Zen to Berlin

bringing the taste of

LUCINDA COWING
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
MITSUE NAGASE

My mind spins as Bernd Schellhorn leads me through some of the many twists and turns of his career, starting with a stint as an apprentice to an old master of Setoyaki* pottery while in his early 20s (—ah, but before that he was a furniture maker in his native Germany, he adds). Indeed I have encountered few who are quite as comfortable in the fluidity of their existence as Bernd, now a consultant of contemporary art. But what is clear throughout his tale is that some 30 years of passionate engagement with Japanese culture has informed much of his approach.

I had wanted to speak to Bernd specifically about his latest endeavour, events featuring *shojin ryori*, the special vegetarian cuisine originally associated with Japanese Buddhist temples. A glimpse of some very elegant photos of his creations by *Kyoto Journal* friend Mitsue Nagase (featured here) on social media piqued my interest, above all because they were location-tagged: "Berlin." Needless to say, in our highly globalized world countless food traditions have been transplanted outside of their original context (albeit in varying degrees of intactness), but the idea that a Westerner was trying to recreate this highly layered cuisine, so deeply rooted in Buddhist precepts, over in the German capital, was irresistible to me.

The best kind of interviews are those that meander in unexpected

• Seto ware originates from central Japan and constitutes one of the Six Old Kilns.

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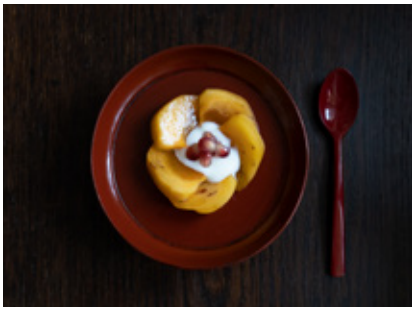
ways, and the same could be said of my chat with Bernd one September evening over Skype. Being acquainted with many expats in Japan—the founders and many contributors at *Kyoto Journal* included—who arrived in the 70s and 80s, deeply influenced by Zen Buddhism, I wondered whether Bernd perhaps had been a life-long admirer of Dogen, or had spent considerable time in a temple setting. What it was about shojin that captivated him 10 years ago? In fact, the impetus turns out to have been simply "the taste," and Bernd does not shy away from using expletives to stress how ridiculously delicious shojin is.

A lifelong love of eating and cooking brought Bernd in touch first with Japan's refined *kaiseki ryori* haute-cuisine—as you guessed, Bernd is no vegetarian—which led to him taking a few months of the year away from Berlin to chef at prestigious ryokan inns and restaurants, including Kyoto's Tsujitome and Hiiragiya Ryokan. Indeed, if Bernd is not organizing tours for the trustees of fine European art



SHOJIN

The word "*shojin*" consists of the two characters meaning "purify" (*sho* 精) and "advance" (*jin* 進): "a way to go forward with purity of heart." The roots of *shojin ryori* may be found in pre-Buddhist India, but it was in the Seventh century when monastic cooking techniques were introduced to Japan's ancient capital of Nara from China. It saw further development through the coming centuries, particularly so under the monk Dogen, who wrote the influential *Tenzo Kyokun* (*Instructions for the Cook*). At a basic level, shojin can be understood as cuisine that prohibits foods derived from animals, and those with pungency, such as onion, garlic and leek. But it is better thought of as a code that cultivates respect and gratitude towards nature, inner reflection and a way of truly savouring food. Indeed, the preparation, serving and receiving of shojin ryori is an important part of Zen practice.

Artwork by Daiki Nakada

museums and other private groups to Japan, he is invariably in the kitchen.

Bernd was accepted as a trainee in shojin cooking at the Michelin-starred Ajiro, situated at the gates to Myoshin-ji Temple, but it was his encounter with the chef Tanahashi Toshio that marked a turning point. "He is one of the few of his generation really able to create authentic shojin," he says.

When interviewed in *Kyoto Journal* in 2013, Tanahashi revealed some disillusionment with the state of food culture in Japan, most notably by stating that he would never take on an apprentice. "I have yet to meet anyone who is earnest about learning the art of shojin cuisine," he lamented. Sadly, by the time Bernd had crossed paths with Tanahashi, he had already resolved to close up shop on Kyoto's Gokomachi Street, where he served up what was arguably the best freshly-made *gomadofu* (sesame tofu) in all the city, to continue his practice overseas. While unsuccessful in convincing him to stay, Bernd is highly nostalgic about his month working with the master: "We would only eat at Tanahashi's, and unlike at most kitchens, we always took our time," he says. It was revelatory too in other ways: Bernd had wondered what it would be like to eat nothing else but shojiin for that entire period, whether he would tire of it. "Your body is happy" when eating this food, "and so is your mind," he insists. "The balance is just right."

I ask Bernd about some of his recent activities in Berlin and his approach to teaching shojin. "We really try to use local—and wherever possible, organic—ingredients. The rice, while a Japanese variety, comes from Italy, and we still have to import *kombu*, mirin and saké, which is difficult to find in Europe or not of good quality here." The menus on offer at his events, he says, are mostly unplanned: he simply uses what is in season and picks out what he likes at the market that day. "Of course, the results are much more carefully crafted," he notes, but this kind of adaptability—the adherence to seasonality and using what is available—is one crucial pillar of shojin. He gives as an example a

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cooking session with Fujii Mariko, the widow of Fujii Sotetsu, Zen monk and scholar of Japanese cuisine who wrote prolifically about shojin through the 80s and 90s, who he first invited to Berlin in 2017. Fujii, who continues her late husband’s work out of Fushikian in Kamakura, was surprised by how unfamiliar vegetables could be so seamlessly paired with Japanese ingredients. They discovered the taste and colouring of the local root vegetable, kohlrabi, for instance, is the “perfect” addition to miso soup.

Ultimately, the principles of shojin are highly transferable and not so difficult—unlike, say, French cuisine, Bernd explains to me. “It’s about taking a carrot and extracting the very best flavour from it.” But there is no denying that it is, as he says, “intensely time consuming” and requires true dedication. It is for this reason that shojin ryori restaurants are unlikely to be cropping up in Germany anytime soon… “Can you imagine how expensive it would be? And it is not as though people have that sort of money to spend.” Despite this, Bernd is certain the time for shojin is now. “There is a newfound appreciation for food and interest in where ingredients come from, traditional ingredients, organic, in season, local…”

Speaking of his workshops, Bernd says, "There is an enormous amount of interest, and not necessarily from Japanophiles." But it is during these gatherings where Bernd's experiences in Japan come full circle: he does not lecture laboriously on Zen philosophy nor take an overly hands-on approach to teaching. Instead, he introduces participants to shojin first through simply tasting it and seeing how it is served.

Bernd has a significant collection of lacquerware and ceramics, he tells me, which he thoroughly enjoys using on such occasions to complement the colours and textures of the dishes. "I let participants discover the ideas connected to Zen on their own...in the Japanese kitchen it is very busy, and there is no time to explain such things. You're taught by watching how it's done and then doing your very best to recreate it. You are invited to make mistakes, rather than told how to avoid them from the outset." He also likens this to his ceramics training, which he undertook at a time when he could barely utter a word of Japanese to follow what was happening without observation.

Bernd admits to being close to tears sometimes at the lack of motivation in Japan to save uniquely rich traditions from disappearing completely—not just shojin, which has a history of over 1,000 years. We muse on the idea that, although the future is uncertain, perhaps it takes an outsider perspective to lend these things a freshness that could attract a new generation. In the meantime, though, Bernd is preparing to spend six months in collaboration with Mitsue-san, filming a documentary on the modern-day proponents of shojin across Japan.

I wholeheartedly appreciate Bernd's sentiment, when he says: "Being able to share shojin with others is good reason enough to make it." Yet, as someone who would rather attempt to pass off ready-made lasagne as their own at a dinner gathering, I suspect that I will remain but an admiring observer of such a feat.

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