

MYSTERY ON A 'DARK' MENU
WEEK 3

Mystery on the 'Dark Dinner' menu

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One evening in mid-August, a dozen people gathered at Ryokusenji temple in Tokyo's Asakusa district for a meal. But this was to be no regular feast, as the diners sitting shoulder to shoulder with strangers would all be blindfolded and served a series of dishes the organizers would not disclose beforehand.

No wonder tension was already in the air when I arrived to share in this so-called Kurayami Gohan (Dark Dinner).

These monthly events are fully booked within a few days of the schedule being posted on the Web by Higanji, a group of young nondenominational Buddhists undertaking this and other

experimental projects in Tokyo. That's according to Kakuho Aoe, at age 32 the 14th-generation heir to 400-year-old Ryokusenji, who also heads Higanji.

As we waited in a lobby area, a male staffer showed up and announced to the 12 attendees, mostly in their 30s and 40s, that, one by one, we would be taken upstairs into a small tatami room, where we



Blind tasting: Participants in one of the monthly Kurayami Gohan (Dark Dinners) at Ryokusenji temple in Tokyo's Asakusa district savor their invisible fare. YOSHIAKI MIURA PHOTO PHOTOS

would each wear a blindfold. When he called my name, I jumped up and called out "Yes!" — only to find that another woman in the room also responded. Remarkably, it turned out there were two of us there sharing our rather unusual family name — though each was written using different kanji characters.

Then my heart jumped again as the staffer, seeing that I had donned my blindfold, politely asked for my hand and carefully led me up a ramp and into the dining room. As considerate as he was, though, I wondered if blind people feel as scared as I did, or as worried as I was about banging my foot against a table or knocking over a glass. It was with relief that my feet touched a seat cushion, and I was told to sit down.

The room remained silent as one unseeing and unseen participant after another entered. Then Michiko Aoe, Kakuho's wife, announced that the dining event would begin. At first, to put us more at ease, Michiko asked us all to play a game of *janken* (rock, paper, scissors) with a participant sitting across the low table. I stuck my right hand out and touched the right hand of the woman sitting opposite with my left hand. That way, we could figure out which shape each of us made. After having four *aiko* (ties), I won. Then we introduced ourselves and I found my opponent was Tanuma-san, a nurse who had told me while we were waiting in the lobby that her work was often stressful and so she came to the event wanting to be "healed." She said she also found the short walk into the room frightening. "I felt as if I had lost my balance, and I staggered to the left and right," she said.



Tray bon: The eight-course meal prepared for guests who experienced a confusing taste of

While we were consumed in our ice-breaking chat, the first dish had already been served, complete with a wet hand towel and chopsticks. But before tasting the food, we had to find our chopsticks in the dark.

experienced a confusing taste or blindness during a recent Dark Dinner at Ryokusenji temple in Tokyo's Asakusa district.

The room quieted down again.

The cold liquid, served in a small glass, tasted like tomato juice. But it was watery and didn't have the same rough texture. That got me wondering. Then came a dish comprised of three small gummy chunks. Could one of these be *konnyaku* (a jellylike food made from the root vegetable devil's tongue) — and might another be *kamaboko* (steamed fish paste)? Either way, the chunks were so slippery that I ended up having to use my fingers to pick them up.

And so the night went on, and we continued our guessing games. Toward the end of the eight-course menu, I began to realize that each dish also had a different sound as I ate it. Since we were all thinking and guessing hard, using all our senses other than sight, there was little said as we ate. Consequently, almost the only sounds in the room were those of food being chomped, chewed or slurped by the 12 blacked-out diners. In a way, it was like music. When we had what I guessed was a boiled broccoli, crunching sounds filled the room. Then came a tofulike substance on a hard biscuit that was eerily glutinous as it lapped against our palates — while the noise of us biting into the biscuit seemed suddenly deafening.

Though we didn't know exactly what we were having, Tanuma-san and I agreed that the gooey stuff and the biscuit both tasted very good.

An hour or so into the program, Michiko said that, after the soup is served, the room lights would be switched on and we could remove our blindfolds as we ate our last dish of rice balls, followed by dessert. When we regained our vision, some people let out a sigh of relief. Others marveled at the smallness of the room. I certainly relaxed considerably.

Kakuho, who had prepared all the dishes, then appeared and began to solve the puzzles — and it was soon clear that, despite concentrating hard during the meal, I'd jumped to some very wrong conclusions. For instance, what I'd thought was *gobo*

(burdock root) turned out to have been yellow paprika, while what I thought was *takenoko* (bamboo shoot) had actually been carrot.

But then just as all the evening's riddles seemed to have been solved, Kakuho grinned mischievously and asked us: "Of course you could tell the difference between the two rice balls, couldn't you?"

What! We hadn't expected to be tested while eating in a brightly lit room. And of course I hadn't figured out the difference.

"The left one was made of rice cooked in an earthenware pot," he said. "And the one on the right was made of rice cooked in an electric rice cooker."

He further explained that rice cooked in an earthenware pot does not harden as much as that prepared in an electric rice cooker, because earthenware

pots raise the temperature of the rice much higher than electric rice cookers.

This makes the surface of the grain melt and create a sticky film around the grain, he said.

"When we eat in a lighted room, chatting away, all the concentration we had while we were eating in the dark goes away," he said, grinning. "We told you that 'the darkness is coming to the end' — but we never said 'the dark dinner is coming to an end.' Watch out!"

Aoe, who has an MBA from a U.S. university, says he came up with the idea to offer this well-thought-out event two years ago when he heard about a "blind" restaurant opening in Europe. "There is very little chance in our daily diet for people to think seriously about the act of eating," he said. "We are often



Hosts: Kakuho Aoe, 14th-generation heir to Ryokusenji temple in Asakusa, Tokyo, and his wife, Michiko

watching time while we gulp down lunch, and we use meals to facilitate conversations. But we hardly ever think about eating itself."

Later, when I described my "dark dinner" to Nanae Takenaka, an assistant professor of clinical psychology at Kyoto University Graduate School of Education, she said that the psychological shock of spending time in the dark must have been somewhat mitigated by the fact that participants knew they would only be spending a limited amount of time like that, and that they would be performing the regular activity of eating. "It's an artificially created darkness, and it's set up to be a leisure activity," she said.

But Takenaka also noted that being in the dark could be therapeutic for some people. "Darkness can blur the boundaries of many things," she explained. "In our daily life, we divide ourselves into different subcategories. There might be, for example, the 'hard-working me' and the 'sociable me,' the 'me who is lethargic at home' and the 'insecure me.' Such a psychological arrangement has its benefits, but when it goes too far, it can make us feel confined or restricted. Darkness can free us from such constraints and sooth us."



Sight unseen: An unblindfolded guest receives one of the final, surprising courses.

But what does a temple priest want people to learn from such dark-dining events as the 20-odd he has staged to date?

Well, as Kakuho put it, the event's purpose is not to force participants to determine a fixed answer, but just to open their channels of curiosity. That could make it easier for

people to navigate through their fast-changing,

stress-stricken modern lives — which is what religion, and especially Buddhism, is supposed to offer, he said.

"Buddhism is to about making it easier for people to live," he said. "To make living easier, people need to put their antennas up and stay curious. It is when you lose the (mind-blocking) filter that you feel more relaxed about life."

By simply blocking off their eyesight, people can learn that they can't live without trusting others, Kakuho added. "To eat something without being able to check it with your eyes means you have to really trust those who serve the food."

For more information about Dark Dinner, visit www.higan.net/ (in Japanese) or mail info@higan.net (in Japanese or English)

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