

# 筑前煮 Chikuzen Ni

VEGAN VERSION: Mixed Vegetables Soy-Braised with Thick Fried Tōfu  
CLASSIC VERSION: Mixed Vegetables Soy-Braised with Chicken



Chikuzen is the former name of a Province, the area that is today part of Fukuoka Prefecture in Kyūshū. The word “ni” in the title of this dish refers to braising or stewing. Although the classic version of this dish is made with chicken, a vegan version with thick fried *tōfu* is also very popular. A wide variety of root vegetables can be included; I am especially fond of lotus root when it’s available. Using dried *shiitaké* mushrooms gives depth of flavor, and provides a stock, too.

Braised dishes develop flavor as they cool down in the pot making them even tastier the second time round. Don’t hesitate to double the recipe so you can set aside extras for later in the week. Chikuzen Ni makes a great *obentō* or dinner.

Makes 4 servings

2 dried *shiitaké* mushrooms, softened in 2 cups water; reserve liquid  
1 slender stick burdock root or parsnip, about 85 grams/3 ounces  
2 slender or small carrots about 85 grams/3 ounces  
1 segment lotus root, about 180 grams/6.5 ounces  
1/2 small par-boiled bamboo shoot, about 110 grams/4 ounces, drained of packing liquid  
1 loaf *konnyaku*, dark, speckled variety, about 220 grams/8 ounces, drained of packing liquid  
1 teaspoon *goma abura* (sesame oil)  
1 loaf thick fried *tōfu* , about 12 ounces, blanched (to remove excess oil) and drained, cut into 3/4-inch cubes

OR

14 ounces dark meat poultry (thigh meat stripped from the bone, skin intact), cut into 3/4-inch/2-cm pieces and marinated in the mixture below for at least 5 minutes (up to 4 hours, refrigerated):

3 tablespoons *saké*  
2 tablespoon cornstarch

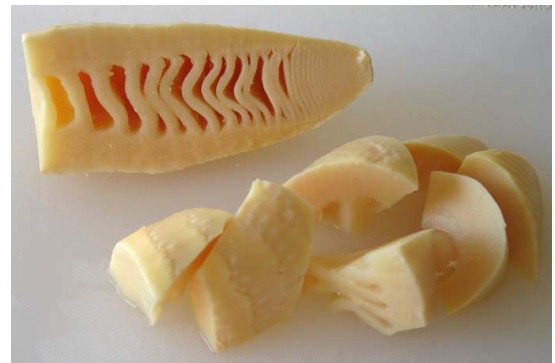
1 tablespoon *saké*  
2 teaspoons sugar  
1 and 1/2 tablespoons soy sauce  
12 fresh snow peas, strings removed from non-flowering end

Remove the softened mushrooms from the water in which they were soaking. Trim away stems. Press out excess liquid from the caps and cut each into quarters. Strain the liquid in which the mushrooms had been soaking. This liquid becomes your stock for cooking this dish. Place the mushroom pieces back in the stock again until ready to cook them.



With the back of your knife, scrape the burdock root lightly to remove any soil that may be clinging to it. If necessary, quickly rinse the burdock root in cold water and immediately pat dry. Cut the burdock root into small irregular chunks using the *ran-giri* technique: begin at the thicker end and slice 1/2 inch from the edge, on the diagonal. Keeping the knife pointing in the same diagonal direction, roll the burdock root towards you (about 1/3 turn) on the cutting board and slice again. Continue, adjusting length and angle of rolling to produce small, multi-faceted but uniform chunks.

Scrape (and trim, if necessary) the carrots, cutting them in the same manner as the burdock root. Peel (and trim, if necessary) the lotus root, cutting thick segments in half lengthwise and then into irregular chunks using the *ran-giri* technique in the same manner as the burdock root. If using bamboo shoots drain and blot up any moisture.; cut into *ran-giri* pieces.



Use the tip of your knife score the surface of the *konnyaku* diagonally with many shallow, parallel slits. Flip the *konnyaku* over and repeat. These slits will make it easier for the *konnyaku* to absorb the flavorful braising liquid. Cut the loaf lengthwise into 4 strips, then across into 1/2-inch cubes.



Place the *konnyaku* in a heated skillet or wok. Jiggling the pan occasionally, cook over high heat about 3 minutes or until you hear a squeaking sound. This indicates that excess liquid has evaporated and the *konnyaku* is ready to absorb new flavors.

Drizzle in the sesame oil and jiggle the pan. Foam will appear on and around the *konnyaku* pieces. Push the *konnyaku* pieces to one side of the skillet.

Add the cubes of THICK FRIED TÔFU to the skillet and stir-fry for 1 minute.

OR

Lift the CHICKEN pieces out of its marinade and add them to the skillet, spreading them out so each has a chance to brown a bit.

DO NOT JIGGLE THE PAN; wait patiently for a crust to form (about 1 minute) before moving the pan. Flip the chicken pieces and allow the other side to brown and crust slightly.

Now, stir-fry to combine the chicken and *konnyaku*.



Remove the softened *shiitaké* mushrooms from the stock they have produced, pressing out any remaining liquid. Reserve this liquid. Add the softened mushrooms to the skillet and stir-fry for 1 minute, tossing them with the *konnyaku* and fried *tōfu* or chicken. Add the burdock root and stir-fry for another minute, until they exude a woodsy aroma.

Sprinkle the sugar over the pieces in the skillet, toss to distribute and then add the *saké*. Add one cup of the mushroom stock, lower the heat and simmer. Skim away froth. Cook until the burdock becomes quite tender (a toothpick inserted in the thickest piece should meet little resistance), about 10 minutes. Use an *otoshi-buta* (dropped lid) if you have one. If not, improvise with cooking parchment cut into a circle slightly smaller than the skillet you are using. Weight down the paper with a small, flat lid from another pan.

Add more mushroom stock as needed to keep the vegetables barely covered. Add the carrots once the burdock is tender; re-lid and cook for 2 to 3 minutes. Lift the lid and season with soy sauce, swirling the pan to be sure the flavors meld. Cook, covered, another minute or two until nearly all the liquid is gone.

Lift the lid, scatter in the snow peas and cook for one minute, allowing them to absorb the flavors in the skillet. Remove the skillet from the heat and let the *mélange* cool to room temperature with the dropped lid in place; this allows the flavors to develop.



Traditionally *Chikuzen ni* is served at room temperature. It makes terrific picnic fare, and in Japan, is often packed into *obentō* boxed lunches.

If you wish to serve the dish hot, re-heat it briefly just before serving. If the liquid is so reduced it looks in danger of scorching, add a few spoonfuls of mushroom stock or water before re-heating.