

DEEPLY REGIONAL JAPAN®

SOW THISTLE AND PERSIMMON 'SHIRA-AE': SALAD IN CREAMY TOFU AND SESAME DRESSING PASTE

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'Shira-ae' is a popular dressing paste for cold vegetable-based dishes in traditional Japanese cuisine. It is made by blending tofu and white sesame seeds into a paste. The thick texture of the sauce makes it 'stick' to the ingredients better than runny sauces, distributing the flavours evenly. The slight creaminess makes relatively bland ingredients such as wilted spinach come alive without smothering the natural flavours.

Shira-ae is a particularly popular side-dish in country-style cooking, where it is often applied to 'sansai' or wild vegetables seasonally foraged from the forests and countryside. The paste subdues the slight bitterness that many sansai vegetables have, while adding substance to the dish. The recipe here uses the leaves of sow thistle (*Sonchus oleraceus*) gathered while weeding my garden, alongside persimmons grown locally here in Canberra. Sow thistles originated in Europe and western Asia and are a common introduced weed in temperate Australia. In Japan, archaeological evidence shows that sow thistles were introduced in prehistoric times, possibly as the ancestors of the Jōmon (ancestral Japanese) people arrived from continental Asia some 20,000 to 40,000 years ago.

Sow thistle is traditionally considered by the Japanese as one of the sansai vegetables, classically enjoyed as tempura, 'ohitashi' (blanched vegetable dishes soaked in dashi-based dressing), or in miso soup. It has also been valued as a potent medicine, for detoxing, digestive health, anti-anxiety and anti-aging (for a review of sow thistle's impressive medicinal properties, see https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326096375_A_REVIEW_ON_ETHNOMEDICINAL_PHARMACOLOGICAL_AND_PHYTOCHEMICAL_ASPECTS_OF_SONCHUS_OLERACEUS_LINN_ASTERACEAE). Sow thistles are best gathered in the cooler and wetter times of the year, and only the younger leaves and shoots should be used, otherwise they may be quite bitter. Blanching in lightly salted water, followed by soaking in cold water a couple of times and wringing out the moisture, should remove most of the bitterness.



Sow thistle (*Sonchus oleraceus*) in flower

Other common edible weeds that could be used for shira-ae include dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), chickweed (*Stellaria media*), purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*), mallow (*Malva neglecta*), bittercress or rocketcress (*Barbarea vulgaris*), wild radish (*Raphanus raphanistrum*), stinging nettle (*Urtica urens*). Naturally, you can also use more conventional leafy vegetables such as English spinach, baby silverbeet, rocket, mizuna, endive, Chinese broccoli and so on—anything that quick blanching will soften and bring out an appetising bright green colour. The addition of fruit in a shira-ae dish is not mandatory, however, it does beautifully offset the savoury, slightly astringent flavour of the vegetables. Apart from persimmon, fruits that are suitable for shira-ae include fig, rockmelon, peach, nectarine, apricot, pear and strawberry—the only requirement is that they must be firm textured and not overripe. Alternatively, dried fruit such as sultana, raisin, fig and apricot can be used, though sparingly so that the dish does not become too sweet.

Shira-ae paste does require some effort to prepare, so you may wish to make an additional amount and store it in the refrigerator (it should keep for a day or so). With additional flavouring agents, the paste can also be used as a topping for boiled soba noodles, as a base for sauces in cooked dishes such as stir-fries, and worked into meat or seafood dumpling dishes (e.g. 'tsumire').

[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 (for 3 to 4 persons as a small side dish)

Paste

- Firm tofu ½ small/medium block (150–175 g)
- White sesame seeds, lightly toasted 3 level tablespoons
- Mirin or sweet white wine 3 level tablespoons
- Japanese soy sauce or tamari c. 2 level teaspoons or to taste
- Sake or vodka 1 level tablespoon
- Unrefined rock or sea salt c. ½ level teaspoon or to taste
- White miso 1 teaspoon
- Sugar (optional) c. 1 teaspoon or to taste

Salad ingredients

- Young leaves and shoots of sow thistle (alternatively, dandelion, rocket, English spinach, baby silverbeet, mizuna etc) A generous bunch
- Firm persimmon (alternatively fig, rockmelon, nectarine, dried fruit etc) 1 large or 2 small

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Place the tofu block in a saucepan, cover with water and bring to the boil. Boil for approximately 2 minutes, remove from heat, drain and allow to cool.



2. Wrap the boiled tofu block in paper towel. Place on a plate or in a bowl and gently squeeze the moisture out of tofu applying a downward pressure with your palms on top of the tofu block. Place a weight or apply a clamp (improvise as needed!), and leave the tofu to dewater for c. 1 hour, changing the paper towel if required.



3. Crumble the boiled tofu finely using a massaging action with your fingers, or using a mortar and pestle.



4. Grind the toasted sesame seeds to a coarse paste using a mortar and pestle or a food processor.



5. Combine the crumbled tofu, sesame paste, salt and sugar (optional), and grind to an even paste using a mortar and pestle or a food processor.



6. Add mirin, sake/vodka, soy sauce/tamari, salt and white miso, and mix thoroughly. (If the alcohol content of mirin and sake/vodka is an issue, combine these ingredients in a small saucepan, bring to the boil and gently simmer for c. 2 minutes to evaporate off the alcohol, adding water along the way to replace the loss in volume if necessary. Remove from the heat, allow to cool, then use.)

7. Blanch the sow thistle leaves or your choice of leafy green vegetables. For bitter vegetables such as sow thistle, dandelion and rocket, add some salt to the boiling water. Remove from the heat as soon as the vegetables have wilted and developed a bright green colour (do not overcook), then refresh immediately in a bowl of cold water. Change the water if it becomes warm. For bitter vegetables, allow to soak in the cold water for two to three minutes, tip out the water, then repeat at least once more. Drain and gently wring out the moisture from the vegetables. Cut into bite-sized sections (3 to 5 cm).



8. Cut the persimmon or fruit of your choice into bite-sized segments.

9. Mix the shira-ae paste prepared in Step 6 evenly through the cut green vegetables. Do likewise for the cut fruit. Arrange in individual bowls, or in a larger serving bowl. If desired, sprinkle with additional toasted white sesame seeds before serving.



NOTE: For an extra dimension, add dashi liquid (konbu and/or katsuo), though beware that the shira-ae paste can turn watery and unappetising very quickly with the addition of liquids.