

FIDDLEHEAD FERNs in TÔFU SAUCE

KOGOMI no SHIRA AÉ
屈みの白和え



Fiddlehead ferns, one of many *sansai* (mountain vegetables) foraged from woodland areas late winter through early spring, are bitter. Indeed, the Japanese believe that much of the culinary allure of mountain vegetables lies in their bitterness – awakening winter-dormant taste buds and reinvigorating the metabolism, too.

I especially like to pair *kogomi* (fiddlehead ferns) with a classic *tôfu* sauce known as *shira aé*. This version of the sauce includes light sweet *miso* for depth and complexity of flavor... and a hint of sweetness to tame the bitter fronds.

Serves 4.

8 ounces/225 grams *kogomi* (fiddlehead ferns [Kitchen Notes](#))

1/4 teaspoon alum (*yaki myōban* [Kitchen Notes](#))

OR

1 tablespoon baking soda (bicarbonate of soda)

4 cups/ 1 liter cold water

1 cup *dashi* ([Kitchen Notes](#))

shira aé (creamy *tôfu* sauce):

1/2 loaf (about 100 grams/3.5 oz) *tôfu* (either firm or silken), drained

2 teaspoons *Saikyo shiro miso* (sweet light bean paste)

Pinch of salt

Drop of *mirin* (syrupy sweet *saké*)

Clean and trim the fiddleheads:

Place the fiddleheads in a large bowl of fresh water to cover; stir and swish to agitate but not bruise the vegetable. Whatever brown papery “skins” may be clinging to the fresh fiddleheads should come loose with the agitation and float. If not, rub gently to remove them. Drain and pat the fiddleheads dry.





With a paring knife, trim away any dark, discolored stems. If the stalks are longer than 1 inch, cut them in half making two piles: tender tops and tougher stems.

Stir either alum OR baking soda into water in a saucepan. Bring the water to a rolling boil and blanch the fiddleheads, stems first, for 2 minutes. Toss the tops into the saucepan and boil for 30 seconds after the water returns to a boil. The water may turn dark, but this is of no concern.

Drain the fiddleheads and BRIEFLY submerge them in a bowl of fresh cold water. Drain and gently squeeze out moisture before transferring to a non-reactive container. Metal and plastic containers should be avoided as they contribute unwanted (metallic and chemical, respectively) elements. Pour the *dashi* stock over the fiddleheads. The fiddleheads can be prepared to this point up to 12 hours in advance of serving them (refrigerate if soaking more than 1 hour).

Make Creamy Tōfu Sauce:

If opening a fresh package of *tōfu* drain it well; If using *tōfu* that has been leftover from a larger block, bring plain water to a vigorous boil and cook the *tōfu* for 2 minutes. With a slotted spoon, remove the *tōfu* to a cloth-lined colander. When cool enough to handle, gather up the edges of the cloth to enclose the *tōfu*, twisting the top to gently squeeze out excess moisture. It is fine to mash the *tōfu* a bit while doing this.



In the old-fashioned Japanese kitchen, the boiled *tōfu* would then be forced through a sieve called an *uragoshi* and finally mashed in a *suribachi* (grooved mortar).



In my modern kitchen (and, I suspect in other Japanese households today), the boiled and drained *tōfu* goes into the bowl of a food processor to be pulse-blended until smooth.



Add the *miso* to the *suribachi* and hand grind to blend. OR, scrape down the sides of the food processor bowl, add the *miso* and pulse-blend the mixture until smooth. Season with the salt and *mirin*; then pulse-blend again until creamy. Scrape down the sides of the bowl as necessary to insure even mixing.

The *tōfu* sauce is perishable and should be kept refrigerated until use. It will keep for about 2 days, covered, in the refrigerator. During that time liquid may form a puddle in the container. Carefully pour this liquid off.

JUST BEFORE SERVING, remove the fiddleheads from the *dashi* and toss in the *tōfu* sauce. Mound in individual serving dishes.

Kitchen Notes



Kogomi (fiddlehead ferns) are an excellent source of vitamins A and C and are rich in niacin, magnesium, iron, potassium, and phosphorus. They are also rich in antioxidants and bioflavonoids, which are plant chemicals that help protect against disease.

Freshly foraged fiddleheads should keep for 3 to 4 days if wrapped in damp newsprint or paper towels and kept at cool room temperature in a dark spot until ready to prepare.



Alum is short for “aluminum potassium sulfate.” It was in the pantries of many American households in the 19th century where home pickling and preserving was common. The primary use of alum is to neutralize certain enzymes that occur naturally in many plants (fiddlehead ferns being one of these plants, and eggplants another – that is why most packages are purple and/or sport a picture of eggplants). Without neutralizing the enzymes in those plants, they taste especially bitter and turn black and slimy when boiled.

Alum is *yaki myōban* 焼きようばん in Japanese.

Baking soda (bicarbonate of soda; formula NaHCO_3) is a base (alkaline) that helps to neutralize certain plant-based enzymes that typically cause a bitter taste and cause those plants to turn black or brown when subjected to moist heat (these can also develop a slimy texture).

Baking soda is *jūsō* 重曹 in Japanese.

DASHI STOCKS



Instructions for making **Standard Dashi** with fish flakes can be found at:
<https://tasteofculture.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Standard-Sea-Stock-Smoky-Sea-Stock.pdf>

Instructions for making **Kelp Alone Stock** can be found at:
<https://tasteofculture.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Kelp-Alone-Stock.pdf>