



Bringing the garden to your plate



Anyone who picks up the book “Von Zen und Sellerie” (Zen and Celery) will not only discover a wonderful piece of work containing simple, seasonal and Japanese-inspired recipes, but also instructions on how to turn cooking into meditation.

Is the carrot cutting me? Or am I cutting the carrot? Cookbook author Malte Härtig has been exploring Japanese Zen culture for years. As a chef and philosopher, he frequently finds himself around food preparation and in his book “Von Zen und Sellerie”, which he produced together with photographer Jule Felice Frommelt, he asks the kinds of questions that make you look at cooking from a whole new perspective.

The starting point for the book was perfect: A vegetable garden – lovingly tended by the photographer – which served as both store cupboard and stage. The pair spent many hours, days and weeks together and out of the garden came recipes that would make Japanese Zen cuisine accessible to readers using European vegetables.

The book includes a recipe for Japanese Tsukemono – which can be made with radishes, for example – as well as one for vegetable tempura. It offers an insight into both culinary culture and temple culture – it is a



light, easy read and a great inspiration for anyone wanting to make vegetables the star attraction on their plate.

I asked Malte Härtig a few questions:

What is Zen cuisine?

For me, it's mainly about treating vegetables with as much care as you would yourself or those around you. Zen master Dogen instructed the monastery cook to handle each grain of rice with as much care as he would his own eyesight. Regardless of whether the vegetables on the chopping board are top quality or wilting, they should all be treated the same. As a result, something wonderful happens – even simple things become beautiful and tasty.

What should be observed if you want to make Japanese temple cuisine with local vegetables?

In Japan, I heard a phrase over and over again that also shaped my own path: "Let the vegetables be your guide". They already have everything you need inside of them. All the cook has to do is pay attention, commit and listen closely when questioning the vegetable: "Celery, what do you want to be?"

Is there a particular vegetable dish in the book that you love to cook?

For a start, I love working with celery – whether you take the root and turn it into a delicious celeriac schnitzel or cover the celery leaves in tempura. However, I also love the rice dish with chanterelles because it takes on the flavour of the mushrooms so beautifully and is easy to prepare. Or the sweetcorn soup that tastes so much like sweetcorn.

And as an experienced cook, did you have any particular gardening insight that helped you when working on the book?

I wouldn't call it insight in the traditional sense of the word. It was more a feeling, a positive vibe, an enthusiasm. After all, the vegetables were full of Jule's love and passion. The vegetables were so alive, you barely needed to do anything to them – simply chop, lightly season and cook. Job done! That's how easily the food flows from the garden to the plate.

You encourage mindfulness during cooking. Is cooking also a form of meditation for you? Or, as a father, do you sometimes find yourself with your dad hat on, running into the kitchen just before lunchtime to get something on the table quickly?

That's not unheard of. When you cook with children, this is the greatest challenge and exercise in mindfulness – making sure you include the kids without overwhelming them or yourself, and especially not the food. I would recommend a standard cooking course such as "Cooking with kids". When the kids are around, it's rare that I can put into practice what I have planned in my head. However, we adopt a new approach and with it comes satisfaction, pride and happiness. What more could you want?

Book recommendation: "Von Zen und Sellerie", Malte Härtig/Jule Felice Frommelt, AT Verlag