Can Buddhism make you a happier cook?

Pete Wells writes about chef and restaurant owner Eric Ripert and his food philosophy

In 2015, Eric Ripert invited a small group of writers to lunch in a private dining room at Le Bernardin in midtown Manhattan, US. Ripert is acclaimed for sensitive and astonishingly varied seafood cookery, and normally a meal at his restaurant entails a procession of elegantly arranged ocean creatures. This one was different. All the food was prepared by Jeong Kwan, a Buddhist nun Ripert had met at a temple in South Korea.

Jeong Kwan served lotus-blossom tea, salted bamboo shoots, bellflower roots, roasted tofu with mouth-tingling prickly ash berries and soy sauce she had fermented and aged at her hermitage. The lunch led to a profile of Kwan by Jeff Gordinier in *T Magazine*, which led to an episode about her on the Netflix show *Chef's Table*, which led to her getting an award from Asia's 50 Best Restaurants, and to offers to present her esoteric, thoughtful, vegetarian cooking around the world.

Ripert, though, was disappointed by the coverage. Not by its quantity but its content.

"The media focused on the beauty of the food and the beauty of the chopsticks, and they didn't focus on, or they didn't think about, the philosophy behind it," he said in a recent interview. "To me, it was unfortunate, and a missed opportunity."

Buddhism, though, teaches the importance of perseverance, and Ripert, 61, has been a practising Buddhist for many years. And so he is trying again.

His new cookbook, *Mindful Cooking: Simple Recipes for Nurturing Body and Soul*, makes a fresh attempt to get across the principles that guide Kwan and other Buddhist temple cooks. The book barely mentions Buddhism as a religion, let alone the intricacies of the Tibetan Vajrayana tradition Ripert practises. Neither does it suggest the reader meditate for hours on end, as nuns and monks do, or wake up in the dark of night to pray.



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KITCHEN CODE: Buddhist nun and chef Jeong Kwan in the Netflix show The Philosopher's Kitchen; (right) the wilted lettuce pancake Ripert learned at Jinkwansa Temple

Instead, Ripert points to some basic habits of thinking — mindfulness, gratitude and joy among them — that can guide us while we cook, making our time in the kitchen "a better, more powerful, more meaningful experience", as he put it.

Baptised and raised in the Roman Catholic Church by his French-speaking parents in the tiny principality of Andorra, Ripert first encountered Buddhism in 1989 through an impulse purchase during a layover at an airport in Paris. An ambitious young cook, he was on his way to a job at a restaurant in the United States. On the verge of buying a copy of *Playboy*, he noticed a book about Tibet and bought it instead.

His interest deepened when he read the address given later that year by the Dalai Lama on receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. Ripert, who spoke very little English at the time, asked his mother to mail him French translations of the Dalai Lama's books. He also attended public talks the Dalai Lama gave in New York City, US.

Ripert met Jeong Kwan, the Buddhist nun, in her hermitage above the Baekyangsa temple in 2014 when he was in South Korea making an episode of *Avec Eric*, a food-travel show. Later, as he asked how she prepared the food at the hermitage, she told him about spring planting, a serious business undertaken only by senior monks believed to have the requisite experience to pray for the seeds and endow them with love. At harvest time, she explained, the monks thank not just the plants but also the weather, the earth and the universe. When preparing meals, she said, she tried to put feelings of gratitude, kindness and compassion into the food.

"When you have that attitude in your kitchen, you don't stress," he said. "You are very much in control and very much at peace with your process and doing the best you can for the people who are eating."

On one trip, Ripert learned a recipe that went into *Mindful Cooking*. He calls it "the soul of the book".

He went to Jinkwansa, a 1,000-year-old temple in Seoul in South Korea, to cook with the chief abbess Gyeho Sunim. Spotting a wilted head of lettuce, Ripert asked what they were going to do with it.

Some of the ingredients that come into her kitchen look beautiful, the abbess said. "And sometimes the perception is that they are not beautiful," she went on. "But everything is beautiful."

She crushed the stem of the lettuce with a knife, dipped it in batter and fried it in perilla oil: a wilted-lettuce pancake. Ripert dipped a wedge into a sauce they had quickly stirred together, and had his mind blown.

After they'd eaten, the abbess told him that many chefs from around the world had come to the temple. None of the others, she said, understood what the cooking meant, its place in the life of the temple or as an act of Buddhist practice.

he began to see that her work brought together two of the major passions of his life, Buddhism and cooking, in ways he had never imagined.

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