

Mindfulness in the city: Falling in love with tofu



Changing minds about tofu through beautiful and delicious dishes

Caroline Ishii
Columnist

OTTAWA — I’ve had a love-hate relationship with tofu. Growing up, one of my favourite ways of eating fresh tofu was cold with grated ginger, green onion slivers, *katsuobushi* (dried bonito flakes), and *shoyu*. Called *hiyayakko*, it’s still one of my go-to dishes on hot, humid summer days. It’s easy to prepare, and its cool creamy texture with vibrant bursts of flavour is refreshing and delicious. I’ve never understood the firm, dense tofu that started appearing in supermarkets and crossed into the mainstream in the 1970s, often on vegetarian restaurant offerings. I would often find this

tofu dense, pasty, and tasteless. This tofu became one of the foods that represented vegetarian food for many, and why people equated veg food as hippish, boring, and healthy-tasting—which is not a good trait when you sacrifice taste and beauty for it being good for you. When I went to the Natural Gourmet, a chef school focusing on plant-based whole foods in New York City, we often did not cook with tofu. Instead, we would concentrate on whole-food proteins like lentils, beans, and tempeh. One of my teachers at the school used to be the personal chef for the comedian Jerry Seinfeld. He wasn’t vegetarian, and I asked him why he wanted to teach in a primarily plant-based school. He said it’s easy to make

Before going to Natural Gourmet, I asked my friend Alfredo for restaurant recommendations for a trip to San Francisco. He said, you’ve got to go to Millennium. It’s fantastic, and by the way, it is vegan. I loved the beautiful fine-dining ambiance at Millennium and was blown away by Chef Eric’s creativity and talents with vegan whole foods, bringing it to the highest levels of appearance and taste I never knew was possible with veg food. And I loved his philosophy of supporting local farmers and the community. This experience influenced me to go to the Natural Gourmet, where Chef Eric studied, and to train at his San Francisco restaurant. When I returned to Ottawa from chef school and my internships, I wanted to start cooking food for people that was beautiful, delicious, healthy, and vegan. So, I started with monthly pop-up dinners that led to opening my restaurant ZenKitchen in Ottawa, the first vegan fine dining restaurant in Canada. With ZenKitchen, I wanted to change people’s minds about veg food as being boring and bland. And for people to come to the



PHOTO COURTESY: SOYERIE

Chef Caroline Ishii created a spicy Korean-inspired tofu and sweet potato noodles stir fry recipe for Soyerie, an organic tofu supplier in the Ottawa-Gatineau region.

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meat and fish taste good, but making beans taste delicious is an art form. His words stayed with me. And I recognized what he said was true. So much of the veg food I was seeing and tasting in those days looked and tasted brown, mushy, and unappealing.

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restaurant first and foremost because the food was beautiful and delicious—even sexy. The fact that the food was vegan and good for you and the planet would be secondary. And I was reluctant to serve tofu. When I opened ZenKitchen in 2007, many people didn’t even

know how to pronounce vegan, often saying “vay-gan,” and related it to a cult-type food that was the staple of hippies living in communes. When I went to get funding for my restaurant, the banks

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From HOCKEY P. 1

Toronto since 1989. “I had always played hockey with Caucasians, and playing hockey with players of my heritage was definitely a special event.” Katsumi collaborated with the Ottawa Asian Heritage Month Society in 2008 on the initial planning of the intercultural tournament, which invites hockey players of at least one-quarter Asian heritage (including Chinese, South Asian, and Japanese) to form teams to play in a fun but competitive event. Teams often include a mixture of different Asian cultures but are limited to only three player “imports” of non-Asian descent. For its return in 2023, the tournament included 10 men’s teams, across two divisions of play, with some players travelling from cities like Toronto, Vancouver, California, and Boston to participate. Neil Fukumoto, coach of the Asian Invasion, shared that a core group of six players have been making the trip to Ottawa every year for over a decade, something he says reflects their commitment to this tournament and the other players.

“It is a huge part of the motivation to be there with guys who really want to be there,” said Fukumoto. “It is part of the dynamic of the team to have guys who make the trip all the way up from Toronto.” To foster the spirit of intercultural collaboration and grow the tournament, registration expanded in 2010 to include players



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Photos from Ottawa Asian Hockey Classic on Mother’s Day weekend. Clockwise: OAH 2023 Upper Rec Finals teams Old Tigers & Chimps and Chicken Chow Men. Josh Shimizu takes a shot during the Upper Recs Final game. OAH organizer Naomi Katsumi with Upper Rec Champions Old Tigers & Chimps’ captain William Kung.

and teams from Ottawa’s Indigenous community who have been participating ever since. Steven Price has been playing with the Odawa Moose since that first tournament and shared how important it was to him to get the

Odawa team, including some new Indigenous players, back on the ice and participating post-Covid.

“It was a good opportunity for me to bring the new generation in to see what we’ve built here with the Asian community,” Price said. “We want to show our appreciation for the inclusion.” The Ottawa Asian Hockey

“They all play hockey throughout the year on their own,” says Kung, “but this is a highlight for me to see them bond this way.”

Classic has become a must-attend event for teams, many of whom return year after year to compete for the trophy. Due to a smaller format for the first year back, some teams were unable to get a secure spot. Registration peaked in 2019, with 18 teams registered, representing 200+ players, competing across four divisions, including a men’s, women’s and children’s division. In many cases, teams have strong family connections with fathers and sons, sometimes fathers and daughters, siblings and friends all playing together. And don’t forget the fans! Even at the early morning games, wives, girlfriends, mothers, and friends are up in the stands cheering for their favorite team. Jean Kung was at the rink at 7:15 a.m. on May 13 to cheer on her husband and her three sons, all members of the Ottawa-based team Old Tigers & Chimps which started as a father/son team. “They all play hockey throughout the year on their own,” Kung said, pausing to shout out some encouragement, “but this is a highlight for me to see them bond this way.” This year’s tournament took place at Minto Recreation Centre and Ray Friel Arena from May 12 to 14 and culminated with the division finals on Mother’s Day. In the men’s upper rec division, Old Tigers & Chimps defeated Chicken Chow Men to take home the trophy, and Asian Invasion topped the Asian Aces to win the men’s lower rec division.

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said that plant-based foods were a trendy fad that would never fly. Of course, they were wrong, and I was right, but they had the money.

Before I opened the restaurant, I went to Japan to train in my friend Yuki’s vegan restaurant. She was from Tokyo and had studied with me at the Natural Gourmet.

Working at her restaurant and through my daily meanderings, I often found tofu shops with various kinds of fresh tofu displayed like fresh cheese stalls in France.

I was amazed by the different types of tofu in varying textures and forms, from extra soft, pudding-like silky soft cubes to the firmer tofu in blocks, which were not tasteless.

In Japan, tofu is part of people’s daily lives.

Preparations of ready-made tofu in different forms for home cooks and restaurants are endless. Raw, boiled, freeze-dried, and fried tofu are used in various applications such as dressings, soups, and hot pots, grilled or served untouched.

This is how I fell in love with tofu again. She was beautiful, complex, and delicious!

I brought those food memories from Japan to my restaurant, where the only tofu I served was *atsuage*, a soft tofu with a deep-fried outer shell. Made fresh weekly from the Ottawa-Gatineau organic tofu supplier Soyerie, the *atsuage* tofu came in cubes,

which we would skewer, glaze, and grill over hot charcoals. Customers and staff fell in love with it.

Soyerie recently asked me to develop recipes for their *agedashi* product. I was excited to do so.

I’m sharing a Korean-inspired stir fry with a spicy barbecue sauce that is easy to prepare and delicious.

For the tofu in the recipe, in Japanese and Asian supermarkets, look for *agedashi* tofu. Soyerie is the best organic tofu supplier in the Ottawa-Gatineau region and sells its products in numerous locations in Ontario.

Its *agedashi* product comes in blocks that you need to cut into cubes. The Chinese fried tofu cubes you usually find in Asian stores, which are lighter with little tofu, may not work as well but will be fine. You can also use the firm tofu found in most supermarkets.

I recommend making a batch of the sauce and keeping it in the fridge as it lasts for weeks. Then, you can use it on tofu, other proteins, and vegetables. It’s also delicious in a sandwich. I’m sure you’ll find many other uses!

Spicy Korean tofu and sweet potato noodles stir fry (vegan)
(www.soyarie.ca/spicy-korean-tofu-and-sweet-potato-noodles-stir-fry-vegan/)
Serves four people

Ingredients:

- 1 package Soyerie Atsuage tofu (340 grams)
- 1 green onion, thinly sliced
- 1 red pepper, julienned



PHOTO COURTESY: SOYERIE

Chef Caroline Ishii created a spicy Korean-inspired tofu and sweet potato noodles stir fry recipe for Soyerie, an organic tofu supplier in the Ottawa-Gatineau region.

- 1 cup snow peas
- 1 bok choy, trimmed
- 1 package of Korean sweet potato noodles
- 1 tablespoon olive or canola oil
- 1 tablespoon sesame seeds
- Barbecue sauce:
 - 1/3 cup white miso
 - 1/4 cup maple syrup
 - 1/3 cup *gochugaru* (Korean dried chilli flakes)
 - 1/4 cup soy sauce
 - 4 cloves garlic
 - 1/2 cup sesame oil
 - 1/4 teaspoon sea salt
 - 1/4 cup or more water

Directions:

1. Drain the liquid from the tofu package. Cut the tofu into cubes or triangles.
2. Prepare the vegetables: green onion, red pepper, snow peas, bok choy
3. Combine the barbecue sauce ingredients in a blender and blend until smooth. Add more water to make the sauce thinner as desired.
4. Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Add the noodles and boil for 6 to 7 minutes. Drain and rinse in cold water to cool down.

5. Heat a large pan to medium heat. Add the oil.
 6. Braise the tofu on both sides until there is some colour, a few minutes on each side
 7. Add the vegetables and sauté with the tofu for a few minutes.
 8. Add the noodles and combine with the rest. Turn off the heat.
 9. Add a few tablespoons of the barbecue sauce, or more, depending on your heat preference, and combine with everything. Garnish with sesame seeds.
- Enjoy!

Nostalgia Night 2023

Celebrating the JCCC’s 60th Anniversary
Saturday August 19, 2023 3:00PM to 7:30PM



Join us on Saturday August 19, 2023 and explore the many exhibits and displays celebrating 60 years, meet up with friends and family, get dressed in your own kimono or yukata, and of course enjoy the great Japanese Canadian buffet.

Registration opens Thursday June 1, 2023 by phone 416-441-2345, online or in person at the JCCC.

Ticket Prices – member \$30, non-member \$36, child 5 – 12 \$5, child 4 and under – free.HST to be added to all prices.

Registration closes Friday July 28, 2023.



Register Early!
Space is limited!

No Walk-ins will be accepted.

From NAJC NEB P. 14

Tanaka and Robert Y. Shimoda. NMEG demanded the BC Security Commission stop the breakup of their families, but they didn’t object to the uprooting.

Some Japanese Canadian men refused to obey the orders to go to road camps. By the beginning of June, women and children were still being moved to the interior to internment/incarceration camps, but about 500 men who did not report to the RCMP were still in Vancouver.

On June 2, the NMEG held a press conference to highlight the impasse which could be broken if the BC Security Commission would consider uprooting families instead of separating them.

The press conference was suggested by Jitaro Charlie Tanaka, who was an advisor to the NMEG leadership. He already had a significant role in advising the Spanish consul who, under the Geneva Convention, was appointed to protect the human rights of Japanese aliens in Canada. He had connections with the BC Security Commission, asking them to consider family uprooting and to send the married men from the road camps to prepare and build accommodations in the small towns in the interior.

In the meantime, Japanese Canadian men and boys in the road camps were hearing about the horrible conditions at Hastings Park and were worried about their families. The RCMP were at each road camp, and their presence confirmed the suspicion that Japanese Canadians were not trusted.

Unrest was building in the camps. Some of the Japanese Canadian men started slowdowns and strikes. In mid-June 1942, three strikes halted the road camps.

BC Security Commission reps went to Ottawa to push for the reunification of families to stop the unrest and then met with NMEG leadership on June 30 to ask for their terms. The next day the BC Security Commission would agree to terms except for one, single men would have to stay working in the road camps. Reluctantly the NMEG agreed.

June 29 — Under Order-in-Council P.C. 5523 Director of Soldier Settlement is given authority to buy or lease confiscated Japanese Canadian farms. Without consulting owners, 572 farms are turned over to be given to Canadian Armed Forces veterans. Ironically, one farm is taken from Japanese Canadian First World War veteran Zennosuke Inouye, who served Canada, but was uprooted, dispossessed, interned/incarcerated, and exiled.

1946

In June, 65 farms that were part of the bulk sale of Japanese Canadian property to the Veterans’ Land Act administration instead sold to private buyers at prices that were double what was offered by the Veterans’ Land Act administration.

1948

June 15 — Bill C-138 amending the Dominion Elections Act passes, which gives the federal franchise to Japanese Canadians in B.C. However, Japanese Canadians were still not able to vote in provincial and municipal elections until 1949.
