



Quick-Pickled Hakusai Cabbage

Hakusai no Sokuseki-Zuké 白菜の即席漬け

Traditional brine-pickling is a multi-stage process that takes weeks to produce mature pickles, though they can be held for months. Indeed, extending shelf-life of an abundant harvest of fresh produce was the goal. For those with little time to spare and just a small quantity of vegetables to prepare, *sokuseki-zuké* (impromptu, quick-pickling) is a boon.



When I first came to Japan in the mid-1960's, a clever screw-top device, called a *shokutaku tsukémono ki* or "tabletop pickle pot," was becoming popular in cramped, urban kitchens. Small, and made of sturdy clear plastic, the pot would sit on the kitchen counter transforming bits and pieces of cabbage into a spirited side dish in only a few hours.

The texture and appearance of the pickled vegetables is like coleslaw (without dressing). Impatient cooks, and others who may not have planned their kitchen activity in advance, will especially appreciate this dish. So will anyone who has bought a whole head (or even a large wedge) of *hakusai* and is wondering what to do with what is left after making other dishes. This recipe guides you in the use of a *shokutaku tsukémono ki* (pictured above) but also provides an alternative method, for those who do not have one of these devices.

Makes 4-6 portions

450 grams/16 ounces of *hakusai* (napa cabbage), about 1/4 of a large head

2 teaspoons coarse sea salt (preferably *ara-jio*), or kosher salt

1 small *yuzu* (peel will be consumed) or other citrus with edible peel, cut into thin strips

kombu (kelp), preferably *ma kombu*, about 3 x 2 inches (12 x 9 cm) broken into pieces

1-2 *tôgarashi* chili peppers, broken into several pieces

Remove outer leaves (often bruised or torn) and set aside to use as a “lid” on top of your cut vegetables. Cut the *hakusai* cabbage into 1-inch/2.5 cm wide pieces, coarsely chopping the tougher core. Feel free to add carrot peels (from scrubbed carrots) to the *hakusai* to add color, taste, and texture interest to your quick pickles.



Place your cut *hakusai* in either a bowl, a pickle press, or a sturdy plastic bag. Sprinkle with the salt and toss lightly. Let the *hakusai* sit until moist and slightly wilted – about 5 minutes. Add the *kombu* and lightly toss and “massage” to further wilt the *hakusai*. Begin with a light touch, gradually exerting more pressure until you can squeeze a fair amount of liquid from the *hakusai*. The addition of the kelp will cause the brine to become slightly sticky. The kelp, too, will become a bit slippery. This is a good sign – evidence that the natural glutamates in the kelp are doing their flavor-enhancing work.

Keep whatever liquid (brine) is exuded in the bowl, pickle press, or bag. Add the *yuza* strips (or other citrus peel) and *tōgarashi*. Place any outer (tougher, possibly bruised) leaves of *hakusai* on top of your cut pieces as a lid. If you are using a *shokutaku tsukémono ki* screw the top in place applying medium pressure. Keep the *hakusai* under pressure for at least 2 hours, or a full day if refrigerated.

If you are improvising, devise your own weighted pickle set-up with a deep bowl or tray and a bottle (or two) filled with water. Even in non-metric America most large water or soda bottles are 2 liters. That means the bottle weighs 2 kilo, or about 4 and 1/2 pounds. That is usually sufficient weight for making quick pickles in the quantity listed in this recipe (about 450 grams or 1 pound of chopped vegetables).



You will also need a flat plate, cutting board, or cookie sheet that is an inch or so less in diameter/width than the bottom of your bowl or tray; this plate, board or cookie sheet becomes a lid, sitting on the food being pickled. Because your weights will sink down and become wet with brine, they should be wrapped in waterproof material, such as a plastic bag. Or place the food being pickled in a re-sealable storage bag. Place your wrapped weights on top of the plate and allow them to sit, undisturbed, for at least 2 hours (or a full day if refrigerated).



Just before serving, discard any wilted leaves that had been used as a lid. Drain off the brine and rinse the *hakusai* mixture briefly under cold water. Drain again. Squeeze to make sure no water remains. Arrange family-style in a large serving bowl, or in small individual serving dishes.

