are tender, add the soy sauce. Swirl to be sure the seasonings are evenly distributed and simmer (covered with an *otoshi-buta*) for a final 2 minutes. Remove the pot from the stove and allow the vegetables to cool to room temperature with the *otoshi-buta* in place. It is in this cooling-down process that the vegetables absorb flavor.

The Japanese serve soy-simmered vegetables at room temperature. But even if you want to serve them hot, allow them to cool once before re-heating for full flavor. Cooked-and-cooled vegetables may be stored in the refrigerator, covered, for up to 5 days. Just before serving the soy-simmered vegetables toss in the snow peas.

落とし蓋 OTOSHI-BUTA (dropped lids):

Old-fashioned technology still useful today! Below, a kitchen scene from a 16th century scroll (Shuhanron Emaki) 酒飯論絵巻 + a variety of sizes of *otoshi-buta* + lid in pot



Because *otoshi-buta* lids drop down to sit directly on the food (not the rim of the pot), bubbling liquid recirculates as it hits the underside of the lid. Quicker, more even distribution of heat means less energy is needed to prepare food... And the food is more deeply seasoned.

Lids come in various sizes; chose one that is slightly smaller in diameter than the pan or pot with which it will be used.