

DANDELION AND LEEK ‘KAKIAGE’ FRITTERS

23 and 24 May 2020



Dandelion and leek kakiage topping sōmen noodles in dashi-based broth

‘Kakiage’ is a type of tempura that uses small quantities of various ingredients that are mixed together and formed into fritters. It is similar in style to the Indian pakora or pakoda. The recipe originated in Edo (Tokyo, as we know it today) by the 18th-century and is believed to represent the original form of tempura as we know today. Fishermen of Edo often ended up with huge amounts of small seafood they could not sell, including baby shrimps and clams that were common in the muddy waters of Tokyo Bay. The kakiage style of tempura developed as a way to make use of such by-catch without wastage. Kakiage was a popular street food in Edo, made with a variety of ingredients including vegetables—kakiage also became the standard topping for Edo-style tempura soba, a recipe developed during the early 19th century.

Kakiage, in many ways, epitomises the Japanese tradition of ‘waste not, want not’. The recipe makes use of small quantities of ingredients—that may otherwise go to waste—to make a meal item. It is a great way to use up those small bits of vegetables, seafood or meat left over from making a more substantial dish. Vegetable scraps, such as peelings, can also be used—in fact, daikon and other root vegetable peels are popular as kakiage ingredients in Japanese home cooking (and delicious too!). Sansai (wild vegetables) foraged from the Japanese countryside are also commonly used for kakiage, particularly in spring—frying has the effect of tempering the bitterness and astringency that many sansai have.

In the spirit of frugal, self-sufficient living, I have used here European dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) that were dug up when weeding my Canberra garden. The recipe allows the whole plant to be used in one dish: the leaves have a bitterness that is reminiscent of many Japanese sansai vegetables, and the roots have an earthy aroma and crunchy texture that resemble burdock roots—another popular ingredient in Japan for kakiage. I have paired the dandelion with leek, whose slight sweetness and ‘oniony’ aroma are a perfect match with the astringent notes of the dandelion. Other

vegetables that combine well with dandelion include shallot leaves, onion, carrot, daikon, capsicum and so on.

In Japan, wheat flour is traditionally used in the batter for kakiage, however, I find that rice flour or potato starch results in a lighter and crisper texture. Egg is added in some recipes but makes the batter heavier, and I have omitted it here. The standard recipe calls for deep-frying, but pan-frying, as I have done here, also works very well and uses much less oil—though be sure to use enough oil, otherwise the batter will not develop its crisp texture.

[IMPORTANT NOTE: NEVER consume weeds or wild plants unless you can identify them with 100% confidence. Do NOT collect edible plants from areas that may have been sprayed with chemicals, are polluted with heavy metals and other substances (e.g. near roads, painted surfaces and industrial activity), or contaminated by human or animal excrement. Many edible plants also require treatment or cooking to remove harmful substances such as toxins and anti-nutrients.]

INGREDIENTS

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| • Dandelion plants (leaves and roots) | 3 or 4 large plants (ideally with a dense crown of leaves over 10 cm long) |
| • Leek leaves | c. 4 leaves (green part only, 15 to 20 cm long) |
| • Rice flour or potato starch | 3 to 4 level tablespoons, or adjust as required |
| • Water, preferably chilled or iced | 2 to 3 level tablespoons, or adjust as required |
| • Oil for frying | c. 5 mm deep in the pan |
| • Salt | c. 1½ level teaspoons |

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Remove any dead or decayed material from the dandelion plants. Flowers and buds can be eaten if desired, but remove any flowerheads that have finished flowering (with a pointed shape), as they contain a hairy pith—the fluff that makes dandelion seeds float through the air.
2. Wash the dandelion plants to remove attached dirt. Be sure to wash the roots very well, taking particular care to remove dirt caught in the forks of the roots. Using a sharp knife on each plant, separate the tender part of the leaves from the tough leaf stalks, then the roots from the leaf stalks.





3. Remove the top of the root where leaf stalks were attached (as it is very tough and often have in-grained dirt attached), thin fibrous roots, and parts of the root where ingrained dirt still remains. Using a light scraping motion with a knife blade (or finger nails), remove as much as possible of the brown discoloured skin covering the roots.



4. Cut the dandelion roots into fine juliennes 3 to 5 mm wide and 4 to 5 cm long. Ideally, cut the juliennes diagonally across the root. Thick roots can be cut lengthwise first. Very thin roots can simply be cut lengthwise. Set aside.



Note: the photo also includes cut leaf stalks mentioned at Step 5

5. Cut the leaf stalks into sections 2 to 4 cm long, and the leaves 3 to 5 cm wide.
6. In a bowl, combine the cut roots and leaf stalks, sprinkle with c. 1 teaspoon of salt, mix through well, and stand for 20 to 30 minutes. Then, cover with water and soak for c. 5 minutes. Discard the water (which will turn brownish with bitterness that has leached out), rinse briefly with running water, and drain well.



7. Cut the leek leaves into thin strips c. 3 mm wide and 3 to 5 cm long. In a bowl, combine the cut leek leaves with dandelion leaves. Sprinkle with c. ½ teaspoon of salt, massage through using your fingertips, and stand for c. 5 minutes. Then, add the dandelion roots and leaf stalks from Step 6 and mix well.



8. Add the rice flour/potato starch and water incrementally to the dandelion-leek mixture, working the batter into the vegetables with your fingers using a massaging action. Stop adding the flour/starch and water as soon as the mixture starts to hold together without falling apart. Avoid adding more flour or starch than necessary, as this will make the batter heavy.



9. Heat oil in a shallow pan on medium heat. Test with a small drop of the mixture to see if the oil has heated (it should gently sizzle). Use a spoon or similar to scoop up the mixture, and drop gently into the heated frying oil. Using a spatula or similar, press down gently to consolidate and flatten each dollop. Do not make the dollops too large or they may break apart during frying. Once sizzling steadily, reduce the heat to low-medium and continue frying.



10. Turn over each piece and fry the other side, once the edges appear crisp and the piece does not fall apart upon lifting. Avoid browning the batter as much as possible. If required, use 2 spatulas placed under and over each piece, for ease of turning over and to avoid disintegration.



11. Remove from heat when evenly fried on both sides. Drain on sheets of paper towel, if required.
12. Serve immediately. Enjoy your kakiage on their own with some salt, soy sauce or another sauce of your choice (non-traditional ones such as 'tonkatsu' sauce or sweet chilli go quite well). You can also prepare a dashi-based tempura dipping broth (see separate recipe). The kakiage can also be enjoyed as a topping for Japanese noodles such as soba, udon and somen.

