

Cooking With Nicholas Zhou: From Novice to Master

A Companion Book of



Real And Healthy Chinese Cooking

Nicholas Zhou

<http://www.chinesefooddiy.com/>

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Part I

Know It Before Your Master It

Chinese Food Cultural Profile

Nutrition and Food

"Fashion is in Europe, living is in America, but eating is in China"

The phrase is a testament to the popularity of Chinese food around the world. Food is an important part of daily life for Chinese people. Chinese not only enjoy eating but believe eating good food can bring harmony and closeness to the family and relationships.



Bok choy

Shopping daily for fresh food is essential for all Chinese cooking. Unlike the fast food society of the U.S., the Chinese select live seafood, fresh meats and seasonal fruits and vegetables from the local market to ensure freshness. This means swimming fish, snappy crabs, and squawking chickens. Even prepared foods such as dim sum or BBQ duck for to go orders must gleam, glisten, and steam as if just taken out of the oven.

Chinese people in general are not as concerned about nutrition as Western culture. They are more concerned with the food's texture, flavor, color, and aroma. These are the crucial points for good Chinese cooking. Chinese daily meals consist of four food groups: grains, vegetables, fruit, and meat. Because of lactose intolerance, Chinese do not consume large amounts of dairy products. Instead, Chinese substitute these with soymilk and tofu, which also contain large amounts of protein and calcium. Vegetables, fruits, and meats are usually fresh. Some exceptions include preserved vegetables such as snow cabbage or mustard greens, preserved eggs, aka "thousand year old eggs" or salted and dried fish. Other exceptions include snack items such as beef jerky, cuttlefish jerky, sweet and sour preserved plums, or dehydrated mango slices. Canned or frozen foods are seldom eaten. Western desserts such as cookies, cakes, pies, and ice cream are eaten only on special occasions such as birthdays and weddings. After dinner, families usually eat seasonal fruit as dessert. Chinese desserts such as red bean soup, sweet white lotus's seed soup, or steam papaya soup are served every so often as a special treat on a hot summer's night.



Mango

Ethnic Chinese cooking does not involve a lot of deep fried cooking. The reason most of the Chinese restaurants in America have deep-fried dishes such as sweet and sour pork, almond fried Chicken, and deep-fried shrimp is to promote business and to please western tastes. This clearly reflects why there are more overweight and high blood pressure concerns in Western culture than there are in Chinese culture.

"Yi Xing Bu Xing"

Chinese hardly waste any section of the animal and have found ways to cook nearly every part. Chinese culture believes that "yi xing bu xing," which means by using any shape or part of the animal the same part of the human body can be replenished and strengthened. For example, shark fin soup and bird nest soup (bird's saliva) is served to replenish strength and increase appetite, crocodile meat strengthens the bronchia, dehydrated tiger testicle increases stamina for men, while monkey brains add wisdom. These foods are considered to be delicacies and tonics. Shark fin soup or bird nest soup is often served at special occasions such as at a Chinese banquet dinner. Other items are rarely prepared.

The Chinese banquet

The Chinese banquet dinner usually occurs on special occasions like holidays, weddings, graduations, birthdays, or having a special visitor in town. It's an event for family and friends to get together for fellowship and laughter. There are usually 10 guests that sit around each table. The banquet dinner involves 10 to 12 dishes including appetizers like jellyfish salad or vinegar pork shank and soups like shark fin, bird's nest, or fish lining. Main courses served at the banquet include lobster, crab, steamed fish, shrimp, abalone, sea cucumbers, quail, crocodile meat, duck, lamb, beef, chicken, and seasonal vegetable dishes and fresh fruit or sweet soup for dessert.

Regional Cuisine

There are many different cuisines in China. Each province has its own special style of cooking. There is Beijing cuisine, Hunan or Hubai cuisine, Shanghai cuisine, Szechwan cuisine, Cantonese cuisine, Hakka cuisine¹, etc. The most well known cuisines are Szechwan and Cantonese. The Szechwan cuisine has the spiciest dishes. They use a lot of chili paste, red pepper, and hot oil in their food. The most famous Szechwan dishes are hot chili eggplant, twice-cooked pork, Szechwan beef, Ma Po Tofu, and Kung Pau Chicken. These dishes are all very spicy and delicious.

The Cantonese cuisine is the most well known cuisine in the Chinese community². In fact, in China, they say, "Eating is in Canton." Cantonese people are known to be quite particular and have high expectations about their food. All the vegetables, poultry, and ingredients have to be fresh. The timing on the cooking is very crucial. Dishes must not be overcooked, and the texture of the food has to be just right with the freshness and tenderness still remaining. For this reason, Cantonese food is very popular. Soup is also essential in Cantonese cuisine. It consists of different ingredients and herbs and is boiled to a rich and tasty soup before it is served. There are many kinds of soup and each soup has its own function or purpose. Cantonese women believe that "to win a man's heart, she must first learn how to cook a good pot of soup."

Yin Yang foods

As mentioned before, due to geographical and climate differences in China, each area has its own way of cooking and different eating habits. Northern China has cold and damp weather,

and therefore people there eat more hot and spicy foods such as chilies, onions, and garlic. They believe these foods will increase blood circulation and help get rid of the coldness and dampness. Generally people from the south like to eat more mild and cooling foods because of the warmer climate. These foods reduce the hotness and dryness. This theory is called balancing "Yin and yang".



Bitter Melon

Chinese culture believes there is a positive energy and a negative energy in the universe. "Yin" represents negative energy and "yang" represents positive energy.³ They have to be equally balanced to create a harmonious and healthy state, otherwise, conflict and disease will be created. There are elements that belong to both "yin" and " yang," meaning some elements of yin fall within yang and some elements of yang fall within yin. This importance of balancing forces has been a part of Chinese thought for thousands of years. It has become a basic guideline for social, political, medical, and dietary usage.

Foods belonging to the yin (also known as "cold" food) are bitter melon, winter melon, Chinese green, mustard green, water crest, Napa cabbage, bean sprout, soybean, mung bean, tulip, water chestnut, cilantro, oranges, watermelon, bananas, coconut, cucumber, beer, pop, ice cream, ice chips, grass jelly, clams, and oysters. These foods cannot be eaten excessively and are thought to cause stomachaches, diarrhea, dizziness, weakness, and coldness in the body if done so.

Foods that belong to the yang (also known as "hot" food) are chili pepper, garlic, onion, curry, cabbage, eggplant, toro, pineapple, mango, cherry, peanuts, beef, turkey, shrimp, crab, French fries, fried chicken, and pizza. Excessive intake of these foods are thought to cause skin rashes, hives, pimples, nose bleeds, gas, indigestion, constipation, redness in the eyes, and sore throat. Both food groups need to be balanced evenly, not taken excessively or deficiently in order to create a harmonious and healthy state.



Red Pepper

Because illness is thought to be related to an unbalance that can be influenced with dietary intake. Often, a Chinese patient may ask the provider questions such as "is there any thing that I should not eat"? Typically, Western provider will only limit food for certain illness, such as sugar intake for diabetes, or salt and fat consumption for hypertension or heart problems. However, because of the conceptual framework around health and balance of the yin and yang, the patient may expect advice on how to avoid aggravating the illness. The patient is really asking " Doctor, because of my illness, should I watch out for certain foods? Which foods will throw off my balance even more?" For example, certain foods in the Chinese culture are asserted to be toxic or poisonous to individuals with weakened health. These foods include crab, shrimp, clams, fish (the kind that is scales less), beef, and eggs. Post-operative patients or patients with skin problems like dermatitis, acne or eczema is often told to avoid the above items as eating these foods are thought to worsen the problems.

The usual response from the Western provider is " No, there are no special restrictions, go ahead and eat anything you want." However, providers who are more knowledgeable about cultural believes might better respond with," Well, we can either refer you to consult our Chinese medical doctor or an acupuncturist in the clinic, or recommend that you eat foods that you are most comfortable or accustomed to".

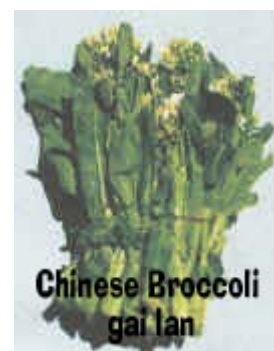


Food groups

As mentioned earlier, Chinese are not too concerned about eating within the five food group guidelines. There is more emphasis on how to eat to balance yin and yang. High importance is placed on freshness and flavor of produce or food. A typical Chinese's meal usually consists of rice, soup and three to four side dishes. Dishes are made of seasonal vegetables, fresh seafood or bite-size portion

of meat or poultry. Because

Chinese expect to have fresh fruit and vegetable in their daily meals, it is not difficult to comply with a provider's suggestion to increase intake of these items. However, it might be more of a drastic change to ask an anemic Chinese patient to add more meat to her diet to help control her anemia. Again, in Chinese food, meat portions are usually small, and often used for the purpose of flavoring the dish or soup. It might be helpful if the provider recognizes the challenge of increasing meat intake and suggests culturally appropriate ways to do so. For example, the patient could add meat to dishes that were originally purely vegetable (e.g., adding chicken to boy choy, minced pork to green beans, or beef to Chinese broccoli, aka "gai lan").



Grains and carbohydrates - Rice, Noodles, Buns

Rice and noodles are a very important part in the Chinese diet. Rice and noodles are equivalent to potato and pasta in the western diet. Handfuls of bite-sized meat and vegetables accompany the rice and noodles. Almost every meal uses rice. The different types of rice are sweet rice, long grain rice, short grain rice, jasmine rice, and brown rice. The different ways to prepare rice are steamed rice, rice soup, fried rice, and pot rice. People living in south China especially consume large amounts of rice. On the north side of China, people consume more noodles or steam buns (bread). Polished rice (white rice) contains 25% carbohydrates and small amounts of iodine, iron, magnesium, and phosphate.⁴ For brown rice, the bran part has not been removed from the rice. In the old days, only the poor Chinese people ate brown rice, but now studies show that brown rice actually contains more vitamin B than the polished rice. There are many processes involved before the white rice is ready for the market. Rice is treated most respectfully in China. Every grain of rice represents a hardship of labor. Parents always tell their children to finish every grain of rice in the bowl; otherwise, they will marry someone with a pimple-scarred face.

Noodles

Chinese noodles come in different sizes and shapes. They can be cooked in the soup or stir-fried, which is known as "chow mien." Noodles are usually served for breakfast, lunch, or late snacks. During birthday celebrations, noodles are served to symbolize long life. The longer the noodle, the longer the life will be for the birthday person. Accompanying meat and vegetables are chopped up into small pieces and stir-fried or steamed. A dinner meal usually has soup in the middle, surrounded by 3 to 5 main dishes of vegetables, seafood, and poultry dishes.

Buns and breads

Chinese bakeries carry pastries and sweet buns filled with delights such as red bean paste, egg custard, BBQ pork, or coconut cream. Families eat them on the run for breakfast, or to curb a midday snack attack. Hong Kong bakeries are known for their wide variety of baked and steamed buns, which may have been influenced by English high tea culture during British rule of the colony. Northern Chinese are known for their fluffy white buns, which may be served in place of rice during meals. In the US, we often see these white buns served with Peking Duck.

Foods to improve weak health

Sometimes when the Chinese feel a deficiency in their health or strength, they usually seek a traditional method first, which is to use herbs and special ingredient soups to replenish the energy level and to stay healthy. Northern Chinese call it "gin bou," and the southern Chinese call it "bo sheng." They usually go to herbalists for herb tea or to seek out advice from an elder or a wise person to learn how to cook the special soup.

The herbal tea and the special ingredient soups usually require hours of slow cooking in an ancient style clay pot, before they reach maximum benefits.⁵ These soups are often used for postpartum, illness, old age, and weak energy. They have special soup recipe books available to explain how to use different soups for different situations. It requires great knowledge and patience to make the appropriate soup. Often, traditional Chinese will use herbs and special soups for all illnesses before he or she seeks out an alternative treatment from Western medicine. Western medicine is often reserved for more severe health problems, as many Chinese believe that Western medicine is "too strong" for them.

Eight Regional Variations of Chinese Cuisine

For most foreigners, “Chinese food” usually implies a lot of deep-fried, strong-flavored and greasy dishes that all taste similar. However, for Chinese people, “Chinese food” is a concept as useless as “German beer,” because, like Chinese culture in general, Chinese food is extremely diverse. China covers a large territory and has many nationalities; hence there is a wide variety of Chinese foods, each with quite different but fantastic and mouthwatering flavors. Because China's local dishes have their own typical characteristics, Chinese food can be divided into eight regional cuisines, the distinction of which is now widely accepted. Certainly, there are many other local cuisines that are famous, such as Beijing Cuisine and Shanghai Cuisine.

Shandong Cuisine



Consisting of Jinan cuisine and Jiaodong cuisine, Shandong cuisine, clean, pure and not greasy, is characterized by its emphasis on aroma, freshness, crispness and tenderness. Shallots and garlic are frequently used as seasonings so Shandong dishes taste pungent. Soups are given much emphasis in Shandong cuisine. Thin soups are clear and fresh while creamy soups are thick and taste strong. Jinan chefs are adept at deep-frying, grilling, pan-frying and stir-frying while Jiaodong chefs are famous for cooking seafood with a fresh and light taste.

Typical menu items: Bird's Nest Soup; Yellow River Carp in Sweet and Sour Sauce

Sichuan Cuisine



Sichuan Cuisine, known more commonly in the West as "Szechuan," is one of the most famous Chinese cuisines in the world. Characterized by its spicy and pungent flavors, Sichuan cuisine, with a myriad of tastes, emphasizes the use of chili. Pepper and prickly ash are always in accompaniment, producing the typical exciting tastes. Garlic, ginger and fermented soybean are also used in the cooking process. Wild vegetables and meats such as are often chosen as ingredients, while frying, frying without oil, pickling and braising are used as basic cooking techniques.

It can be said that one who doesn't experience Sichuan food has never reached China.

Typical menu items: Hot Pot; Kung Pao Chicken; Water-Boiled Fish; Fried Diced Chicken with Chilli Sauce; Zhang Tea Duck; Mapo Bean Curd (Tofu) ; Cabbage in Boiling Water; Tasty and Spicy Crab; Twice Cooked Pork.

Guangdong (Cantonese) Cuisine



Tasting clean, light, crisp and fresh, Guangdong cuisine, familiar to Westerners, usually has fowl and other meats that produce its unique dishes. The basic cooking techniques include roasting, stir-frying, sauteing, deep-frying, braising, stewing and steaming. Steaming and stir-frying are most frequently used to preserve the ingredients' natural flavors. Guangdong chefs also pay much attention to the artistic presentation of their dishes.

Typical menu items: Shark Fin Soup; Steamed Sea Bass; Roasted Piglet; Dim Sum (a variety of side dishes and desserts);

Fujian Cuisine

Combining Fuzhou Cuisine, Quanzhou Cuisine and Xiamen Cuisine, Fujian Cuisine is renowned for its choice seafood, beautiful color and magical tastes of sweet, sour, salt and savory. The most distinct feature is their "pickled taste."



Typical menu items: Buddha Jumping Over the Wall; Snow Chicken; Prawn with Dragon's Body and Phoenix's tail

Huaiyang Cuisine



Huaiyang Cuisine, also called Jiangsu Cuisine, is popular in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River. Using fish and crustaceans as the main ingredients, it stresses their freshness. Its carving techniques are delicate, of which the melon carving technique is especially well known. Cooking techniques consist of stewing, braising, roasting, and simmering. The flavor of Huaiyang Cuisine is light, fresh and sweet and its presentation is delicately elegant.

Typical menu items: Stewed Crab with Clear Soup, Long-boiled and Dry-shredded Meat, Duck Triplet, Crystal Meat, Squirrel with Mandarin Fish, and Liangxi Crisp Eel

Zhejiang Cuisine



Comprising local cuisines of Hanzhou, Ningbo, and Shaoxing, Zhejiang Cuisine is not greasy. It wins its reputation for freshness, tenderness, softness, and smoothness of its dishes with their mellow fragrance. Hangzhou Cuisine is the most famous one of the three.

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Typical menu items: Sour West Lake Fish, Longjing Shelled Shrimp, Beggar's Chicken

Hunan Cuisine



Hunan cuisine consists of local cuisines of Xiangjiang Region, Dongting Lake and Xiangxi coteau areas. It is characterized by thick and pungent flavors. Chili, pepper and shallot are usually necessities in this variation.

Typical menu items: Dongan Chicken; Peppery and Hot Chicken

Anhui Cuisine



Anhui Cuisine chefs focus much more attention on the temperature in cooking and are good at braising and stewing. Often ham will be added to improve taste and candied sugar added to gain freshness.

Typical menu items: Smoked Duck, Feiwang Fish with Milk, Wenzheng Bamboo's Shoots, Stewed Snapper; Huangshan Braised Pigeon.

Yin and Yang in Chinese Cooking

"Real knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance."

(Confucius)

Yin and yang. Hot and cold. Male and female. The philosophy of yin and yang lies at the heart of Chinese culture. The first references to yin and yang come from the [I Ching](#), the five classic works compiled and edited by [Confucius](#). Taken literally, yin and yang mean the dark side and sunny side of a hill. People commonly think of yin and yang as opposing forces. However, it is really more appropriate to view them as complementary pairs. The Chinese believe problems arise not when the two forces are battling, but when there is an imbalance between them in the environment. Floods, divorce, or even a fire in the kitchen - all can be attributed to disharmony in the forces of yin and yang.



This is the traditional symbol for the forces of yin and yang, sometimes described as two fish swimming head to tail.

How does the concept of yin and yang relate to food? A basic adherence to this philosophy can be found in any Chinese dish, from stir-fried beef with broccoli to sweet and sour pork. There is always a balance in color, flavors, and textures. However, belief in the importance of following the principles of yin and yang in the diet extends further. Certain foods are thought to have yin or cooling properties, while others have warm, yang properties. The challenge is to consume a diet that contains a healthy balance between the two. When treating illnesses, an Oriental physician will frequently advise dietary changes in order to restore a healthy balance between the yin and yang in the body. For example, let's say you're suffering from heartburn, caused by consuming too many spicy (yang) foods. Instead of antacids, you're likely to take home a prescription for herbal teas to restore the yin forces. Similarly, coughs or flu are more likely to be treated with dietary changes than antibiotics or cough medicines.

Almost no foodstuff is purely yin or yang - it's more that one characteristic tends to dominate. This is why there is not complete agreement among experts as to which foods exhibit yin or yang forces. It also reinforces that it is not so much the individual ingredients, as the the balance and contrast between ingredients in each dish, that is important. Interestingly, cooking methods also have more of a yin or yang property, as the list below demonstrates.

Cooking Methods:

Yin Qualities:

- Boiling
- Poaching
- Steaming

Yang Qualities:

- Deep-frying
- Roasting
- Stir-frying

Types of Foods:

Yin Foods

Bean Sprouts
Cabbage
Carrots
Crab
Cucumber
Duck
Tofu
Watercress
Water

Yang Foods

Bamboo
Beef
Chicken
Eggs
Ginger
Glutinous Rice
Mushrooms
Sesame Oil
Wine

Ying and Yang in Our Daily Life

Hot day? Try a warm drink

Whereas Americans would reach for a glass of ice water or iced tea on a sweltering (yang) summer day, most Chinese would never do that because an ice-cold drink is thought to tax the body's energy and shock the system. They'll have warm water or, even better, hot chrysanthemum tea or warm winter melon soup--both of which contain yin ingredients that cool the body.

A soup for the change of seasons

Late September into October is an ideal time to drink mustard green soup. Its balance of pungent-smelling mustard greens (yin) and sweet potato (yang) is thought to fortify the system and prevent flu. To make the soup: Bring 1 1/2 quarts water to a boil in a large saucepan. Add 1 pound rinsed and drained broad-leaf mustard greens, cut into 1-inch pieces, and a large, peeled sweet potato, cut into 1/2-inch chunks. Cover, reduce heat to low, and simmer 3 hours. Serve piping hot, no more than 1 1/2 cups per person. [Adapted from Grace Young, *The Wisdom of the Chinese Kitchen*, Simon & Schuster, 1999]

A southern tradition

Americans in the deep south traditionally saute mustard greens in springtime and drink the juice at the bottom of the pan (called the liquor) as a restorative tonic. Mustard greens are rich in calcium, folate, and beta-carotene.

Autumn grocery list

To counter dry fall weather, Chinese physicians recommend foods such as sesame that moisten the lungs. As the temperature shifts from warmer to cooler, you should also add yang foods.

The Five Elements Theory of Chinese Cooking

"He that takes medicine and neglects diet, wastes the skills of the physician."
(Chinese proverb)

Like the concept of yin and yang, the Five Elements Theory is at the cornerstone of Chinese culture. What is the Five Elements Theory? The Chinese believe that we are surrounded by five energy fields: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. However, the elements are not static: they are constantly moving and changing. (In fact, some scientists think the term "element" is misleading, and prefer to refer to the "five phases" or "five forces.")

Once the Chinese identified the five elements, they set about categorizing all phenomena within the five categories. Everything, from a river to sounds to the organs in our bodies, can be described in terms of the five elements. How things are characterized depends on their individual qualities. For example, earth is associated with growth and nourishment, so the spleen, which monitors the blood - digesting debris and producing antibodies when necessary - is categorized as an earth element.

Just as an imbalance between yin and yang can produce destructive forces, keeping all elements in balance promotes harmony both in our surroundings and ourselves. Of course, balancing five elements is a little more complicated than achieving harmony between two opposing forces. According to Chinese belief, each element acts upon two others, either giving birth to it or controlling it. For example, wood gives birth to fire and controls or suppresses earth. Similarly, fire gives birth to earth and controls metal. All the elements are constantly interacting with other elements - none stand alone. The table below outlines the relationships.

Gives Birth To	Controlling
Wood - Fire	Wood - Earth
Fire - Earth	Earth - Water
Earth - Metal	Water - Fire
Metal - Water	Fire - Metal
Water - Wood	Metal - Wood

To give an example from nature, a plant (wood) grows when it is given water. When burnt, wood gives birth to fire, and the burnt ashes subsequently return to the earth.

What role does the Five Elements Theory Play in the Chinese diet?

You'll see adherence to the five elements theory in many facets of Chinese life. Martial arts, for example: many schools have a series of basic movements, each designed to keep the body in harmony with one the elements. And the five elements theory plays a large role in Feng Shui, the latest trend in both landscaping and interior decorating. Literally meaning "wind and water," Feng Shui is all about aligning energies in your home or work environment in a way that is most conducive with your own personal energy.

As for diet, Chinese herbalists believe that, to properly treat a patient, you must know the state of the five elements in their body. A deficiency or an excess of an element can lead to illness. In *The Chinese Kitchen: Recipes, Techniques, Ingredients, History, and Memories from America's Leading Authority on Chinese Cooking*, Eileen Yin Fei-Lo provides some wonderful examples of how her grandmother used the principles of the five elements theory to cure common illnesses. Treating a cough with winter melon tea and fresh water chestnuts is just one example.

A detailed look at the use of five elements theory in diagnosing and treating illnesses is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice to say that practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine rely on it to explain the relationships between the body organs and tissues, as well as between the body and the outside environment. The table below outlines the relationship between the five elements and body parts, feelings, colors, and taste.

Element	Yin	Yang	Feelings	Colors	Tastes
Wood	Liver	Gall Bladder	Rage	Green	Sour
Fire	Heart	Small Intestine	Happiness	Red	Bitter
Earth	Spleen	Stomach	Thought	Yellow	Sweet
Metal	Lungs	Large Intestine	Sorrow	White	Spicy
Water	Kidneys	Bladder	Fear	Black	Salty

How would a physician use the above information to make a diagnosis? Let's say a patient suddenly developed a preference for sour food. This could indicate liver problems. Of course, the actual process of examining a patient and making a diagnosis is much more complex than merely consulting a chart. It requires a thorough understanding of the interaction between all the elements. Because time and date of birth are also thought to play a role in an individual's "state of the five elements," many physicians will consult astrological charts before making a diagnosis.

Understanding the Three Tenets of Chinese Cooking

You don't have to be well versed in Confucianism or Taoist principles to think like a Chinese cook, and you don't have to master fancy cooking techniques or buy a ton of kitchen equipment either. You really need only a few simple tools and the willingness to follow a few basic guidelines — not rules — that all Chinese cooks first learned as children in their own parents' kitchens.

Keep it in balance

The Chinese pay a great deal of attention to contrast and harmony in their everyday existence. Balancing yin and yang is a way to achieve harmony in your life, as well as your culinary creations. These two elements complement and contrast each other, and a thorough understanding of them goes a long way toward understanding the Chinese philosophy in the kitchen. Here's what these two terms mean:

Yin represents feminine, soft, cold, and wet forces.

Yang is masculine, bright, hot, dry, and vigorous.

So how does this harmony translate to food? Chinese classify bland, low-calorie foods as yin, whereas richer and fattier items fall within the yang category. By harmonizing the yin and yang ingredients in a dish, the cook creates a good meal that maintains a healthy balance. If this concept sounds a bit too abstract, consider the popular dish sweet-and-sour pork — a clear example of the yin-yang balance of taste (sweet is yin, and sour is yang).

Balancing isn't restricted to taste alone. You can create texture contrast by combining soft, steamed items with crispy, fried ones. Or how about contrasting the color scheme with the spiciness in a single dish? Cooking techniques as opposite as deep-frying and steaming can join forces to create meals that are not only tasty but also philosophically stimulating.

Cook seasonally, buy locally

For much of China's history, its people have had to adapt their daily menus to those ingredients available in their own gardens and at local markets on that particular day. Chinese home cooks somehow managed to turn this liability into an asset, taking limited, simple ingredients and turning them into masterpieces. The popularity of wheat-flour dumplings and noodles and of root-based dishes in northern China; the deft preparation of fresh seafood in the regions running along the country's coast; and the prevalence of fresh produce and rice dishes in the semitropical south all attest to the use of local, seasonally accessible foods.

Perhaps the best place to start is at your local farmers market. Always ask what's in season. Fruits and vegetables that are in season are abundant and at their peak of flavor, color, and texture, while those out of season are few, and their quality can be questionable. Go with the numbers, and you have a better chance at getting high-quality ingredients.

Don't see what you want in your local market? Check out the seed store, and you may turn your backyard into a healthy Asian vegetable garden. You can rather effortlessly grow many vegetables that are common in Chinese dishes in small backyard plots or gardens.

Granted, raising poultry and hogs in midtown Manhattan or catching live river shrimp in Nebraska may not be practical. Nevertheless, you should still think "fresh, fresh, fresh" when seeking these and other ingredients at your local market or your favorite butcher's counter.

Many substitutes are available for the traditional ingredients and cooking tools used in Chinese cuisine. But there is no substitute for freshness. None.

If all else fails, improvise!

Chinese chefs are experts in developing endless alternatives in ingredients and cooking methods in the face of scarcity and hardship. If you want to cook like the Chinese, you, too, should adopt a flexible approach when it comes to the availability of ingredients.

Many ingredients in traditional Chinese dishes sound foreign to novice cooks — and for good reason! Even with the ever-expanding stock of most supermarket chains, finding yard-long beans in suburban Detroit may still be a bit challenging. However, regular green beans can make a nice substitute. So be flexible: Buy fresh, crisp regular green beans and enjoy.

The next time you hit an ingredient-availability wall, don't give up on the whole recipe. Use your imagination to scope out attainable items that can take the place of ones not quite at peak freshness or still on the dock in Shanghai. No one but you will know the difference.

In all Chinese markets, you find an array of dried, pickled, salted, bottled, canned, or otherwise-preserved counterparts for seasonal or less-readily available ingredients. Take advantage of the assortment and stock up on dried noodles, grains, and dried black mushrooms, for starters.

If you don't have the time or inclination to make your own sweet-and-sour stir-fry sauce, the Asian foods section of your local store can pick up the slack with countless bottled versions. Remember that canned, sliced water chestnuts, bamboo shoots, and straw mushrooms — all easy to find — take the core out of your prep work. By throwing in a little patience and imagination, anyone can cook Chinese like the Chinese.

Know About Chinese Table Etiquettes

Set Up Dinner Table

The head of the table will usually start a meal by saying "seck fan" (literally, "eat rice") or give some other indication that everyone can eat. Like many cultures, it is not proper to start eating until the head of the table indicates it is okay to do so.

If someone picks up a piece of food and puts it in your bowl, say thanks. They are trying to help you and are being gracious hosts.

Once you've finished, put the chopsticks horizontally down on the table or the plate -- do not put it on top of the bowl.

Never hold your chopsticks vertically pointing straight up or at anyone -- this is very bad luck in Chinese terms.

Rules of Sitting

The Chinese have a number of rules and customs associated with eating. For example, meals must be taken while seated; there is a set order of who may be seated first among men, women, old and young; and the main courses must be eaten with chopsticks, and soup with a spoon. Chinese banquets are arranged on a per table basis, with each table usually seating ten to twelve people. A typical banquet consists of four appetizer dishes, such as cold cut platters or hot hors d'oeuvres; six to eight main courses; then one savory snack-type dish and a dessert. The methods of preparation include stir-frying, stewing, steaming, deep-frying, flash-frying, pan-frying, and so forth. A dish may be savory, sweet, tart, or piquant. The main colors of a dish may include red, yellow, green, white and caramel color. Food garnishes, such as cut or sculptured tomatoes, Chinese white radishes, cucumbers, and so forth, may be used to add to the visual appeal of a dish. All of these elements contribute to making Chinese food a true feast for the eyes and nostrils as well as the taste buds.

Using Chopsticks and Table Manners

Chopsticks



Chinese simply choose chopsticks as their tableware rather than knife and fork since Chinese people, under cultivation of Confucianism, consider knife and fork bearing sort of violence, like cold weapons. However, chopsticks reflect gentleness and benevolence, the main moral teaching of Confucianism.

Chinese food seems to taste better eaten with chopsticks which are the special utensil Chinese use to dine. It will be an awkward experience for foreigners to use chopsticks to have a meal. Fortunately, learning to eat with chopsticks is not difficult.

The method of using chopsticks is to hold one chopstick in place while pivoting the other one to pick up a morsel. How to position the chopsticks is the hard part. First, place the first chopstick so that thicker part rests at the base of your thumb and the thinner part rests on the lower side of your middle fingertip. Then, bring your thumb forward so that the stick will be firmly trapped in place. At least two or three inches of chopstick of the thinner end should extend beyond your fingertip. Next, position the other chopstick so that it is held against the side of your index finger by the end of your thumb. Check whether the ends of the chopsticks are even. If not, then tap the thinner parts on the plate to make them be even.

Ok, now you are going to practice. Just place a little pressure on the upper chopstick, the one against your index finger, to make it pivot on the index finger while keep the bottom chopstick stationary. Isn't it easy? After a little practice, you can use them to enjoy your Chinese food. You'll certainly need to take care in the first few attempts.

Using chopsticks to eat rice is a problem to most foreigners. Generally the tip to eat rice is to bring one's rice bowl close to one's mouth and quickly scoop the rice into it with one's chopsticks. Since this is difficult for foreigners, it is perfectly acceptable simply to lift portions of rice to the mouth from the bowl held in the other hand.

There are superstitions associated with chopsticks too. If you find an uneven pair at your table setting, it means you are going to miss a boat, plane or train. Dropping chopsticks will inevitably bring bad luck. Crossed chopsticks are, however, permissible in a dim sum restaurant. The waiter will cross them to show that your bill has been settled, or you can do the same to show the waiter that you have finished and are ready to pay the bill.

Table manners

In China, since people eat together, usually the host will serve you some dishes with his or her own chopsticks as a show of hospitality. Since this is different than Western customs, you can leave the food alone if you feel too awkward.

There are some other rules you are suggested to follow to make your stay in China happier, though you will be forgiven if you have no idea what they are:

- Never stick your chopsticks upright in the rice bowl, since that is usually done at a funeral and will be seen as an extremely impolite gesture to the host and seniors present.
- Make sure the spout of the teapot is not pointing toward anyone.
- Don't tap on your bowl with your chopsticks, since that will be deemed an insult to the host or the chef.

Never try to turn a fish over and debone it yourself, since the separation of the fish skeleton from the lower half of the flesh will usually be performed by the host or a waiter. Superstitious people will expect bad luck (a fishing boat will capsize).

Symbolism in Chinese Food

Symbolism is a very important part of Chinese people's life. A lot of Chinese foods are also symbolic, especially during traditional festivals or other special occasions.

For Chinese New Year:

- Black moss seaweed - wealth
- Dried Bean Curd - happiness
- Chicken - happiness and marriage (especially when served with "dragon foods," such as lobster. Family reunion (if served whole)
- Eggs - fertility
- Egg Rolls - wealth
- Fish served whole - prosperity
- Lychee nuts - close family ties
- Noodles - A long life
- Oranges – wealth, luck
- Chicken - part of the symbolism of the dragon and phoenix. At a Chinese wedding, chicken's feet (sometimes referred to as phoenix feet) are often served with dragon foods such as lobster. Chicken is also popular at Chinese New Year, symbolizing a good marriage and the coming together of families (serving the bird whole emphasizes family unity).
- Peanuts - a long life
- Peaches - peacefulness
- Pomelo - abundance, prosperity, having children
- Seeds (lotus, watermelon, etc.) - having a large number of children
- Tangerines - luck

For a wedding:

- Zao (Chinese date), peanut, guiyuan (longan) and sunflower seeds - having a "noble" (precious) son very soon
- Eggs - fertility

Other occasions:

- Snapper's head or shell - welcome
 - Red Boiled Egg - for newborn baby

How to Celebrate Chinese New Year?

This year, gather your family round to welcome the Chinese New Year with Oriental flair. Use the following menu and tips to prepare a feast of which Confucius would have approved and start the year on a lucky footing. The brief survey of Chinese cooking below will help you grasp the philosophy behind it.

Chinese Menu Worthy of Confucius

Recipe #1:

Good Fortune Won Tons

Makes: 4-6 portions

Preparation Time: 45 minutes

Cooking Time: 20 minutes

Ingredients:

Farce

- 1/2 lb. (225 g) chicken, chopped up
- 1 Tbsp. (15 mL) minced fresh ginger
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 tsp. (5 mL) sesame oil
- 1 Tbsp. (15 mL) soya sauce*
- 1/4 cup (60 mL) scallions, sliced very thin
- 1 egg*

Won Ton

- 48 won ton wrappers
- 1 egg*, beaten

Directions:

- In a bowl, combine stuffing ingredients. Set aside.
- Lay 12 won ton wrappers on a working surface. Brush edges of each wrapper with beaten egg. In the centre of each wrapper, put a teaspoonful (5 mL) of stuffing and seal shut. Repeat until there are no more wrappers or stuffing.
- Meanwhile, bring a pot of water to a boil. Immerse 8 won tons or so at a time in the water and cook about 3 minutes. Drain. Repeat until all won tons are cooked. Keep warm and serve.

Tip and advice:

Chopped chicken can be replaced with well drained canned flaked crab. Stir-frying cooked won

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tons in sesame oil makes them beautifully browned and crispy.

Accompaniment:

Serve with a sweet and sour or peanut sauce.

Recipe #2:

Eternal Youth Chinese Vegetables

4 portions

Preparation Time: 10 minutes

Cooking Time: 5 minutes

Ingredients:

- 1 Chinese cabbage, cut up
- 1 broccoli, cut up
- 2 tsp. (10 mL) peanut oil*
- 1/2 tsp. (2 mL) minced garlic
- 1 Tbsp. (15 mL) oyster sauce
- 1/2 tsp. (2 mL) powdered sugar
- 2 Tbsp. (30 mL) water
- 1 tsp. (5 mL) sesame oil

Directions:

- Bring a big pot of water to a boil. Cook vegetables 1-2 minutes until tender-crisp. Drain and keep warm in a serving platter.
- Heat peanut oil and cook garlic 1-2 minutes. Add remaining ingredients and bring to a boil. Pour over vegetables, mix together and serve.

Tip and Advice:

Use frozen Oriental-Style Vegetables when pressed for time.

Accompaniment:

Garnish with fried noodles.

Recipe #3:

Great Wealth Steamed Whole Fish

Preparation Time: 25 minutes

Cooking Time: 20 minutes

Ingredients:

2 whole snappers, about 1 1/2 lb. (675 g), gutted and scaled
1/2 tsp. (2 mL) salt
1/2 tsp. (2 mL) ground pepper
2 Tbsp. (30 mL) thinly sliced fresh ginger
1 Tbsp. (15 mL) sesame oil
1 Tbsp. (15 mL) soya sauce*
3 scallions, cut into segments
1 stalk celery, cut into thin strips
1/2 red pepper, cut into thin strips

Directions:

- Wash fish inside and out with cold water and pat dry with paper towels. Salt and pepper and put ginger in the cavity.
- Combine sesame oil and soya sauce. Brush over fish.
- Put a grill in the bottom of a big wok. Add water to a depth of 7 cm. Water must not touch grill.
- Lay fish on grill and cut 3 slits in thickest part of fish.
- Cover and bring to a boil over high heat. Cook 15-20 minutes. Shut off heat, spread vegetables over the fish and cook covered another 3 minutes. Arrange fish on a serving platter and keep warm.

Tip and advice:

Whole snappers can be replaced with fillets. For crispier fish, heat 1/2 cup (125 mL) peanut oil. When it begins to smoke, pour it over vegetables and fish.

Accompaniment:

Serve with white rice or rice vermicelli.

Recipe #4:

Chinese Noodles with Shrimp

4 portions

Preparation Time: 20 minutes

Cooking Time: 10 minutes

Ingredients:

1 lb. (450 g) Chinese noodles
1/4 cup (60 mL) peanut oil*
2 tsp. (10 mL) garlic, minced
20 large raw shelled shrimp*
1 Tbsp. (15 mL) soya sauce*
1 Tbsp. (15 mL) hoisin sauce
1 Tbsp. (15 mL) rice vinegar

1/4 cup (60 mL) chicken broth*
1/4 lb. (115 g) bean sprouts
3 scallions, minced

Directions:

- Cook noodles. Drain and set aside.
- Heat oil in a wok. Cook garlic, stirring. Add shrimp and cook another 3 minutes, stirring. Shrimp should be pink. Add cooked noodles, soya sauce, hoisin sauce, rice vinegar and broth. Stir fry on high heat until everything is heated through and sauce is absorbed.
- Add bean sprouts and scallions and cook 1 minute more. Transfer to a serving platter.

Tip and advice:

Garnish with fresh coriander.

Recipe #5:

Many Offspring Sweet Won Tons

4 portions

Preparation Time: 30 minutes

Cooking Time: 20 minutes

Ingredients:

Farce

1/4 lb. (115 g) dry pitted dates, chopped
2 bananas, cup up small
2 oz. (60 g) slivered almonds, crushed
1/2 tsp. (2 mL) ground cinnamon

Won Ton

60 won ton wrappers
Water as needed
Peanut oil* as needed

Directions:

- In a bowl, combine stuffing ingredients. Set aside.

- Lay 12 won ton wrappers on a working surface. Moisten edges of each wrapper with water. Place 2 tsp. (10 mL) of stuffing in the centre wrapper and cover with another set at an angle to create a star. Transfer won tons to a platter lined with waxed paper, keeping them well apart. Repeat until there are no more wrappers or stuffing.

- Meanwhile, in a large pot heat oil until it bubbles. Immerse about 5 won tons at a time and fry about 2 minutes. Drain on paper towels. Repeat until all won tons have been fried. Keep warm and serve.

Tip and advice:

Sprinkle with icing sugar before serving.

Accompaniment:

Serve with exotic fruit salad (pineapple and litchis).

Chinese New Year: “To Dine Well is to Enjoy the Company of the Gods”

New Year’s Eve means family and food for the Chinese just like Christmas Eve for many Westerners. The Chinese lunar calendar differs from the Gregorian calendar we use.

Symbolic Foods

Food is the focal point of this holiday, like so many others. The whole family gathers – this custom is called “surrounding the hearth” – round a table laden with dishes with auspicious meanings: many children, luck, prosperity, long life.

- A dish of long uncut noodles, the longer the better, represents long life.
- Whole fish invites wealth.
- Dates and chestnuts are thought to favour fertility.
- Green vegetables keep one young and promote spirituality while glassy vermicelli represent good fortune.
- Foods fried in oil attract luck and prosperity while round-shaped foods symbolize togetherness.
- Finally, oranges are guarantors of health whether eaten or used to decorate the table.

The menu is elaborate, but frozen and refrigerated prepared foods are excellent shortcuts. Just heat and serve. Won ton soup, regular or mini spring rolls with meat or strictly vegetarian, egg rolls, chicken balls, Asian shrimp trio and seafood dim sum are just some of the many products available.

Décor and Ambience

In decorating, remember the following elements that help clear out bad luck and attract good

luck.

- Send invitations in red envelopes addressed in gold script.
- Decorate the dining and living rooms with red lanterns and vases of bright flowers.
- Lay the table with a red tablecloth and napkins.
- Set a large plate of oranges and tangerines on the table. The Chinese consider them deeply symbolic.
- On both sides of the front door, put up Chinese scrolls in gold lettering on red paper with traditional New Year's wishes of happiness, wealth, long life and joy.
- Ideally, the table should be round with a lazy Susan in the middle so that people can serve themselves from any dish without having to get up.
- Set a small plate, a porcelain spoon, a small soup bowl, a saucer for the sauce, a wine cup and chopsticks at each place at table.
- Post the menu at the door and give dishes poetic names inspired by Chinese proverbs.
- Tie chopsticks with a strip of paper bearing a short description of the person's Chinese sign or a Chinese proverb.
- Keep in mind that 2004 is the year of the monkey, let decorations reflect this.
- Make up red envelopes, slipping a bill or a coin in each, for the children to bring them luck during the year.
 - Don't forget the sparklers! They're a great substitute for the fireworks that traditionally chase away evil spirits.

Chinese Medicinal Cuisine

Chinese medicinal cuisine is unique in China and has a long history. Based on traditional Chinese herbal medicine practice, it combines strictly processed traditional Chinese medicine with traditional culinary materials to produce delicious food with health restoring qualities. In China, people contend that food tonic is much better than medicine tonic in fortifying one's health. To cook medicinal food, one has a large variety of fine materials to choose from and each material has its own unique flavor. Generally, processed herbal materials are more commonly used in order to avoid strong odors. However, individuals of different physical status need to select different herbs. The selection of herbs will depend on each individual's condition of health. Due to its herbal nature, it is better to take medicinal food according to the doctor's prescription.

In the cooking of medicinal food, slow cooking methods such as stewing, braising and simmering are usually used in order to extract more of the herbs' healing properties.

Typical medicine cuisine:

- Baby Pigeon Stewed with Gouqi (Medlar) and Huangqi (membranous milk vetch);
- Pork Simmered with Lotus Seed and lily;
- Pig's Kidney Stewed with Eucommia Bark.

Genetically Modified Food

What are the definitions/characteristics of "genetically modified," "organic" farming, "traditional" farming?

Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) have been modified by DNA that was inserted by human intention. According to the definition drawn up by the National Organic Standards Board, GMOs are "made with techniques that alter the molecular or cell biology of an organism by means that are not possible under natural conditions or processes. Genetic engineering includes recombinant DNA, cell fusion, micro- and macro-encapsulation, gene deletion and doubling, introducing a foreign gene, and changing the positions of genes. It shall not include breeding, conjugation, fermentation, hybridization, in-vitro fertilization and tissue culture." Genetic engineers can cut, splice, and transfer genes between totally unrelated living organisms to produce combinations that would never occur naturally. The use of this technology in agriculture has the potential to cause unintended effects on the environment and on human health.

Organic farming is based on an agricultural system that maintains and replenishes soil fertility without the use of toxic and persistent pesticides and fertilizers. According to the National Organic Standards Board, "Organic agriculture is an ecological production management system that promotes and enhances biodiversity, biological cycles, and soil biological activity. It is based on minimal use of off-farm inputs and on management practices that restore, maintain, and enhance ecological harmony." Organic handlers, processors, and retailers adhere to standards that maintain the integrity of organic agricultural products. The use of genetic engineering is prohibited in organic agriculture.

The term "traditional" farming is confusing because it means different things to different people. For some, it means the type of farming employed in the era before technological advances. For others, it equals small-family farming. In addition, the term is often used as a misnomer for conventional farming, which is the widespread method of farming currently in the United States. In truth, conventional farmers use agricultural practices that have been developed and widely adopted only since the 1940s and 1950s; thus, the use of the term "traditional" is misleading. These practices, often referred to as the "Green Revolution," include high-intensity farming and the use of synthetic pesticides, herbicides, and chemical fertilizers

What are the health advantages, disadvantages, of GMF?

GMF technology is capable of producing food crops with enhanced nutrient content and also nutrient balance. For example, it is possible to engineer fruits and grains with higher concentrations of calcium, iron, vitamins A and C, and more protein with essential amino acids. Other possibilities are GMF with antipathogen proteins and products (for example, bacteriocins) to keep us healthy and protect us from food pathogens (for example, aflatoxins). Also GMF can synthesize human and animal vaccines, which may make vaccination programs easier

and more successful. Indirectly, GMF help to reduce the amounts of chemicals that are used in their production and hence residues in food and feed.

Direct health threats arise from the newly introduced proteins, especially DNA vaccines in the meat industry, which might cause allergy and illness to consumers. The indirect threat arises from the use of bacteria engineered with resistance to several common clinical antibiotics that are used in GMF technology. Care should be taken to avoid transferring genes into the natural environment, which may lead to pathogenic bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics. Another indirect effect could be larger amounts of herbicide residue present in food and fodder because of the use of herbicides in larger amounts on highly resistant herbicide-tolerant crops.

What personal impact does GMF technology have on you?

As an academic working at a publicly funded university, and as a mother with a young family, I feel a strong, personal sense of responsibility to inform myself and to contribute to the public debate in agricultural areas, including GE. However, exercising this right and responsibility as a tenured faculty member comes at a cost, to which I myself can attest. For speaking publicly on an issue outside of my paid professional responsibilities in pasture and grazing management, I was charged with "unethical" behavior by my dean, a charge that received national media coverage for some weeks early this year. He was obliged to issue a public apology of sorts, in response to a heartwarming robust expression of outrage from academics, farmers, and private citizens across the country. Nonetheless, it was not an experience--personal or professional--that I recommend to anyone. And, needless to say, it did not deter me or my colleagues in GE Alert--a group of Canadian academics and scientists concerned about ag-biotech--from continuing our efforts to understand and communicate the issues to the public. My dean has since been promoted to an interim Vice President position.

At another level, I have also experienced a disturbing loss in confidence in the process of science. After 20 years as an academic, I still trusted the fundamental integrity of science, scientists, and the scientific organizations that represent us. However, after watching the effects of high stakes research in my own and other universities (University of California, Berkeley and Davis, alma mater of my father and myself, respectively; University of Minnesota; Penn State), I now see my confidence as naive and misplaced. I uncritically accepted the reassurances of my biotech colleagues in response to my fundamental queries, starting in the mid-1990s. Over time, I gradually realized that the pat answers I was receiving were simplistic and, in fact, unsound:

No risk of superweeds because the crops did not evolve here;

No increased weediness potential, because domesticated crops cannot survive in the wild;

No chance of gene transfer from ingesting GE food because genes are wholly degraded during digestion; and

Mode of action prevents evolution of resistance to Round Up.

Even a cursory effort, such as someone with my background in physiology and agronomy might make, demonstrated the shallowness of the opinions held by those I had consulted.

- Perhaps because the stakes are so high, and despite the sound science behind the arguments), remarkably uncollegial attitudes confront those dissenting from the party line. This type of behavior serves to dissuade other wavering scientists from speaking out and helps to maintain the appearance of conformity. High-stakes proprietary research has shattered the supportive, collegial environment needed for genuine creativity and has replaced it with something entirely different--something that serves interests unrelated to those of academia and society. Much more is being lost than lab space.

Part II

Nicholas Zhou's Shopping Guide

Measurements in Recipes

In U.S. kitchens, the British measurement system dominates: teaspoons, tablespoons, cups and pints. With the advent of metric education, people are less sure than they once were how these measures interrelate. So, here they are:

1 tsp 1 teaspoon

1 Tb 1 tablespoon There are 3 teaspoons in a tablespoon

1 Tb 1/2 oz 1/2 oz is the same as 1/2 ounce

1 c 1 cup 1 cup is 8 ounces (oz)

ergo There are 4 tablespoons in 1/4 cup.

There are 16 tablespoons in a cup.

1 pint 16 oz There are 2 cups in one pint

1 quart 32 oz There are 2 pints (4 cups) in a quart

1 gallon 128 oz There are 4 quarts in a gallon. Imagine how often you'll be cooking a gallon of anything!

Note that the ounces referred to here are "fluid ounces" and refer to the weight of water of that volume. Obviously denser materials like flour or sugar weigh more. However, they are usually measured by volume rather than weight, so a cup of water and a cup of flour have the same volume, but different weights. Measurements as small as 1/4 or even 1/8 of a teaspoon are often found in recipes, although anything less than 1/4 teaspoon is really a dash, a pinch or a skoshe.

What do I Buy First? - Getting Ready to Cook Chinese Food

Buy Chinese cooking ingredients and kitchenware at ChineseFoodDIY Shopping Center:

<http://www.chinesefooddiy.com/shopping.htm>

So, you've decided to finally take the plunge and start cooking Chinese food. Now all you need to do is make sure your pantry is stocked with the right equipment and ingredients. However, a quick look through any Chinese cookbook makes it clear that this could be an expensive - not to mention time consuming - proposition. Is it really necessary to embark on a frantic search through Chinatown for exotic sounding ingredients such as lily buds, shark's fin, and winter melon, not to mention splurging on fancy gadgets such as ginger graters and garlic crushers?

For the most part, no. However, there are several basic ingredients that you will use over and over in Chinese cooking. When it comes to cooking equipment, a [wok](#) has numerous advantages - besides requiring less oil and distributing more heat than a frying pan, its unique concave shape makes stir-frying easier. Not to mention that you get a stir-fry pan and deep-fryer rolled into one.

By contrast, a cleaver is optional for the beginner. You can still use a conventional knife for all her slicing and dicing, bringing out the cleaver only when some heavy duty chopping was required. It's nice to have, but not essential.

Here is a list of the basic ingredients and utensils you need to cook Chinese food:*

Ingredients	Cooking Utensils
Celery - Regular celery works well in stir-fries.	Chopsticks - Use in the kitchen for stir-frying and mixing ingredients.
Chinese Rice Wine - It adds flavor and is good for removing strong odors, such as fish.	Cutting Board - Wood or acrylic are best.
Chinese Dried Black Mushrooms - Found in most Asian markets. Cheaper brands work fine in soups and stir-fries.	Knife - for cutting and chopping
Cornstarch - Used in stews, marinades, and as a thickener. Can substitute for tapioca starch in recipes.	Wide blade Spatula - for stir-frying
Garlic - Along with ginger , it is often used to season cooking oil.	Wok - Carbon Steel is best.**
Ginger root - Always use fresh ginger unless the recipe states otherwise.	

Green Onion (Also known as spring onions) - Often used as a garnish. If, like me, you don't care for the taste of raw green onions, combine them with the other ingredients in the wok just before serving.	
MSG (Monosodium Glutamate) - Optional. If a recipe calls for MSG and you don't want to use it, try a bit of sugar as a substitute. If you're out of MSG , substitute Accent.	
Oyster Sauce - The cheaper brands are fine for use in stir-fries; stick to the more expensive brands for dips.	
Rice - Long grain for meals; short grain or "sticky" rice for desserts or snacks. For something different, try a scented rice, such as jasmine.	
Sesame Oil - Used as a flavoring in stir-fries and soups.	
Soy Sauce - both light and dark. The bottles are not always clearly labeled, but you can tell by holding it up to the light - dark soy sauce is thicker and darker.	
Vegetable Oil for frying - It's healthier and has a higher smoking point than peanut oil. Also, peanut oil goes rancid sooner, which can be a problem if you don't cook Chinese food often.	

*(I'm assuming you already have other basic cooking tools and supplies)

**For electric ranges, it is better to have a flat-bottomed wok, as a round-bottomed wok may reflect back and damage the heating element.

And that's everything. Of course, you'll want to add items as you go along - such as a [cleaver](#) and a [bamboo steamer](#) - but this will get you started. There are many dishes you can prepare with these basic supplies.

A Few Tips

- If possible, go to an Asian marketplace for Asian vegetables. They will be less expensive, and the produce may be fresher.
- When preparing a dish, put all your cut vegetables on a large platter. (A flat baking tray is ideal.) When stir-frying, the individual vegetables are added separately, ensuring that none are overcooked or undercooked. However, if you put the vegetables on separate plates until needed, you'll wind up with a lot of extra dishes to wash.
- Don't put any condiments on the table. In many restaurants in Asia, the chef will become quite upset if he sees a customer drowning the food in soy or Worcestershire sauce. Chances are, if you leave the condiments in the cupboard your family won't even miss them.

Useful Tools in Chinese Cooking

Wok: Much Chinese cooking requires the use of a wok. The wok is traditionally made of cast iron, but is normally found in carbon steel form in the United States. Several factors should be kept in mind when choosing a wok, one of which is weight. Although the wok is not generally moved around very much on the stove, weight does play a role in a wok's utility; a wok that is too thick will not heat as quickly as a thinner one. More important than weight, however, is size, and the best woks are generally 14 inches wide, large enough to hold a whole chicken, fish or duck, and with enough room for additional ingredients. There should be room in the wok to move the food around, and since the heat is concentrated on the bottom, a larger wok will allow more food to be cooked at one time. Woks generally come with a matching ring and cover, and be sure to look for one with wooden handles which won't conduct heat like metal will, making your wok easier to work with in the long run.

[Buy wok now](#)

Cleaver: Because they retain their sharpness well and are less expensive than stainless steel, Chinese chefs recommend using carbon steel cleavers. Cleavers come in a variety of weights, with each dictating its degree of usefulness. Light-weight cleavers have narrow blades and are primarily used for light chopping, delicate slicing and boning. Medium-weight cleavers, which are the most versatile, have thicker blades and are useful for all but the heaviest of tasks. This all-purpose tool can be used for everything from crushing ingredients to chopping, slicing, mincing and cutting up meat. Lastly, heavy-weight cleavers have the thickest blades and are generally used to hack through bones and cut through the toughest of ingredients.

[Buy cleaver now](#)

Frying Strainer: Used for deep-frying foods, the best frying strainers are made from wire mesh. Choose a strainer with long bamboo handles which won't conduct heat and will be easier to use.

Wide-Blade Spatula: This tool is helpful when stir frying and scooping up food. Its long handle helps keep you farther away from cooking heat.

Ladle or Scoop: This dual-purpose tool is used for removing food from the wok. The ladle or scoop can also be used to impress your friends, allowing you to mix sauces right over the wok. Of course, this technique takes practice, so be sure to rehearse before performing in front of an audience!

Long Wooden Chopsticks: Chopsticks are useful for picking up and moving food around within the wok, but only if you know how to use them! Here again, the wood will not get hot, making them easy to work with.

Bamboo Steamer with Lid: This fundamental tool is designed to fit inside the wok, and can be used one at a time or stacked one on top of another. You may line the steamer with

cheesecloth and place food on top of it for cooking, or simply place the steamer onto plates when serving. The steamer should sit approximately one inch above the boiling water inside the wok, and the water should be replaced as it evaporates during cooking. When cleaning the steamer, be sure to avoid using detergent -- the bamboo will absorb the flavor of the soap, so instead simply rinse with water.

[Buy Bamboo Steamer now](#)

Wok or Frying Pan?

A reader recently asked, "What is the concept behind cooking with a [wok](#) versus just a plain old pan on the burner?" It's a reasonable question. Frying, or cooking food in hot fats or oils, has been a popular cooking technique with numerous cultures since ancient times, most of whom do not use a [wok](#).

Nonetheless, the wok has always been the utensil of choice for stir-frying, a cooking technique that was developed to deal with shortages of both oil and ingredients. The wok's unique shape ensures that **heat is distributed evenly, allowing for faster cooking times**. And **the wok's deep, sloping sides make spills less likely**.

As the instruction booklet that came with one of my woks proudly announced: "This Chinese classic is a triumph of kitchen engineering. It has had no need for design improvements or changes after centuries and millions of satisfied users." That is, until it met up with the latest in North American kitchen appliances. Designed to fit or sink into a Chinese wood stove, the wok is decidedly unstable on western electric or gas stoves. Manufacturers originally tried to solve the problem by designing a metal ring or "collar" to fit underneath and stabilize the wok. This is still the recommended procedure if you cook with a gas stove. However, for those who use electric stoves, something else was required. Ultimately, manufacturers came up with the flat-bottomed wok. At the same time they also replaced the round handles (made to lift the wok in and out of the oven) with one long handle.

There's no doubt that this new design is much safer. Unfortunately, it also departs somewhat from the original concept that made the wok such an excellent cooking tool. True, the flat bottom is more effective in conducting heat from the stove's flat electric coils than would be the case with a round bottom. On the other hand, **the heat is no longer concentrated right at the center**. This means more oil is required, and **it's harder to toss ingredients, since the wok can't be tilted**.

How can the problem be solved? Purists such as Martin Yan eschew the flat-bottomed model, recommending **a round-bottomed wok with a base specifically designed for electric stoves**. Others, such as restaurateur Barbara Tropp, compare using the round-bottomed wok on an electric stove to "trying to walk across town on toe shoes." (Source: *The Modern Art of Chinese Cooking*).

So what is the answer? Should Chinese food lovers rush to trade in their electric stoves for the latest gas model? Fortunately, no: I own two flat-bottomed woks myself, and find they work beautifully. But the increasing acceptance of the flat-bottomed wok does seem to give added weight to the argument that a frying pan works as well as a wok for stir-frying. After all, if you're using a flat-bottomed pan with a skillet-like handle anyway....

The trick is to know what works for you. Perhaps you make Chinese food infrequently, or you're simply more comfortable sticking with a utensil that you have experience using (in this case a frying pan as opposed to a wok). If you already own a deep-fat fryer and/or a steaming tray, the wok's ability to perform these functions may not be of use to you. Perhaps you're hoping the frying pan will spare you the expense of purchasing a second wok. Just remember that, when it comes to stir-frying, not all pans are created equal. Here are a few tips to help you pick a "stir-fry friendly" frying pan:

- The pan needs to be made of fairly heavy material, so there are no problems with scorched food in "hot spots". Cast iron is an excellent choice - it is a very good conductor of heat, and it distributes the heat evenly. (The original woks were fashioned from cast iron, which the Chinese have been producing since the sixth century BC). The Calphalon hard anodized pans make good stir-fry pans as well. On the other hand, stay away from Teflon: despite the best efforts of its inventors, it can't take the high heat needed for stir-frying.
- It should have a lid for steaming. Even basic recipes such as Chop Suey will call for green vegetables such as Bok Choy to be cooked under cover.
- Finally, you may be tempted to circumvent the problem by purchasing an electric wok. Don't - most do not generate enough heat for stir-frying. Although there are exceptions, generally the best use for an electric wok is to keep food warm while you're preparing another dish.

Buy kitchenware at ChineseFoodDIY Shopping Center:

<http://www.chinesefooddiy.com/shopping.htm>

Before You Buy a Wok

If you would like to buy a wok, please check out our recommended brands by [click here](#). These products are highly recommended by Nicholas Zhou.

You don't absolutely need a wok to create satisfying Chinese meals. Nonetheless, the bowl-shaped utensil has several advantages - **it spreads heat evenly, uses less oil for deep-frying than a traditional deep-fat fryer, and ensures that food tossed during stir-frying lands back in the pan and not on the stove**. A good wok will make it easier to cook Chinese food.

What Type Should You Buy?

Remember that old adage "You get what you pay for." This is one of those rare cases where it doesn't apply. There is no substitute for a good carbon steel wok. Not only is it relatively inexpensive, but it conducts heat evenly. While there many other types of woks on the market today - aluminum, stainless steel, even copper, every experienced Asian cook I've spoken with still swears by carbon steel, and I have to agree.

Flat or Round Bottom?

If you are cooking with a western electric range your best option is to use a flat bottom wok. Round bottom woks can reflect heat back on the element, damaging it. A flat bottomed wok can also be used on gas stoves.

Handle with Care

Originally, woks came with two metal handles to make them easy to lift in and out of the traditional Chinese wood stove. Today, flat bottom woks normally have a long wooden handle, like a skillet. The long handle makes it easy to move and tilt the wok when stir-frying. Most also have a small helper? handle on the other side, so the wok is still easy to lift. Round bottom woks may follow the traditional wok design with two small metal ears? or have a single long metal or wooden handle.

Size Matters

Woks come in a variety of sizes - restaurants may use woks that are several feet across. The size of wok you choose will depend on several factors, including your own preferences, the type of stove you have, and the depth of the wok.

What about Non-Stick?

With the current interest in low-fat cooking, many manufacturers now offer woks with a non-stick coating. While it depends on the individual coating and how it is applied, generally non-stick coatings don't work well on carbon steel. I use one as a secondary wok, but despite my best efforts, there are still spots where the coating has been damaged from frying at high heat. If you really want the non-stick coating, try a heavy gauge aluminum wok, such as those made by Calphalon.

Care and Maintenance

It's very important to season your wok before using it for the first time. Seasoning removes the preservative oil manufacturers place on the wok to prevent rust, replacing it with a light coating of cooking oil. It is also important to clean your wok after each use. Given the variety of woks on the market today, it's difficult to give a general set of seasoning and cleaning instructions. However, below I do have instructions for seasoning and cleaning a carbon steel wok

[Buy a wok online now](#) - Recommended by Nicholas Zhou

Before You Buy a Chinese Cleaver

For an all-purpose cutting utensil, nothing beats a Chinese cleaver. Every part of the knife is put to use. The sharp edge of the blade is used for cutting, while the blunter top edge is used to pound and tenderize meat. Turned on its side, the cleaver is an excellent tool for smashing garlic and ginger. You can even use it to transfer food from cutting board to [wok](#). An added bonus is that the flat end of the handle nicely substitutes for a pestle.

It's All in the Blade

Traditionally, cleavers blades were made of carbon steel. The problem is that carbon steel is highly susceptible to rust. Also, they tend to add a metallic taste to the food. Today, even well known cookbook authors such as Martin Yan and Eileen Yin-Fei Lo recommend blades that are stainless steel, or a combination of carbon and stainless steel.

Cleaver or Knife?

Just because a Chinese cleaver looks like a western butcher's cleaver doesn't mean you can use it to chop bones. Heavier cleavers are designed for this. However, the primary function of lighter cleavers - often called a Chinese Chef's Knife - is slicing meat and vegetables. Chopping bones with these lighter cleavers can ruin the blade. If you're uncertain which type of cleaver you have, check with the store where you purchased it.

Choosing a Cleaver

Ask two experts to name their favorite cleaver and you will get two different answers. Like ice cream flavors, choosing a cleaver is a very personal decision. The most important thing is to find one that is well made. Dexter, Martin Yan and J.A. Henckels are all good brand names.

Your comfort level is also important. The cleaver should feel solid, but not too heavy. If your arms feel strained when holding the cleaver, try another. Preparing dinner shouldn't be hard work!

[Buy Cleavers Online](#) (Recommended brands by Nicholas Zhou)

Sharpening a Cleaver

A cleaver blade should be sharpened regularly. A dull knife forces you to exert more pressure, which can lead to unpleasant accidents.

There are several ways to sharpen a cleaver. One of my cooking teachers swears by a smooth piece of sandstone she picked up during an afternoon stroll nearly twenty years ago. However, a more popular option is to use a sharpening steel. Sharpening steels don't actually remove metal - instead they realign the blade edge at a molecular level.

Care and Maintenance

The important thing to keep in mind when it comes to cleaning and storing the cleaver is

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protecting the blade. Cleavers should be stored in a proper knife block where there is less risk of damage. As for cleaning, for best results wash the cleaver by hand in warm, soapy water. Dry thoroughly - even stainless steel isn't completely rustproof. And be sure to clean the blade immediately after working with acidic ingredients such as tomatoes.

[Buy Cleavers Online](#) (Recommended brands by Nicholas Zhou)

Picking a Melon

Step 1:

Don't look. Don't touch. Just breeze through and breathe in. If you are seized by the sweet perfume of ripe melons, follow your nose to the source. If you find several varieties, sniff out the aromatic one. Not drawn to anything yet? Be patient.

Step 2:

Looks aren't everything. But in the case of common melons, they can tell you quite a lot.

- A beige-skinned honeydew with distinct green veins reveals immaturity; a pale yellow version with bright, lemon-colored areas suggests time on the vine
- Cantaloupes are similar: they're unripe when the skin beneath the textured "web" is green, ripe when orange or gold.

Step 3:

A good melon is firm, but not rock hard. It yields very slightly to pressure but has no soft spots. Sponginess means the fruit is too far gone.

Step 4:

When a honeydew is fully ripe, the fibrous net that attaches the seeds to the flesh breaks down, allowing the seeds to rattle around. Ripe cantaloupes rattle only occasionally, so it's an unreliable indicator.

Step 5:

Some swear by the thump test. Hold your dominant hand as if ready to knock on a door. Deliver two or three good thumps to the round side of a melon. The sound should be deep and thick, indicating a dense, full fruit. A higher hollow sound can mean insufficient moisture, among other things.

Step 6:

Seeds rattle but there's no aroma? Smells divine but looks way too green? A first-rate fruit needn't exhibit all of these signs to be a winner. The object is to be familiar with all indications of ripeness, which will enable you to choose a terrific melon.

Part III

Chinese Cooking Tips and Techniques

What to do before cooking?

Chinese cuisine aims for perfection and balance among four elements in each dish: color, aroma or fragrance, flavor, and presentation. Colors should be pleasing, showing that the ingredients are fresh and tender. Aromas should be appetizing. Finally, the dish should be beautifully arranged and presented. Good Chinese cooking is also distinguished by its meticulous cutting, careful blending of seasonings, and attention to temperature control.

Here we offer a brief description of some of the basic techniques, skills, and ingredients of Chinese cooking. We hope it will be helpful to visitors when they try the Chinese recipes.

- [Selecting Ingredients](#)
- [Preparation](#)
- [Cutting](#)
- [Balance Among Ingredient](#)
- [Blending Seasonings](#)

Selecting Ingredients

Chinese cooking uses a wide range of ingredients, including meat, meat products, fish, seafood, poultry, eggs, vegetables, bean products, wild plants, game, and many seasonings. Most come in both fresh and dried forms, but the most important features to look for are freshness and quality.

Meats should be judged by their place of origin, season of production, and any other characteristic—for example, old or young, male or female—that may be specified in a recipe. Appearance, color, weight, water content, and smell are also important.

Different dishes call for different cuts of meat because cuts have different textures once they have been cooked. Cuts of the same meat may be tough or tender, coarse or fine. For example, the Chinese distinguish eighteen different cuts of pork. These include filet, streaky pork, shoulder butt, ham butt, hock, and shank.

The filet is considered the best cut and is generally stir-fried or quick-fried (see the section below on "cooking techniques" for descriptions of these and other procedures) to take advantage of its tenderness. Streaky pork is best when marinated with spiced rice flour and then steamed, or red-cooked (braised in [soy sauce](#)). The shank and hock are best suited to lengthy simmering, with or without soy sauce, while the ham and ham butt are often used as substitutes for filet. The ribs and feet are best prepared by lengthy, low-temperature methods like braising, baking or simmering, while spareribs are suitable for sauteing, quick-frying, slippery-frying, and deep-frying. The methods used for pork are also applicable to similar cuts of beef and lamb or mutton.

With reference to poultry, the tenderest and most versatile part of a chicken or duck is the breast. Chickens or ducks less than a year old are usually quick-fried or deep-fried, while older birds need long, slow cooking like simmering or braising to tenderize them.

Fish is as nutritious as poultry. Crab, prawns and shrimps are rich in phosphorus, calcium and vitamin A. You can tell a fresh fish by its tight, undamaged scales, red gills, and clear protruding eyes. Fresh prawns and shrimps should be greenish-white, with firm bodies that curve slightly. They should not be flat or limp, and their heads and tails should be intact. Fresh crabs should be alive and active. They should spit foams and have green upper shells and white under-shells.

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Preparation

In Chinese cooking, preparation includes trimming and washing vegetables, slaughtering and dressing live chickens and ducks, gutting live fish, and reconstituting dried ingredients. When preparing vegetables, cooks first trim and discard any wilted or tough outer leaves. Then they wash them. Vegetables should not be cut before they are washed, because vitamins and minerals would be washed away. Nutrients are also lost if vegetables and other foods are cut ahead of time and exposed to the air. The most nutritious dishes are prepared and cooked immediately.

Chinese cooks prefer to buy live poultry and fish and to kill them themselves whenever possible because they believe that freshly-killed chickens, ducks and fish have a subtler flavor. If you slaughter your own poultry, you should drain off the blood thoroughly and soak the bird in very hot water before plucking it. When preparing a duck, you will find it easier to pluck the eiderdown if you force-feed it with wine, vinegar, or cold water before killing it. To draw a bird, make an incision about 3 inches (7 cm) long along the lower part of the breast, on the back, or under one of the wings. When drawing out the entrails, be careful not to puncture the gallbladder; its bitter taste would ruin the edible meat. Then wash the bird thoroughly before continuing to prepare the recipe.

Preparing a fresh, whole fish involves scaling, chopping off the fins, taking off the gills, gutting and washing. To gut the fish, make a cut along the belly or spine and take out the black membrane in the belly cavity. If the recipe calls for a whole boned fish, you should first gut it by cutting along the spine. Then cut parallel to the spine almost up to the top and separate the flesh from the top and bottom of the center bone. Lift out the center bone and small side bones and cut the spine away at the head and tail. Finally, wash the cavity and the outside and arrange the fish as closely as possible in its original shape.

The easiest way to shell shrimps and prawns is to hold the head in one hand and the tail in the other hand and squeeze the meat out of the shell at the neck end. Wash the vein away under cold running water or pick it out with the tip of a knife. Wash the shrimp, drain, dry well, and set aside. Sometimes shrimp and prawn heads are also used in dishes.

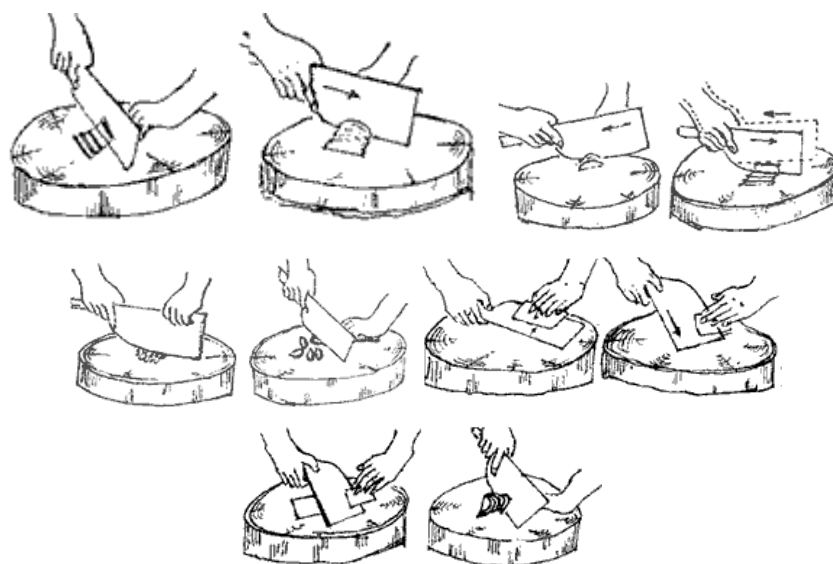
Drying makes meats, seafoods and vegetables tough and fibrous. To reconstitute dried foods, first soak them in cold water until they soften. Then soak them in warm water until they expand and regain their original texture and pliability. When preparing dried vegetables such as wood ear (an edible fungus) or golden needles (also known as dried tigerlily buds), you need not use cold water first. Wash the vegetables well to remove any dirt or sand, and then soak them in hot water until soft. Dried black Chinese mushrooms are prepared the same way, but require less soaking time.

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Cutting

Chinese recipes call for ingredients to be cut into different shapes because different ways of cutting affect the texture and appearance of a finished dish.

Chinese cooks use three main cutting techniques (see illustrations): straight-cutting (also known as perpendicular-cutting), horizontal-cutting (slicing), and slashing (scoring). Both straight-cutting and slicing are used to create chunks, slivers, slices, strips, cubes, and even pulps and pastes. Slashing means making shallow parallel cuts on the surface of an ingredient, usually a meat or fish. This exposes a larger area to the seasonings and to the heat source. If an ingredient is scored in a crisscross or diamond pattern, it will shrink to form a raised flower-shaped pattern when cooked.



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Balance Among Ingredients

Chinese cooks attach great importance to the balance among the ingredients in a dish. This important step should result in a harmonious blending of textures, colors, aromas, flavors,

shapes and nutritional qualities. To do this well, you must understand the required cooking methods of the dishes and the characteristics of different ingredients and how they fit together.

Balancing amounts

The major ingredient should be the most plentiful one in a dish. If you are making stir-fried meat shreds, for example, the total quantity of other ingredients should not exceed the amount of meat. If there are two or more main ingredients, you should use about the same amount of each.

Balancing flavors

All the ingredients in a dish should enhance the flavor of the main ingredient. This is why asparagus or bamboo shoots are often cooked with chicken, duck, and fish: the blandness of these vegetables enhances the light, delicate character of the meat.

Similarly, the blandness of shark's fins and sea cucumbers (beche-de-mer, sea slug) can be offset by cooking them with Chinese ham, chicken, or pork, or in a highly-flavored stock. You can also cut the heavy, greasy character of a main ingredient by adding lighter secondary ingredients. This is why many Chinese recipes call for pork to be cooked with fresh vegetables.

You must also take seasonal factors and personal preferences into account. Summer is the season for light, juicy foods, while heavier dishes, or ones with thick gravies, are better suited to cold weather. When you plan a menu, you should balance sweet, salty, sour, and hot dishes to suit your taste and that of your family and guests.

There is also a Chinese sequence for serving dishes: salty dishes are served before sweet ones, while heavy- and light-flavored ones are served alternately.

Balancing textures

Texture refers to the crunchiness, crispness, softness, or tenderness of a food. In Chinese cooking, ingredients with similar textures are usually cooked together. However, crisp and soft foods are sometimes combined in a single dish. This requires careful attention to cooking temperatures to retain the differences in textures.

Balancing shapes Chinese cooks usually cut all the ingredients in a dish into similar shapes. For example, chunks of meat and chunks of vegetables are usually cut to about the same size. This makes it easier to cook all the ingredients evenly and also gives the final dish a pleasing appearance.

Balancing colors

Chinese cooks tend either to select ingredients of the same color, or to use many contrasting ingredients to add color to a dish.

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Blending Seasoning

A well-prepared dish should have a distinctive flavor. But it is not enough just to select the right blend of foods and the correct cooking temperature-a good cook also needs to master the art of blending the right seasonings with the right combinations of ingredients. Without the correct seasoning, even delicious ingredients can taste bland and uninteresting. Seasonings are also important in Chinese cooking because they create the special flavors that characterize different regional styles.

The condiments used in Chinese cooking come in two ways, singly or blended. They lend single flavors (salty, sour, sweet, etc.) or blended flavors (sweet and sour, sweet and salty, hot and spicy, etc.) to foods. Some examples of these flavors and the condiments used to create them are:

Salty flavor

Salty flavor is basic to most dishes, with other flavors usually added. Salt and [soy sauce](#), are the main seasonings used to impart a salty taste.

Sweet flavors

Sweet flavors counteract fishy odors, cut the greasiness of rich dishes, and enhance delicate flavors. The main seasonings use to give a sweet flavor to foods are confectioner's sugar, brown sugar, rock sugar, granulated sugar, honey, and saccharin.

Sour flavors

Sour flavors help the digestion and increase the absorption of inorganic salts. They also lighten heavy or rich dishes. Red and white rice vinegar are the main seasonings used to add sourness to a dish.

Hot flavors

Hot flavors are appetizing because of their sharpness. Hot seasonings include fresh and dried red chili (chilli) peppers, pepper, [ginger](#), [scallion](#), and [garlic](#).

Bitter flavors

Bitter flavors have a special aftertaste that can be palatable and refreshing. Ingredients such as bitter melon, Chinese yam, tangerine peel, and-Chinese wolf-berry give a bitter flavor to dishes.

Spicy flavors

Spicy flavors help mask off-odors or fishy smells, cut greasiness, and whet the appetite. In Chinese cooking, the main spicy condiments are cassia bark, which resembles cinnamon, star anise, fennel, clove, Sichuan red peppercorns, sesame, sesame oil, sesame paste, wine, red wine mash and flavoring essence.

The first five spices are often ground and mixed together into a combination called "[five-spice powder](#)."

Delicate flavors

Delicate flavors are natural food essences, generally the principal amino acid of the ingredient. Shrimp eggs, crab meat, oyster sauce, fish sauce, and meat stock impart delicate flavors.

Sweet and sour flavor

Sweet and sour flavor comes from sweet and sour sauce, a mixture of sugar and vinegar, jam, and ketchup (catsup).

Sweet and salty flavor

Sweet and salty flavor comes from a combination of shrimp eggs, [soy sauce](#), and shrimp paste.

Peppery and salty flavor

Peppery and salty flavor comes from mixtures like the combination of roasted ground Sichuan peppercorns and salt known as "spiced pepper-salt."

Spiced pepper-salt is sometimes referred to as "prickly ash." One basic recipe for making it is:
4 tbsp salt

1 tbsp whole Sichuan peppercorns

Heat a dry [wok](#) over moderate heat and pour in the peppercorns.

Cook, stirring constantly, about 1 minute, or until they release their fragrance. Grind to a fine powder in a mortar or blender, strain out any large husks, and set aside. Reheat the wok and pour in the salt. Cook, stirring constantly, about 5 minutes, or until it just begins to turn golden brown. Pour into a bowl and let cool slightly before mixing with the ground peppercorns. Store in a tightly-closed jar. Makes about 1/4 cup and will keep indefinitely.

Sharp and salty flavor

Sharp and salty flavor is obtained from chili (chilli) peppers or Sichuan peppercorns and salt.

Hot and spicy flavor

Hot and spicy flavor comes from seasonings like curry and mustard.

Hot and salty flavor

Hot and salty flavor is found in condiments like chili (chilli) sauce and Worcestershire sauce. Seasonings can be added to foods before, during, and after cooking. Because the success of Chinese dishes depends so much on how they are seasoned, the following guidelines may be helpful.

Fish, shrimp, beef, lamb, and mutton sometimes have off-odors. Adding wine, vinegar, [scallions](#), [ginger](#), or sugar before or during cooking helps counteract unpleasant odors.

Do not over-season dishes that feature delicate foods like fish, shrimp, chicken, duck, or mushrooms, or you will kill their flavor.

Bean threads (also known as "cellophane noodles"), shark's fin, and sea cucumbers are so bland that they should always be cooked with a highly-flavored sauce or stock.

The amount of seasoning used should be correct. When a dish has several flavors, the principal and complementary flavors must be balanced to enhance the principal flavors.

The predominant flavors of Chinese dishes change with the seasons. Fresh, crunchy foods and sweet-and-sour cold dishes are best for hot weather, while winter is the time for heavier, fattier dishes, or those that call for long, slow cooking techniques like stewing or braising. Hot pot, in which a variety of fresh ingredients and meat is cooked in a boiling broth in a special cooking pot, is also a special cold-weather dish.

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Cooking Methods in Chinese Cuisine

You may get confused by terms such as sauteing, marinades, stir-fry and deep-fry for you just start learning Chinese cooking. In fact they are all cooking methods in Chinese cuisine. In this tip, you are going to be familiar with the following 8 basic cooking methods. In the following tips, we will talk more about stir-fry and deep-fry.

- [Frying](#)
- [Sauteing](#)
- [Steaming](#)
- [Flavor-potting](#)
- [Smoking](#)
- [Marinades](#)
- [Sugar and Syrup Coating](#)
- [Sauces and Gravies](#)

Frying

Chinese cooking uses many methods of frying, including several types of deep-frying, "slippery-frying," "quick-frying," and several types of stir-frying.

Deep-frying (zha)

In deep-frying(zha), ingredients are fried in four to six cups of vegetable or peanut oil over a high heat.

Dry deep-frying (gan zha)

In dry deep-frying(gan zha), foods are given a thick coating of [cornstarch](#) ([corn flour](#)) before being fried. They come out very crisp outside and tender inside.

Clear deep-frying (qing zha)

In clear deep-frying(qing zha), the foods are not coated with [cornstarch](#) before being cooked.

Flaky deep-frying (su zha)

In flaky deep-frying(su zha), foods are parboiled or steamed until they are almost cooked through. Then they are dipped in a thick batter of [cornstarch](#) and water and cooked in boiling oil until the coating turns crisp and flaky.

Soft deep-frying (ruan zha)

In soft deep-frying (ruan zha), the ingredients are not precooked, but are given a light coating of [cornstarch](#) before being fried. They come out tender but not crisp.

Chinese cooking also uses two techniques for deep-frying ingredients in wrappers.

Paper-wrapped deep-frying (zhibao zha)

In paper-wrapped deep-frying (zhibao zha), the food is wrapped in sheets made of glutinous rice flour.

Crisp deep-frying (cui zha)

In crisp deep-frying (cui zha), the wrappers are made of dry bean-curd sheets.

Both methods involve first deep-frying the packets of food in moderately warm oil over a high heat and crisping them by frying them briefly when the oil comes to a boil.

Slippery-frying (liu)

Slippery-frying (liu) involves two processes. The ingredients are deep-fried and then covered with a cornstarch-based sauce prepared in a separate pot during the frying or immediately afterward. When the sauce is poured over the food, it results in a texture as slippery as satin. Foods prepared this way are fragrant, crisp, and tender.

Deep-frying before stir-frying (peng)

In deep-frying before stir-frying (peng), foods are deep-fried in very hot oil until cooked. Then the excess oil is poured out and a sauce which unlike slippery-frying does not contain cornstarch is added. The dish is stir-fried for a few moments to blend the ingredients before being served. Dishes prepared this way are crisp outside and tender inside , with each morsel covered in a velvety sauce.

Quick-frying (bao)

In quick-frying (bao), foods are deep-fried in very hot oil over high heat and then the oil is poured out and seasonings are added to the food, which is left in the wok.

Stir-frying (chao)

Chinese cooking distinguishes four types of stir-frying (chao). In all four types, ingredients are cut into small cubes, strips, shreds, or slices, and cooked over high heat in a few tablespoons of very hot oil in a wok. The technique of stir-frying involves using a flat scoop to toss and turn the ingredients so they cook evenly in the oil. Sometimes the wok is also shaken. Stir-frying usually takes only a few minutes. The food must be removed as soon as it is cooked to guarantee its fresh flavor and crunchy-tender texture.

Raw stir-frying (sheng chao or bian)

In raw stir-frying (sheng chao or bian), raw ingredients are quickly stir-fried, resulting in a fresh, tender dish with little sauce.

Stir-frying pre-cooked food (shu chao)

In stir-frying pre-cooked food (shu chao), the ingredients are parboiled or precooked before being stir-fried.

Soft stir-frying (ruan chao)

In soft stir-frying (ruan chao), the food to be stir-fried is coated with a batter before being cooked.

There is also *stir-frying without coating* (gan chao).

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Sauteing

Chinese cooking uses three methods of sauteing, which is also called "shallow-cooking." Sauteing uses much less oil than deep-frying and is done at lower temperatures than stir-frying. Ingredients are usually cut into slices or flat pieces. Seasonings are added after the food is browned.

Sauteing on both sides (jian)

In sauteing on both sides (jian), foods are browned slowly on both sides in oil but do not have a coating.

Sauteing on one side (tie)

Sauteing on one side (tie) means browning batter-coated foods on one side only.

Sauteing followed by cooking in sauce (ta)

In sauteing followed by cooking in sauce (ta), foods are coated in a batter and sauteed on both sides. Then a sauce is added and the dish is simmered until the sauce thickens. The food will be soft inside, but with some crispness outside, and the thickened sauce will be slippery.

Braising, Stewing, Boiling and Simmering

Chinese cooking has many methods of cooking foods in liquids.

Stewing one kind of meat (ao)

Stewing one kind of meat (ao) means slow-cooking chunks, slices, cubes, or shreds of meat after first stir-frying them briefly until the surfaces have lost their raw look but before the insides are cooked. Seasonings and broth are added and the liquid is brought to a boil. Then the heat is turned down and the meat simmers slowly until done. The sauce is not thickened.

Precooking before stewing (hui)

In precooking before stewing (hui), several ingredients are parboiled or precooked before being placed in one pot for slow simmering. Unlike ao, the final step involves thickening the sauce.

Stewing over low heat (men)

Stewing over low heat (men) resembles braising. The meat is stir-fried briefly to brown. Then

seasonings and a sauce are added and the dish simmers over low heat until the sauce is almost all reduced.

Stewing over medium, then high, heat (shoo)

Stewing over medium, then high, heat (shoo) means braising foods over medium heat until tender, then turning the heat to high to reduce the sauce.

Both of the above methods can be applied to "red-cooking," or braising in [soy sauce](#). The soy sauce imparts the reddish look that gives this technique its name.

Stewing meats with bones (ju)

Stewing meats with bones (ju) is similar to the above methods, but the meat or poultry is first marinated in rice-wine and [soy sauce](#). Then it is deep-fried before being simmered in sauce and water. The meat is not boned.

Stewing and adding thickening (pa)

Stewing and adding thickening (pa) is similar to stewing meats with bones, but the sauce is thickened with [cornstarch](#) instead of being reduced and thickened by simmering.

In quick-boiling in broth (cuan), thinly-sliced ingredients are cooked quickly in a boiling clear broth, or in water.

Dip-boiling (shuan)

In dip-boiling (shuan), as with the "hot pot" dishes referred to earlier, diners pick up morsels of meat, seafood and vegetables and cook them by dipping them into boiling water or stock in a fire-pot.

Boiling (zhu)

Boiling (zhu) simply refers to cooking ingredients in a large amount of water over high heat. The sauce is reduced and the food comes out tender. No [cornstarch](#) is used. The gravy or sauce is rich but light and fresh.

Simmering (one of several forms of dun)

In simmering (one of several forms of dun), foods are put into cold water and brought to boil. Then seasonings are added and the heat is reduced for long, slow cooking.

Simmering over high heat (wei)

Simmering over high heat (wei) also starts with cold water, as in dun, but the food is cooked at high heat over a long period. This method tenderizes tougher meats and poultry and yields a thick, heavy sauce.

Simmering over charcoal (wo)

In simmering over charcoal (wo), the food is cooked over very low heat from a charcoal burner for three or four hours. This gives it a delicate flavor and a soft, tender texture.

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Steaming

Chinese cooking uses two methods of steaming, or cooking foods over, rather than in, liquids.

Basic steaming (zheng)

In basic steaming (zheng), the ingredients are placed in a heat-proof container with a seasoned sauce. Then the container is placed in a steamer partially filled with water and set over high heat. The food cooks quickly in the vapor and is removed when barely done. The result is fresh and tender.

Placing one tightly-closed pot inside a larger pot (steaming dun)

Another form of steaming involves placing one tightly-closed pot inside a larger pot (steaming dun). In this method, the ingredients, a seasoned sauce, and a large amount of stock go into one pot, which must have a tight-fitting lid. The pot is half-immersed in boiling water in another larger pot and steams for two or three hours. The result is very soft.

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Flavor-Potting

This method refers to stewing foods in a highly-flavored sauce (see the section on "Stocks and Flavoring Sauces" below) that permeates the dish.

Basic flavor-potting (lu) means stewing the food in a mixture of [soy sauce](#), rice wine, sugar, salt, red fermented rice mash, and [five-spice powder](#), [scallions](#), [ginger](#), chicken stock and water. The food cooks over low heat for several hours and comes out tender and full of flavor.

Marinating and flavor-potting (jiang) adds the step of marinating the food in salt, [soy sauce](#), and soybean paste (also known as ground bean sauce) before it is stewed in the flavor-potting sauce.

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Smoking

Chinese cooking treats smoking and roasting as similar methods.

Smoking(xun)

In smoking (xun), foods are parcooked and then cured in smoke from burning wood or peanut shells.

Roasting (Kao)

In roasting (kao), raw ingredients are marinated in seasonings before being roasted in an oven or barbecued over direct heat from a coal or charcoal burner.

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Marinades

Marinades are an essential part of many Chinese recipes and marinating may take place before or after ingredients are cooked.

Ban

In ban, raw foods or those that have been cooked and cooled are cut into small pieces and mixed with [soy sauce](#), vinegar, and sesame oil. Other seasonings, such as garlic, ginger, sesame paste, sugar, or ground peppercorns, may also be added to heighten the flavor.

Qiang

In qiang, the main ingredient in the marinade is peppercorn oil, mixed with other seasonings and poured over foods that have first been parboiled or partial fried.

Yan

The yan method of marinating uses saltwater brine, water, or liquor. In salt-marinating, the food is soaked in brine, which draws out the moisture from the food so it can better absorb the seasonings in the marinade that follows. Wine-marinating is similar to salt-marinating, but uses fermented rice liquor instead of seasonings in the marinade.

Finally, the Chinese specially called "drunk-marinating" means soaking live food, especially seafood such as shrimps, in a clear liquor and then marinating them in salt. Then the food is often eaten while still alive (see recipe "Drunken Fresh Shrimps").

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Sugar and Syrup Coating

Chinese cooking has three methods of coating foods with sugar or syrups.

Spinning

In spinning a thread of syrup (basi), the ingredients are deep-fried or boiled before being dipped into sugar that has been melted in either oil or water and cooked until it thickens and spins a thread.

Preserving in syrup (mizhi)

In preserving in syrup (mizhi), foods are partially cooked and then boiled in a sugar and honey sauce until the syrup thickens.

Coating with frost (guashuang)

In coating with frost (guashuang), foods are cooked by deep-frying while sugar is melted with water or oil in another pot to make a white syrup. When the food is mixed with the syrup, it looks as if it is covered with a layer of frost.

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Sauces and Gravies

Thickening the liquids in the pan into a sauce or gravy is often the last step in a recipe, and can be crucial to the success of a dish.

Sauces are made either by stirring a mixture of [cornstarch](#) that has been dissolved in an equal amount of water into the liquid and cooking it until it thickens, or by making a sauce or gravy in another pan and pouring it over the dish just before it is served.

Sauces help blend the flavors of all the ingredients, impart an added aroma, and give the dish a shiny, glistening finish.

Chinese recipes usually rely on two kinds of gravies. The first is a mixture of [cornstarch](#), [soy sauce](#) or salt, sugar, vinegar, [MSG](#), and a little water. It is usually used for stir-fried and slippery-fried dishes and is added to the pan at the last stage of cooking.

The other way to make gravy is to add seasonings gradually while the dish cooks and to thicken it at the last minute with [cornstarch](#) and water. This lets the flavors of the seasonings permeate the food and is generally used with long, low-heat cooking methods.

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Cooking Techniques in Chinese Cuisine

Chinese cooking has developed many methods that take advantage of the wide range of foods and ingredients available throughout the nation. Different regions use different methods, and often the same foods will be prepared quite differently.

The basic techniques used in Chinese cooking are precooking techniques such as parboiling and partial frying, and cooking techniques such as frying, sauteing, braising, stewing, boiling, simmering, steaming, "flavor-potting," and smoking. This section also describes cooking temperatures, cooking with oil, marinades, sugar and other coatings, sauces, gravies, stocks and flavoring sauces.

- [Precooking Methods](#)
- [Cooking Temperatures](#)
- [Cooking with Oil](#)
- [Coating](#)

Precooking Methods

Some meats need to be partially precooked just long enough to get rid of off-odors but not so long their flavor or texture changes. Some vegetables also need precooking to get rid of astringency or bitterness or to heighten their fresh color. Parboiling and partial frying are the two most common methods of precooking foods before they are combined with other ingredients for the remaining steps in a recipe.

Parboiling

There are four methods of parboiling. Each uses different timings and temperatures and yields different results.

Parboiling

Parboiling vegetables like taro root, Chinese yams and fresh bamboo shoots by cooking them in boiling water before they are cooked with other ingredients, helps to remove their astringent taste and makes peeling easier. These vegetables should be parboiled in their skins, if possible, and peeled and cut as required afterwards to avoid loss of nutrients.

Slow-boiling

Slow-boiling is used for foods like pork tripe that take a longer time to cook than the other ingredients in a recipe. These foods should be simmered in boiling water until tender and then combined with the rest of food and seasonings called for in the recipe.

Hot-plunging or blanching

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Hot-plunging or blanching is used for some tender, fresh vegetables to set their color and texture. Celery, spinach, green beans and other vegetables are plunged into a large pot of boiling water and removed as soon as the water returns to a boil. They are then drained and run immediately under cold water to stop the cooking process.

Quick-boiling

Quick-boiling is often used to rid meat of bits of bone and the off-odor that comes from the blood. The meat is placed in cold water and removed and drained as soon as it comes to a boil. However, the method used for pork kidney, fish, and chicken is closer to blanching: the meat is dropped into boiling water and removed as soon as it is cooked.

Chinese cooking also uses two methods of partial frying foods as an intermediate step in many recipes.

Sliding through the oil means placing an ingredient in warm oil which has been heated to.

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Cooking Temperatures

Heat is what causes all the changes that take place in foods when they are cooked. Because different temperatures and cooking times lead to different results, temperature control is a key element in Chinese cuisine.

Chinese recipes call for three kinds of heat: high heat, used in stir-frying, quick-frying, and deep-frying; medium heat, used in sauteing, slippery-frying, and deep-frying coated foods; and low heat, used in steaming, simmering, braising, and stewing.

Chinese recipes also often specify three levels of flame (or heat, on the electric ranges which are common in the West) to regulate the levels of heat of water.

High flame or heat is used to produce a fast boil, in which the water or liquid is kept bubbling rapidly. The fast boil is used to reduce and thicken broths or stocks and in hot-plunging and quick-boiling.

Medium flame or heat keep liquids at a moderate boil and is used in some types of braising. Low flame or heat is used to keep liquids at a slow boil or simmer in stewing, simmering, and flavor-potting.

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Cooking with Oil

Many of the recipes in this book call for deep-frying foods in large amounts, from two to eight cups (500 ml to two liters), of [vegetable oil](#). When foods are deep-fried at the proper

temperature, they absorb very little oil, but, it can be difficult to judge whether oil is at the right temperature.

Although many Chinese recipes call for oil to be heated "to the smoking point" when deep-frying, it should be pointed out that the cooking oils used in China are often less highly refined than those used in the West. The presence or absence of impurities changes the appearance of oil as it heats.

We therefore suggest using thermometers to gauge how hot oil is.

Warm oil is about in this temperature range, no bubbles will appear around a small piece of vegetable leaf like a piece of [green scallion](#) or spinach, or a slice of [ginger](#), that has been tossed into the oil.

Moderately hot oil is about . In this temperature range, small bubbles will sizzle around a piece of ginger, or scallion tossed into the oil.

Very hot oil is about a one-inch cube of day-old bread will turn brown in one minute when dropped into the oil.

Boiling oil is above. A heavy haze appears and the oil bubbles vigorously.

Most Chinese recipes call for oil to be heated to the hot or very hot stage. Lower temperatures are used in methods like sliding through the oil, while extremely hot oil is used to crisp and brown coated foods that have already been fried at a lower temperature.

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Coating

Chinese recipes often call for meats and other ingredients to be first marinated and then dipped into a batter—a paste which may contain [cornstarch](#) or flour, egg white, salt, sugar, and monosodium glutamate. When the food is later deep-fried, the coating seals in juices, keeps the food from falling apart, and reduces the loss of nutrients. These coatings also cook into light, crisp crusts that contrast with the tenderness of the food inside.

Cooking pastes and coating are also used for foods that will be stir-fried, quick-fried or slippery-fried because they impart a soft, slippery quality to the dish.

The most common batter is made of cornstarch and water. It is usually made of two parts cornstarch to one part water and is used in deep-frying and slippery-frying. It cooks into a crisp, yellowish-brown crust when deep-fried.

A batter of egg white and cornstarch is used in stir-frying and slippery-frying. The batter remains white after cooking, but the food inside is tender.

An egg yolk and cornstarch batter may also be used in deep-frying and slippery-frying. It results in a golden-brown coating.

The flour and egg yolk coating is actually a two-step process. The food is first dipped in flour and then into beaten egg yolk.

Another two-step process is egg and bread-crumbs coating. The food is first dipped in beaten egg yolks and then rolled in bread crumbs. When deep-fried, the coating turns crisp and golden-brown.

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Stir-Fry Tips in Chinese Cuisine

1. Make sure you have all the ingredients you need ahead of time.
2. Make sure all the food is cut according to directions before you start. Never try to prepare food while stir-frying.
3. For even cooking, cut all the ingredients the same size.
4. If not following a recipe, cut all the ingredients into bite-sized pieces.
5. Heat the wok on medium-high to high heat for at least a minute before adding oil. (You may want to skip this step if you have a nonstick pan - it can damage the coating.)
6. Add the oil (up to 2 to 3 tablespoons depending on the dish; peanut, canola or other [vegetable oils](#) are good) drizzling it so that it coats both the sides and the bottom of the [wok](#). The oil heats faster this way.
7. Before adding other ingredients, season the oil by cooking a few pieces of garlic and ginger. (Note: you may want to reduce the heat at this point to keep them from burning).
8. If the recipe calls for meat and vegetables, cook the meat first and then set it aside. Add the meat back when the vegetables are almost cooked. This ensures that the meat is not overcooked, and that the meat and vegetables retain their individual flavors.
9. Meat is normally stir-fried on high heat to seal in the juices (individual recipes can differ).
10. Never add more than a cup of meat at a time to the wok. Lay the meat out flat to cook.
11. Remove the meat from the wok when it changes color - for example the redness in the beef is gone. At this point the meat is approximately 80 percent cooked.
12. Stir-fry vegetables according to density, with the densest vegetables being stir-fried first and for the longest time. Denser vegetables such as broccoli, carrots and eggplant require more cooking time than green leafy vegetables such as bok choy.
13. If you're uncertain about the order in which to stir-fry vegetables, the simplest solution is to stir-fry them separately, one at a time.
14. If possible, wash the vegetables ahead of time to ensure that they have drained and are not too wet.
15. Alternately, if the vegetables are too dry, try adding a few drops of water while stir-frying.

16. When stir-frying meat, wait a few seconds before tossing so that it has a chance to brown; when stir-frying vegetables, begin moving them immediately.

17. When adding sauce to vegetables and/or meat, form a "well" in the middle by pushing the ingredients up the sides of the wok. Add the sauce in the middle and stir to thicken before combining with the other ingredients.

18. Once the dish is completed, taste and adjust seasonings as desired.

19. Speed is essential when stir-frying.

20. An added benefit of wok cooking is that you can push already-cooked ingredients up the sides away from the direct heat, while the remaining ones continue to cook.

21. Serve the stir-fried dish immediately.

Finally, a few words about cooking temperatures. Some recipes give instructions on whether to cook a dish at high, medium-high, or medium heat, but others don't. In *Chinese Home Cooking*, Helen Chen suggests starting to cook at medium-high heat and then adjusting the temperature up or down as needed on your model of stove. Another option is to have a second burner set on medium heat that you can quickly move the wok to if you feel the food is cooking too fast.

Deep-Frying Questions and Answers in Chinese Cuisine

1. Do I need to use a wok for deep-frying?

No. Some people feel safer sticking with a deep-fat fryer. If you do use a wok make sure it is securely in place - flat-bottomed woks work best for electric ranges; round bottomed for gas stoves. (Make sure the round bottomed wok is securely in place in the wok stand).

2. Can I use a deep Saucepan instead of a wok or deep-fryer?

If you don't have a deep fryer, you can use a deep saucepan with a wire basket that fits inside it.

3. How do I put the food into the wok?

Be careful to slide foods in to prevent splattering. Also, add ingredients in small amounts and don't overcrowd the wok. Overcrowding will lower the temperature and may lead to splattering or spillage.

4. What is a good temperature for deep-frying?

It depends on the recipe, but most suggest you heat the oil to somewhere between 350 degrees and 375 degrees Fahrenheit. (Partly this depends on the size of the food being cooked, as larger items can be deep-fried at a lower temperature). Remember, though, the temperature will drop slightly when you put in the food.

5. What type of oil should I use for deep-frying?

Peanut oil is good, as it has a high smoking point and thus does not burn easily even at high temperatures. You can also use [vegetable oil](#), but I find I have more trouble with the oil splattering. Chinese recipes used to call for lard, but most don't anymore because of the fat content. Sesame oil has a low smoking point and thus generally isn't used for frying.

6. How much oil should I add?

Most recipes will call for a specific amount of oil, although some just list "oil for deep-frying," under the ingredients, while others give a range such as 2 to 4 cups. How much oil to add depends on the item being deep-fried. Make sure the food is completely submerged, but allow space at the top for the oil level to rise when the food is dropped in.

7. How can I tell when the oil is hot enough?

You can always go the traditional route and use a wooden chopstick to check the oil - it's hot enough when bubbles form all around the object. However, it takes a bit of practice to know just when the oil reaches the right temperature. Add to that the fact that you need to adjust for a drop in temperature when placing the food in the wok, and the novice is better off relying on a deep-fry thermometer. If you don't have a deep-fry thermometer a candy thermometer will work also.

8. How can I reduce splattering?

The food you are going to deep-fry should be at room temperature. This reduces the drop in the temperature of the oil when you put it in, lessening the chance of splattering. You might want to dry the food with a paper towel before adding it. If the food to be deep-fried is in a sauce, use a slotted spoon to let it drain before adding it to the wok. Similarly, if the food is batter-coated, make sure all the excess batter has dripped off before placing it in the hot oil.

9. What if the recipe calls for the food to be deep-fried twice?

This is optional, but it does give the food a crisp coating. The difference in texture between the crisp coating and the juicy interior makes a nice contrast. Make sure to recheck the oil temperature before you add the food a second time.

10. Can I reuse cooking oil?

Yes, you can reuse cooked oil several times. You'll know it has gone bad when it starts smoking at normal temperatures or the color darkens.

11. How can I reduce the amount of fat?

First, by keeping the temperature up. Food cooked at too low a temperature will be greasy. Secondly, by not overcrowding the wok, which lowers the temperature, again leading to greasy food. Finally, using a wok actually helps - the unique shape of the wok means that you use less oil to cook with than is the case with a deep-fat fryer.

Steaming in Chinese Cooking

Steaming is a preferred cooking method of health conscious individuals because no cooking oil is needed, resulting in a lower fat content. Steaming also results in a more nutritious food than boiling because fewer nutrients are destroyed or leached away into the water.

In western cooking, steaming is usually used to cook vegetables, and only rarely to cook meats. On the contrary, vegetables are seldom steamed in Chinese cuisine, vegetables are mostly stir-fried or blanched instead. In Chinese cooking, **steaming is used to cook many meat dishes**, for example, steamed whole fish, steamed pork spare ribs, steamed pork or beef cake, steamed chicken, steamed goose etc. Other than meat dishes, many Chinese rice and wheat foods are steamed too. Examples include buns, Chinese steamed cakes etc. Steamed meat dishes (except some dim sum) are less common in Chinese restaurant than in traditional home cooking because meats usually require longer cooking time to steam than stir frying.

The Chinese chefs developed an efficient method of restaurant cooking. Big [bamboo steaming baskets](#) each three feet in diameter, four inches tall can be stacked up on top of a [wok](#) like a chimney. The bottom of each basket is a grid which allows the steam from the wok to rise all the way to the top of the stack. In kitchen of some dim sum restaurants, a steaming stack can be 20 levels high. The bottom level is removed when done and the entire stack simply shift downward. This technique ensures a constant supply of freshly steamed dim sum.

Steaming at home can be done with a wok. A shelf is put on the bottom of the wok. A small steam basket or a dish of food is put on the shelf. Water is filled to just below the dish or basket. Keep the water boiling with a lid on. Most vegetable dishes are done in approximately five minutes. Most meat dishes take longer than 20 minutes.

A common alternative is to put the dish on top of the rice being cooked. A pot of rice takes about 30 minutes to cook. The dish is ready when the rice is.

Specialized steamers are available in the market. Although they are more convenient, they are not necessarily better.

Steaming outdoors can be done by wrapping meat, poultry, or fish in banana leaves and burying it under the hot sand or ash. Meat and fish can also be covered in clay and placed in a fire.

Tips for Steaming Vegetables

To make the most of steaming:

- Be sure the rack sits at least one inch above the water in the wok. Have boiling water on hand to replenish any that evaporates.
- Steam marinated or sauced items in a pan or on a plate to save the juices.

If the lid of the wok is loose, wrap a wet towel around it to seal in the steam.

Quick and Easy Chinese Cooking During Busy Weekdays

Ah, the joys of cooking dinner during the week.

You've finally arrived home, having battled rush hour traffic to transport the children to and from various sports and music classes. You're tense and exhausted, but instead of resting, you dash madly about the kitchen, trying to get dinner on the table.

At times like these, eating Chinese food may be the last thing on your mind (unless this involves nothing more demanding than driving to the local take-out for an order of Almond Chicken and Spring Rolls). When your challenge is to put a meal in front of the family in twenty minutes, the thought of peeling [ginger](#), mixing sauces, and marinating meat can seem overwhelming. Speed, not quality, is what counts at these times.

However, culinary masterpieces featuring twenty ingredients aside, it is possible to prepare Chinese dishes on a tight schedule. The actual act of stir-frying takes only five to ten minutes - it's preparing the ingredients that can be so time consuming. Here are a few tips to help you prepare quick and easy meals with an Oriental flavor:

- **Store peeled ginger**
Ginger is one of the key ingredients in Chinese cooking. Peeling ginger takes time, but you can peel it ahead of time and store in the refrigerator. Place in a jar, cover with sherry, and seal - as the flavor of the ginger fades you have the sherry taste to compensate.
Better yet, why peel the ginger at all? Simply cut off a slice and stir-fry until aromatic.
- **Use Pre-seasoned instead of freshly seasoned oil**
I found this tip in Deh-Ta Hsiung's Chinese Cookery Secrets - just add 2 - 3 pieces of ginger to heated oil, and cook until the ginger rises to the surface and turns brown. Cool the oil and store. The oil can be reused several times.
- **Use canned chicken broth instead of homemade chicken stock**
There is nothing like homemade stock, but chicken broth works fine in a pinch, as in this recipe for [Egg Drop or Egg Flower Soup](#). Calorie counting tip: substitute chicken broth where water is called for in stir-fries to add flavor while reducing the amount of cooking oil. (Vegetarians can add soaking liquid from vegetables such as dried mushrooms).
- **Prepare the meat ahead of time**
Cutting meat is not something you want to do while rushed or distracted, particularly in stir-fry dishes, when it's important that the pieces of meat are a uniform size. Just cut

the meat, cover with plastic wrap and leave in the refrigerator until you come home from work.

- **Cook with instant noodles, such as Ramen**
They're quick and easy to prepare - after boiling, if you like you can discard the flavor packet and stir-fry them with a sauce.
- **Wash fresh vegetables about 30 minutes ahead of time**
This gives them plenty of time to drain before cooking.
- **Use frozen vegetables**
A good option if you don't have time for slicing and dicing. Many frozen food manufacturers carry "Oriental" or "Stir-fry" Blends, containing an assortment of Asian vegetables. Just toss them in the heated wok with oil and stir-fry.
- **Use canned vegetables**
Another option is to use canned Chinese vegetables, such as water chestnuts and bamboo shoots. Bamboo shoots and mushrooms make a nice combination (they're even featured in a dish called "Fried Two Winters"), while water chestnuts go well with snow peas. Just rinse in warm water to remove any "tinny" taste.
- **Boil and bag it**
Look for boiled bamboo shoots in the refrigerator section at the Asian market - all you need to do is soak them in hot water to remove any salinity before cooking.
- **Use favorite sauce or marinade combinations in more than one recipe.**
That way, you won't be experimenting with new ingredients or different combinations of familiar ingredients every time you cook dinner. One of my favorite stir-fry sauces for vegetables is something I came up with while trying to spice up a bean curd dish (the "secret formula" is 2 tablespoons dark [soy sauce](#), 1 tablespoon oyster sauce, 1 1/2 tablespoons sherry, and 1 teaspoon sugar).
- **Try a ready made stir-fry sauce or marinade**
Many local supermarkets carry a selection of stir-fry sauces and marinades. Most can be used with meat, seafood, or vegetables.
- **A Busy Cook's Mecca - the Asian market**
The convenience section of most Asian markets has exploded in recent years. You'll find a wide assortment of sauces, marinades, dry seasonings, curry mixes and soup bases, all designed to help you create your favorite dishes on busy weeknights. For example, Asian Home Gourmet has a dry chili stir-fry for Kung Pao Chicken - just add chicken, nuts and sherry. Meanwhile, McCormick has a seasoning packet for deep-fried pork and Mama Sita has a Calderata seasoning packet will add a taste of

the Philippines to soups or stews. But go find out for yourself!

- **When all else fails, simplify the recipe**

As a regular poster on my forum recently pointed out, just because a recipe calls for shredded pork with [ginger](#) doesn't mean you can't serve sliced pork with ginger instead. Also, on nights like these it pays to stick to ingredients that will pass muster with family members - this is not the time to discover that your son thinks sesame seeds are gross, or that your husband shares the widely-held view that cilantro tastes like soap. For best results, stick with the tried and true.

Chinese Cooking For The Novice

According to one of Hong Kong's leading food writers and connoisseurs, Willie Mark, Hong Kong is "the uncontested capital of Chinese gastronomy." Few visitors who have sampled its vast culinary riches would disagree with Willie. Hong Kong's outstanding chefs in all the four major schools of Chinese cuisine (Canton, Peking, Sichuan and Shanghai) have redefined classic recipes and cooking techniques.

The question that nags lovers of Chinese food is: "Can I create some of these tasty, savory dishes at home?" The answer is: "Very easily, with a little practice." Once a Western kitchen has been stocked with a few key ingredients, a few basic utensils and an apprentice cook's enthusiasm, it can produce a multi-course meal for half-a-dozen guests at 30 minutes' notice - the true test of a competent Chinese housewife!

Simplicity is best

The goal is to create the correct balance of flavors and textures in each platter, and throughout the whole meal. Practice definitely makes for Chinese culinary perfection. Start out simply, one course at a time, using any of the better-known Chinese cookery books designed for non-Chinese readers. Just remember that most Chinese dishes, with the exception of Imperial Banquet specialties, are meant to be simple.

All home-style dishes were meant to be quickly whipped up in a [wok](#) - a large, saucer-shaped, metallic cooking pot. Most standard **a la carte** restaurant dishes are also speedy, simple affairs. That is partly because freshness and natural tastes are considered fundamental to Chinese cooking. The short cooking time also reflects the fact that few diners outside the Imperial Court had time to sit around and wait for cooks to concoct elaborate culinary conceits.

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that the time a traditional Chinese cook saves on cooking processes is more often than not devoted to the preparation of ingredients - but no more so than in a traditional Western kitchen. Few convenience foods are acceptable to traditional Chinese cooks.

Nowadays, most working Hong Kong housewives have had to accept convenience. Tins of curried beef, marinated pork trotters, preserved vegetables and other "emergency" rations are standbys. Refrigerated and deep-frozen meals and shellfish are commonly used. As in the West, however, the "real thing" is still preferred for special family or festival meals. That means the cook must buy the best available market produce.

So, what does one really need to start cooking a Chinese meal? Very little, apart from top-class ingredients.

Basic essentials

The "seven essentials" in a traditional Chinese kitchen were firewood, rice, oil, salt, sauce (soy), vinegar and tea. Everything else was bought fresh, twice or three times a daily. Nowadays, of course, refrigeration means that shopping need not be done so frequently! Although today's cooks tend to stock many more ingredients, those seven essentials of a "well-kept house" indicate the simple style of Chinese cooking.

The "fire" is still the first priority. As so many Chinese, especially Cantonese, dishes depend on super-fast stir-frying and instantaneous heat control, a gas cooker is undoubtedly the best equipment. Use of an electric cooker necessitates a lot of practice in gauging when to adjust the heat level, and an electric place cannot caress a round-bottomed wok in the way that gas flames can. Yet, with practice, an electric cooker and flat-bottomed frying pan can turn out very passable Chinese dishes. If possible, have a range with at least two rings.

One round-bottomed wok is the only "special" utensil that is needed. Woks designed for electric ranges are available in stores. Be sure to buy a metal wok lid. Purists prefer cast-iron woks, for their fast conduction of heat, but stainless steel woks are just as acceptable. A 14-inch wok is adequate for home cooking.

A long-handled shovel-like metal spatula (**wok sang**) is more useful than a Western spatula for turning and tossing food. A small wooden-handled sieve is needed for moving deep-fried food to the walls of the wok for draining. The other basic utensil is a steaming stand (which also allows one to cook two dishes simultaneously). Additionally, wooden cooking chopsticks are recommended cooking tools. (It is assumed most non-Chinese households already possess an electric rice cooker).

None of the utensils is expensive, including the key utensil, the chopper, or cleaver. It should be so sharp that one could shape or even cut one's nails with it (as is done by "pedicurists" in old-fashioned Chinese bath-houses!). The chopper is handled with great care by Chinese cooks, only raised high above the chopping block when one's second hand is well clear, and is never allowed to come near one's fingers. Instead, one should only present knuckles towards the blade's side when chopping or dicing food.

Wooden chopping blocks (usually cross-sections of soap wood tree trunks) are favored by most people because they do not blunt the chopper as quickly as other types. Modern considerations for hygiene have led to the widespread use of special plastic boards. However, as plastic boards can easily slip, the good heavy wooden blocks are still recommended, for safety's sake. Be sure to scrub and rinse (never soak) the board after every use.

Additional Chinese kitchen utensils such as bamboo steamers and earthenware cooking pots can be purchased when the apprentice cook moves onto more complex dishes. These items are well worth considering, once the basic techniques have been mastered, for bamboo steamers allow excess liquids to drain away from a steaming dish, and earthenware pots add

an indefinable richness of flavor to soups and hot pots. In the beginning, though, standard Western kitchen utensils - saucepans, a frying pan, a colander, etc. - serve well enough. There is one more thing that is essential, as you will soon discover, and that is an efficient exhaust fan to extract the steam!

Stir-frying vegetables

Let's start cooking with plain green vegetables. A couple of quick lessons will have you cooking a dish of which the flavor, vitamin content and very color will amaze any guest used to old-fashioned over-boiled vegetables! The following basic steps are suitable for any cabbage, spinach, kale or other green vegetable, and will introduce the apprentice cook to the fundamental Cantonese cooking technique of stir-frying.

Wash and drain the vegetable leaves, chopping them into manageable lengths of about four inches. Chop the stalks too, if necessary. Then, thoroughly heat the wok.

Pour a little cooking oil into the pan. The amount will depend on how much and what type of vegetable leaves you are cooking. The idea is to have the vegetables lightly coated with the oil, with no excess oil lying in the pan, so a practice run or two will soon give you an eye for the appropriate amount.

Wait "only a moment or two" until the oil is hot and starting to steam at the edges, then spread it (carefully!) up the walls of the wok with the **wok sang**. Make sure that all the vegetables are coated. You will see them starting to cook, the inner core of the stems will change color, and an inviting aroma will rise from the wok - a quick glance and sniff is enough to tell the vegetables are ready for seasoning. Add a flavoring agent such as salt, sugar or chicken stock, and then a little water or stock. The liquid produces the steam in which the final cooking process is carried out. After quickly agitating the wok's contents with the **wok sang**, place the lid on the wok and wait a few minutes until there is only a little liquid left in the wok (experience will tell you precisely when).

Lift the lid and, presto! You have vibrant green fresh vegetables. The hot oil has sealed in all their natural juices, yet the steaming will have ensured that the vegetables are not oily. At this point, turn the heat down and taste the vegetables to see whether extra salt should be added. You can also add a sauce now, such as oyster sauce, sesame oil or wine, depending on the vegetable.

The same stir-frying techniques are applied to meat, and to such other vegetables as eggplant. If you plan to add a garlic, [ginger](#) or other garnish to the dish, add it in the initial stage, after the oil has been heated. Just remember the 18th c. counsel of Yuan Mei: "The eyes and the nose are neighbors to the mouth and act as middlemen. A good dish strikes the nose and eyes first.

Applying heat to food

With practice, you will discover how variations in this basic cooking technique can change the texture and taste of foods. In general, good quality cuts of meat warrant cooking in hot oil that has not started to smoke, while seafood and battered foods should be fried in a very hot pan in oil that has started to smoke, and larger pieces of meat or whole meats are best immersed in oil that has started to smoke at a lower temperature.

Shallow frying, say for fish, should be done over high heat until the fish has begun to brown, when the heat should be reduced to a minimum. You will know you judged it correctly when the fish does not stick to the wok or pan!

There are possibly a hundred more Chinese methods of "applying heat to food," as cooking has been described. Every region of China has its special cooking techniques, and the adventurous cook will enjoy discovering the variety of methods used for boiling, simmering, stewing, frying, smoking, marinating, etc.

Simplicity is the key to Chinese cuisine, despite the apparent complexities of Chinese restaurant menus. Maintaining and enhancing an ingredient's natural flavor is the name of the game. The game's second rule is that foods deserve to be flattered by complementary tastes and textures. Thus, one can create a personalized Chinese "nouvelle cuisine" by combining meats and vegetables in new ways, in a stir-fried dish, a soup or some other appetizing way.

So do take a small pad and pen with you when you dine in Hong Kong's fine Chinese restaurants so that you can take down the English names of dishes that were particularly pleasing, find the names in your cookery books at home, and get ready for fun in the kitchen.

Twenty Tips for Cooking Chinese Food

Try to vary the meat and vegetables in a dish, so that there is an interesting variety of flavors, textures, and colors. Prepare everything before you start cooking: meat, vegetables, and sauces.

Wash green, leafy vegetables ahead of time. This gives them more time to drain so they will not be too wet when you stir-fry.

While it's nice to own one, you don't need a cleaver to cook Chinese food.

Place all the cut vegetables on a tray or cooking sheet. That way, you won't forget anything. Just be careful not to mix them up, as cooking times will vary among vegetables.

Drain tofu before using, as this allows it to absorb the other flavors in the dish.

Marinate fresh meat.

Always cut beef across the grain.

Cut the meat into uniform pieces so that it will cook more evenly. If you're not using a recipe, a general rule is to cut everything into bite-sized pieces.

When adding oil for stir-frying, drizzle the oil down the sides of the wok.

When deep-frying, to tell if the oil is hot enough, simply stick a chopstick in the wok. When the oil sizzles all around it, you can begin adding the food.

Don't use dark [soy sauce](#) unless the recipe specifically calls for it. When a recipe simply says to add soy or soya sauce, use light [soy sauce](#) or one of the Japanese brands such as Kikkoman.

If preparing stir-fried meat and vegetables, stir-fry the meat first and set it aside. Usually you will return it to the wok with a sauce during the final stages of cooking.

When stir-frying vegetables, cook the toughest and thickest vegetables for a longer period than the softer, leafy vegetables. Vegetables such as broccoli, carrots, and cabbage need to be cooked longer than bok choy, which in turn is cooked longer than snow peas or bean sprouts.

If you are uncertain in what order to cook vegetables, simply stir-fry them separately. Never overcook.

Once you've gained a bit of experience and can "guesstimate" amounts such as one teaspoon or two tablespoons, try storing sauces in plastic containers similar to the syrup dispensers used in restaurants. This cuts down on the amount of washing up after each meal. Just be sure to label each of the containers!

Always use fresh [ginger](#), not powdered.

If desired, use sugar as a substitute for [MSG](#) (Monosodium Glutamate).

The formula for mixing [cornstarch](#) and water is 1 to 2: for example, 1 tablespoon of [cornstarch](#) with 2 tablespoons of water

Taste the dish and adjust the seasonings as desired.

And finally, in the immortal words of one of my favorite cooking teachers: "the two most important things about Chinese cooking are a hot stove and a sharp knife.

Kitchen Work Tips (I)

Cooking Sweetcorn

Don't cook sweetcorn, it only needs to be heated through. Cooking corn can make it tough and reduce sweetness.

Drop ears in a pot of boiling water. Once the water returns to a boil the corn has reached the same temperature and is plenty hot and ready to serve.

How to cut meat into thin slices

When cooking a Chinese beef stir-fry or Mongolian beef, you are required to cut the meat as thin as possible. This is easily attained by slicing the meat while it is partially frozen.

Tips on cooking and storing chestnuts

Chestnuts come from the nut-bearing *Castanea* tree. They are cultivated mostly in Europe and are exported fresh worldwide from September through February. Chestnuts are unrelated to horse chestnuts (which are inedible and dangerous to eat) and water chestnuts (a tuber with an apple-like crispness that is widely used in Asian cooking).

Roasting Chestnuts

To roast fresh chestnuts, make a one-inch slash on the flat side of the nut's shell with a sharp knife, just barely revealing the flesh. Place the nuts on a cookie sheet in a preheated 400°F oven until the skins split and the flesh begins to brown (about ten minutes). Peel away the shell with the help of a knife.

Blanching Chestnuts

Chestnuts can also be blanched. After boiling for 3-4 minutes, wrap them in a towel and squeeze hard to crush the skins and extract the meat.

Storing Chestnuts

Keep fresh chestnuts up to one week in a cool, dry place, or two weeks in a plastic bag in the refrigerator.

How to peel and de-vein shrimp

Perhaps you've come across a recipe which requires you to peel and de-vein the shrimp, but because you were not sure how to do this, you decided not to cook that recipe at all.

Well, now there won't be a reason for that.

If you're dealing with uncooked shrimp, the first thing you need to decide is, if you want to cook it in the shell or not. Generally when you fry the shrimp, you will want to leave the shell prior to cooking. But for shrimp cocktail, you will probably want to remove the shell. Always leave the shell on when boiling shrimp. When cooked in the shell, the juices and natural flavors do not get a chance to escape and you also run less of a risk of burning them.

To peel shrimp, first remove the head. Then, with the shrimp facing away from you, grip the 'feet' of the shrimp and pull around to one side. The shell should break off in one piece, leaving the tail. Grip the fin part of the tail in one hand and the body of the shrimp in the other and give a firm tug. The tail will pull away, leaving behind the meat that was inside the fin.

The recipe may also be asking to de-vein the shrimp, but it is up to you. The shrimp's intestinal tract runs down their back. In larger ones, like rock shrimp, leaving this in will give the shrimp an unpleasant gritty texture, so you are best without it. To de-vein shrimps, you simply run a knife down the back of the shrimp and then you can use your finger to pull the vein out. This is easier under running water.

It will probably take some practice to get these techniques down, but you can do it.

Saving time in the kitchen ... blanching vegetables

If you are planning on making batter-coated fried vegetables as side dishes, try a time-saving trick that many pros use.

Dredge your prepared vegetables as usual in a milk and egg wash (mix an egg with some milk and whisk for a minute), then coat with a mixture of flour and cornmeal or packaged coating mix.

When mealtime approaches, place the coated vegetables in a generous frying basket, and place them in the hot oil.

DO NOT fully cook the vegetables, but pull them out of the oil after a minute or two has gone by. You want the coating to be light in color, not brown.

This technique is called 'blanching', and it saves time in the long run by keeping the vegetables in a state of 'suspended animation'.

When the time is appropriate to serve the vegetables, the basket should be put back into the oil until the coating is fully browned. This will take less time than usual due to the blanching, so you can easily time your side dishes to come out alongside your main course.

Roasting for Beginners

In the beginning, roasting was done on a turning spit over an open fire and the juices ran over the surface of the meat basting it continuously.

Nowadays most roasting takes place in the oven and offers a fast method of cooking tender portions of meat, poultry, and fish.

You want to start with an oven that's preheated at a high temperature to seal the meat thus preventing a loss of juices while at the same time caramelizing the surface.

After 10- 20 minutes, lower the temperature and continue roasting until done.

Some meats will require basting to keep from drying out while some cuts of meat like pork are fatty enough and will require no basting.

Sometimes it is necessary to bard (tie pieces of fat to the surface of) what you are cooking to help with basting.

Birds should be cooked breast down to start and then finished on the other side to allow the juices and fat to flow into the breast meat.

Make sure you have a roasting pan that is the correct size for what you are cooking. Too big.... and the food may burn, too small and your roast may stick to the sides of the pan. Too shallow... and your oven will be a mess, too deep.....your food will steam, not roast.

Tips when cooking beans

When cooking beans, any additional ingredients, such as acidic substances, such as lemon juice, vinegar, tomatoes, ketchup or wine, should be added at the end of the cooking time, since acid makes the beans firm.

You could add a packet of seasoning after the beans are tender, as adding it too soon can inhibit the cooking process.

How to make Chocolate Bags

Have you ever looked for an elegant dessert to present at an important party? How often have you searched and searched for a simple, yet expensive looking gift to give to a special friend? Have you ever had to prepare for a wedding, but wondered what you could do to make the wedding stand out above all the rest?

Well, now you can make your own chocolate bags. Gourmet chocolate bags are sold for as much as \$30 per bag, empty and plain! Some of the finest chefs offer chocolate bags as a dessert container or fine chocolate gift. Now YOU can put your guests, friends, and co-workers at awe with this simple, yet elegant idea!

Supplies Needed:

Get FREE Recipes & Cooking Tips in Your Email Weekly:
Send a blank email to: chinesefooddiy@GetResponse.com

- * Chocolate Chips
- * Glass Bowl
- * Stirring Spoon
- * Rubber Spatula
- * Scissors
- * Tape
- * Coffee bean bag (found at the grocery stores when purchasing beans) with plastic (preferred) or wax paper lining
- * Refrigerator or freezer (optional)

Pour your chocolate chips in the glass Bowl. Put the bowl in a microwave and heat for 3 minutes on high, stirring every 20-25 seconds. Heat until chocolate chips have completely melted and the chocolate is smooth.

Take the coffee bean bag and cut to desired height - about 4" high. The taller the bag, the more difficult it is to make the chocolate bag.

Once cut, take two pieces of scotch tape and tape the lining to the outside of the coffee bag. This will keep the lining from sliding from the weight of the chocolate, and will help keep the bag open a little.

Next, scoop some chocolate onto the rubber spatula. Take the spatula and coat the inside bottom of the bag with chocolate, taking care to fill in the corners as much as possible. Next, coat all four sides of the bag, all the way to the top. Again, take care to get chocolate in the corners of the bag. This will help the outside of the bag look smooth (no gaps or bubbles) and will let the bag be leak-proof if you choose to fill it with mousse or ice cream which may melt.

Once this first coat is applied, you may either let the bag sit at room temperature for several minutes until it hardens, or put it in the freezer (about 5-10 minutes).

Once hard, take the chocolate bag and apply another coat of chocolate. However, this time, put the bag up to a light. The purpose of this is to see if there is any light coming through the chocolate. If you can see light coming through the chocolate, that area either has no chocolate (a hole), or is so thin that it may break once you tear the paper off the chocolate. Wherever you see a light spot, coat with chocolate. Also, add a second layer of chocolate to the base of the bag to make it sturdy. When done, let it cool again until hard.

Finally, carefully tear the coffee bag from around the chocolate. Viola! A fine, gourmet chocolate bag!

**If you would like to make the chocolate bag even more impressive, you may melt other varieties of chocolate (white, dark, colored, etc) chips. Add a couple tablespoons of melted shortening to the chocolate to thin the mixture. Then, drizzle the chocolate lightly over the outside of the bag to give it a gourmet drizzle effect.

Cooking a perfect Risotto

Follow the steps below for a perfect Italian style risotto.

The ingredients for risotto vary from recipe to recipe but the basic ones are:

- 4-6 cups HOT vegetable/chicken/pork/beef stock (broth)
- 3 tbsp butter
- 1 cup minced onion
- 2 cups Arborio, Vialone Nano, or Carnaroli rice
- 1/2 cup grated Parmigiano Reggiano cheese

Directions:

1. Heat a heavy duty saucepan on LOW and melt 2 tablespoons butter.
2. Add the minced onions to the pan. Cook for about 10 minutes until the onions are translucent.
3. Add the rice to cooked onions, stirring with a wooden spoon. Cook for approximately 2 minutes. It is important that you do not rinse the rice before cooking as rinsing will remove the starch that gives risotto its creamy texture. Frying the rice with the onions means that grains will be coated with liquid-resistant fats which will prevent them from quickly absorbing the cooking liquid.
4. Add enough HOT stock to cover the rice. Stir with a wooden spoon. The liquid must be hot to keep the temperature in the pot constant without interrupting the cooking process. It acts as a melding agent - by releasing the rice's starch.
5. Bring mixture to a gentle boil, stirring frequently. As liquid evaporates, add more. The ratio of rice to stock is approximately 1 to 3, but the amount might vary. The liquid should be added in small amounts, ½ to 1 cup at a time, until the desired consistency is reached.
6. The rice will roughly double in volume when cooked.

Begin tasting the rice after 15 minutes of cooking. Continue testing until the texture is al dente.

A properly cooked risotto is creamy (what Italians refer to as "ben mantecato"), not soupy. The grains of rice should remain "al dente" or slightly resilient to the bite.

7. When the rice is cooked, stir in the remaining butter and the cheese, remove from heat and serve immediately.

Serving immediately produces the best results - before the rice absorbs additional moisture causing a gummy texture.

A different way to Roast Meat

Simply peel 2 large onions, slice in half, arrange in a greased oven dish and place the meat on top. Roast as usual.

Roasting this way, ensures the meat doesn't touch the bottom of the baking dish and most fat from the meat is drained, but it also flavours the onions, which can be served as a delicious garnish.

Usefull Tips For Cooking with Cheese

I love cooking with cheese because it adds instant flavour and creaminess to so many dishes... If you are into cheese big time as well, these usefull tips may come handy:

- A. To keep cheese from becoming tough and stringy, cook it at low temperatures and always add the cheese at the end of the cooking time.
- B. Cheese melts and blends better if you shred it or cut it into small pieces.
- C. To shred cheese with soft texture, use a grater with large holes, or finely chop it.
- D. Lower-fat cheeses don't melt well.
- E. When grilling/baking cheese-topped dishes, keep a close eye on them, because the cheese melts fast.
- F. Cheese microwaves well, but use lower power settings.

How to Steam Vegetables

Don't have a steamer? Don't worry! All you need is a large pot or pan with a lid. The key to successful steaming is cutting the vegetables into equal-sized pieces. If you do so, all the vegetables will be cooked at the same time.

- a. Chop the vegetables, throw them in the pot/pan with a little bit of water (for example, if you're steaming a head of broccoli florets, you'll need about 4-5 tablespoons of water).
- b. Adjust the heat to medium or medium-high, until the water boils gently on the bottom of your pan.
- c. Cover the pan with the lid so that steam will build up inside, and check occasionally to make sure the water doesn't boil away completely (add water if necessary).
- d. The vegetables are done when they're tender enough to fork easily, but not so tender that they're mushy.

Roasting Peppers

Roasted peppers make a great addition to salads, omellets, pizzas, pasta dishes and sandwiches. Roasted peppers are also brilliant on their own. Add a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil, a dash of balsamic vinegar, a crushed garlic clove, a little salt and pepper, and you have an appetizer that will endear guests no matter what the occasion.

There are a few ways to roast peppers: over a gas burner, and under your oven's grill.

Please note: peppers need frequent turning until they blister and char - if any section of the pepper becomes coated with white ash, you're over-roasting.

Turn gas burner on high and arrange peppers directly over flame.

Roast peppers until blistered and charred, turning frequently with tongs. Place peppers in pan, cover for 10-15 min until cool. The steam will help loosen the skin. Peel away charred skin. Slit pepper in half with paring knife and scrape away seeds.

Use as called for in recipes or store in a tightly sealed container in the refrigerator or freezer.

Selecting and Storing Lamb

Selecting Lamb

Look for meat with a fresh pinky red colour and a layer of fat which is creamy white in colour. As lamb has quite a high fat content overall it is best to avoid cuts with too much excess fat, but none means that the flavours won't come out as well in your cooked dish.

Storing Lamb

Store lamb at temperatures between 1 and 5C. If stored at room temperature, bacteria that cause food poisoning will rapidly multiply. Small cuts of lamb, such as chops and joints, can be kept in the freezer for up to three months; large joints, such as legs, for up to six months. Remember to wrap meat well to prevent freezer burn.

Diet Tip

You can reduce the fat in lamb by trimming the excess before cooking. Use grilling rather than frying. Lean cuts, such as chops or a well-trimmed neck fillet are ideal for grilling.

Turn Any Food Into Something Special

Sprinkle fruit-flavored gelatin powder over vanilla pudding to give it a pretty look and added flavour!

Freeze leftover coffee and tea in ice cube trays. Use cubes to cool down complimentary iced beverages without diluting them.

Make a plain coffee cake special by topping with your favourite preserves and grill until the topping bubbles.

Stir 1 or 2 teaspoons of mint jelly into iced tea for a refreshing twist.

Make ice cubes festive for a party by freezing sprigs of mint, maraschino cherries, lemon or orange peel in them.

Freeze some of the party punch in a ring mold, then float it in the punch bowl. This way the ice won't water down the punch.

For a taste treat and extra light pancakes, try substituting apple cider for the milk called for in the recipe for pancakes.

For a delightful change, serve your hot or iced drinks with citrus sugar. Bury strips of lemon and/or orange zest in granulated sugar to for a week or so to give the sugar a delicate citrus taste.

Add a little soda water to your favorite fruit juice to add a bubbly sparkle and to make the fruit juice calories go further!

Make plain brownies special by melting a few of your favorite candy bars, along with a splash of milk, in the microwave. Use the melted chocolate mixture to top the brownies.

Mash about 6 garlic cloves into a 1/2 cup butter, add chopped chives or parsley. Form into logs, wrap in plastic, and freeze. Slice as needed to melt onto meats, vegetables or use as a spread.

Flavored oils give extraordinary lift to many dishes. Drizzle basil-flavored oil over sliced tomatoes and mozzarella. Use roasted garlic-flavored oil to perk up ordinary fried potatoes.

Add a finishing touch to desserts by garnishing with an ingredient used in the recipe, such as lemon slices on a lemon pie, peanuts on a peanut butter pie or chocolate curls on a chocolate pie or cake.

Kitchen Work Tips (II)

Storing Fresh, Frozen or Cooked Meat Safe

So, what do you do when you get home from the supermarket?

Do you stuff everything into the fridge or do you think ahead and freeze the foods you won't be able to eat by the best before date? Or perhaps, you just leave the shopping bags on top of your worktops for few hours before you start thinking what to freeze and what to eat fresh?

When you bring fresh, cooked or frozen meat home from the supermarket it is important to follow the storage instructions on the label. Storing meat at the correct temperature and using it by the specified date prevents spoilage and the chance of food poisoning.

All raw and cooked meat is highly perishable, so it should refrigerated at a temperature between 0°C (32°F) and 4°C (39°F), or kept in the freezer at -18°C (0°F) or colder. If meat is left at 7°C (44.4°F), for example, the bacteria causing food poisoning multiply rapidly.

Bacteria begin multiplying when meat is left out of the fridge for two hours or longer, which is why it is a good idea to take your shopping straight home and into the fridge or if you plan on stopping somewhere enroute from the supermarket, you could use a cool bag.

All pre-packaged meat, including poultry, should be left in its wrapping until you are ready to cook. Loose pieces of meat should be covered loosely to allow air to circulate and keep the surface dry, inhibiting bacterial growth. Any meat that will not be used within a few days should be frozen as soon as possible.

Tips on Preparing Your Christmas Turkey

Preparing your turkey for the oven is easy with this step-by-step guide:

- A. Prepare the stuffing in advance.
- B. Remove the turkey from it's packaging, removing any giblets from the cavity inside.
- C. Stuff your turkey to keep it moist while cooking and to give it a yummy flavour.
- D. Only stuff the neck cavity of the turkey - never the body cavity as the temperature inside never gets hot enough to cook the stuffing.
- E. For the the body cavity you could use a sliced onion, lemon or orange and fresh herbs to infuse the meat with addition flavours.
- F. Stuff the neck cavity and tuck the flap of skin over the cavity entry, securing with a small

skewer.

G. Before cooking, season the turkey with salt and freshly ground pepper, and smear the skin with butter.

H. Place the turkey, breast side down in a roasting tin to cook. This way the turkey will baste itself and the meat will remain moist.

J. If you are using foil, cover loosely and remove the foil for the last 20 minutes of cooking time, to allow the turkey to brown.

I. Alternatively, you can cover your turkey with streaky bacon, which will not only protect the meat from burning, but will also keep it moist and add that irresistible bacon flavour too.

Wooden or Plastic ... Some Myths on Chopping Boards

I have always opted for a wooden chopping board, simply for esthetic reasons, but at some point I was rather concerned about germs that may remain in the wood. The reason for this was perhaps the fact that new plastic cutting boards were advertised on TV, trying to convince everyone that plastic was better because it is non-porous.

Then I started reading and investigating and surprisingly enough, a wooden board is no harm to you. Wood cutting boards are actually better not only for your knives but hygiene too ...

Myth 1 - wooden boards are so porous that harmful organisms such as salmonella, e-coli and listeria soak in, are hard to remove, and easily contaminate other foods placed upon it later.

Myth 2 -plastic, because it is not porous, can be more easily and safely cleaned.

The fact is that although everyone believed those myths are true, including health officials, no one actually tested them until 1993.

I read that Microbiologists at the University of Wisconsin's Food Research Institute contaminated wooden cutting boards and plastic ones with all bacteria that cause food poisoning.

What happened?

Without washing or touching the boards, the bacteria on the wooden board died off in three minutes. On the plastic board the bacteria not only remained but actually multiplied overnight.

It seems wood has a natural bacteria-killing property, which plastic does not.

Anyway, this doesn't mean you have to rush off to the shop to buy a wooden chopping board. As long as you wash the plastic with anti-bacterial cleaner, you are pretty safe :-)

Artichokes How do you cook them?

Some Facts First

The artichoke is native to the Mediterranean. The artichoke vegetable that we eat is actually the flower bud from a large plant, which apparently can grow to rather large - 2m in diameter and 1.5m in height. The most common type of artichoke that is sold in grocery stores is the Green Globe artichoke. Artichokes can be somewhat expensive because of the intense labour necessary to harvest them. Each bud must be harvested by hand, and it can take up to two years for a plant to begin producing buds.

So...How do you cook them?

Many people feel a bit lost when it comes to artichokes and don't quite know what to do with them. However, there are some simple ways to prepare this fine vegetable, which has a delicate, slightly nutty flavour and weird appearance. Many people eat the leaves as well as the succulent heart, sometimes only the "choke" is served, topped with a variety of sauces.

Get it Ready - Handy Tips

With a sharp knife, cut off the stem at the bottom, leaving about 1 cm, so the artichoke can rest firmly on its base. Make sure to pull off any small or coarse leaves at the base. Then use scissors to snip off the thorny tip from each leaf. Cut about 2 cm off the top of the artichoke, leaving a flat top. Rinse the artichoke under cold, running water. Gently spread the leaves apart to make sure they are well cleaned. Carefully spread the centermost leaves using your fingers, and pull out the little cone of purplish leaves in the center. Scrape out the hairy "choke" with a small spoon, leaving only the meaty heart. Sprinkle the exposed bottom with several drops of lemon juice to prevent discoloring, and press the outer leaves of the artichoke back into their original shape.

Note: You can also remove the hairy choke after cooking, but the artichoke is more likely to be damaged as it has become very tender from cooking.

Cooking and Serving

Put the artichoke in a saucepan large enough to hold them without allowing them to tip over, and add cold water to cover them.

Bring to boil, then reduce heat and allow to simmer for about 15-40 minutes (depending on size and freshness) until artichoke is tender. When the leaves are easily pulled off, and the choke in the middle is tender when pierced with a fork, you can be sure, it is ready. Drain them carefully upside down, and then serve hot with garlic mayonnaise or melted butter. Or drizzle olive oil and lemon juice all over them. Of course, you can use your imagination and serve with any sauce you like.

Oyster Buying and Storing Tips (KitchenTips)

Buying Oysters

When buying live oysters, make sure they're still alive. The shell should either be closed tightly or should close readily after being tapped. If you open an oyster and the meat is dried out, throw it away. Don't buy oysters with broken or damaged shells. Oyster meats should be plump and have a fresh, mild, saltwater odour. Oyster meats are usually tan and creamy, but the colour can vary. Green and reddish pigmentation is harmless, the colours disappear during cooking. If the meat has a pink colour, it indicates the presence of yeast. Throw it away. Fresh shucked oyster meats should be packed in their own juices which should be clear.

Storing Oysters

Store live oysters cupside down (flat side up) to keep them in their own liquor. Live oysters should be stored between 34 and 40 degrees F. At this temperature, they will stay alive for at least 7 to 10 days after they're taken out of water. Live oysters need to breathe. Never store them in airtight bags or containers. Keep live oysters away from fresh water - it will kill them. Stored properly, fresh oyster meats will stay in good condition up to two weeks after they're shucked. Frozen oysters on the half shell and meats should always be thawed slowly under refrigeration (24 hours is ideal).

Health Tips

Proper Food Handling Keeps the Holidays Safer

While outbreaks of food-borne illnesses from restaurants or food product recalls tend to create news headlines, hundreds of unreported cases of food-related illnesses occur because of poor food-handling practices in the home, according to Dr. J. Nick Baird, state health director. "This is a good time to remind ourselves about the importance of proper food handling."

If you suspect that you may have some type of food-borne illness from a restaurant, or believe you became ill as a result of a food product you purchased from a store, report that information to your local (county or city) health department. If possible, remember to save the suspected food so it can be tested.

Following are helpful tips on safe food handling at home -- from the grocery store to leftovers.

At The Grocery Store

Follow "sell by" and "use by" dates

Frozen food should be solid, refrigerated foods should be cold; no packages should have holes or tears

Place raw poultry, meat or fish in separate bags to prevent leakage before putting them in your cart

Pick up perishable foods (including meats) last before checking out

At Home

Immediately put perishable foods in the refrigerator or freezer

Place meat, fish and poultry in separate plastic bags, on a plate, to prevent leaks; store on a low shelf

Use beef, steaks, roasts, deli meats and poultry within a few days; fish within one or two days

Refrigerator temperature should be between 35 and 40 degrees F; keep the freezer at or below zero

Space items in refrigerator or freezer so air can circulate around them

Keep interiors clean; store perishables in coolers while cleaning or defrosting the freezer or refrigerator

Freezing/Defrosting

For long-term freezing, rewrap or over-wrap meats with freezer storage bags or other papers

Wrap raw meat, fish and poultry carefully to protect other foods from juices

To thaw fish or poultry, place in a refrigerator, on a plate, away from other foods

Meats can also be defrosted using a microwave, according to manufacturer's directions

Cook defrosted meats immediately

Do NOT defrost meat, poultry or fish on a kitchen counter or in warm water; bacteria thrive in temperatures between 40 and 140 degrees

Food Preparation

Keep everything clean that touches food -- hands, utensils, bowls, counter-tops

Wash hands with warm, soapy water before preparing any food

Wash hands EVERY TIME after handling raw meat, poultry and fish

Use SEPARATE platters, cutting boards, trays and utensils for cooked and uncooked meat, poultry and fish

Keep juices from raw poultry, meat and fish from touching other foods

NEVER eat raw seafood, meat, poultry, eggs (or foods containing raw eggs)

NEVER drink unpasteurized milk or other dairy products

When marinating meat, seafood or poultry, use a covered, non-metallic container and place in refrig

Cleaning Up

Thoroughly rinse off (do not soak) all produce with clean, drinkable water; use a clean brush if necessary

Always wash contact surfaces and utensils in warm, soapy water immediately after preparing these foods

To sanitize, use two to three teaspoons household bleach in one quart of warm water; rinse

with hot water

Cooking

Cook ground meats thoroughly to an internal temperature of 160 degrees or until center is not pink and juices run clear

Do not cook meats at low oven temperatures (below 300 degrees)

Do not use brown paper bags for roasting

Cook stuffing for turkey or chicken separately, not in the cavity of the bird

Do not interrupt cooking time and finish later

Baste or brush sauces on cooked surfaces only

Serving

Do not leave cooked meat or other perishable foods out at room temperature for longer than two hours

When serving buffet style, keep cold foods on ice at or below 40 degrees; hot foods at 140 degrees or above

Do not mix buffet foods by adding fresh foods to existing buffet items

If using a marinade as a sauce, be sure to bring to a rolling boil for at least one minute

Use separate plates, platters or trays for holding raw and cooked foods

If using utensils for both raw and cooked foods, wash t

Leftovers

Freeze or refrigerate leftovers immediately

For rapid cooling, use small, shallow containers (less than two inches deep)

Cut large portions into smaller ones to speed cooling times

Leftover meat, fish and poultry should be wrapped securely before refrigerating

Eat leftover meat, fish and poultry within three to four days; reheat to 160 degrees or until steaming hot

Sauces and gravies should be reheated to a rolling boil for at least one minute before serving.

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Chinese Cooking - Ingredient Substitutions

It can be so frustrating. You're all set to impress friends and family with your wok cooking skills. Everything is going along smoothly, until you check the cupboard and discover that the five-spice powder you were positive was tucked behind the sage has disappeared.

What can you do? First, don't despair. Of all the international cuisines, Chinese cuisine is probably the most open to creative solutions born of need and circumstance. Many of the ingredients that we now see as integral to Chinese cuisine - such as fiery red chile peppers - weren't native to China, but introduced by other cultures. Why not try substituting another ingredient? The recipe's creator will never know, and you can still enjoy a tasty dish. The taste will not be quite as authentic, but that's okay.

Here are some food substitution suggestions for ingredients commonly used in Chinese cooking.

Ingredient	Substitute
Agar-agar (An Asian gelatin substitute that doesn't require refrigeration)	Gelatin
Bamboo Shoots	White cabbage
Bok choy	celery or Swiss chard
Chili Sauce	1 cup tomato sauce, 1/4 cup brown sugar, 2 tbsp. vinegar, 1/4 tsp. cinnamon, dash of ground cloves and allspice**
Chinese five-spice powder	Equal amounts cinnamon, star anise, cloves, fennel, and Szechuan Peppercorn. If Szechuan peppercorns aren't available, use freshly ground black peppercorns
Cilantro or Coriander (Chinese parsley)	Parsley (for decoration only, not taste) Can add dash lemon juice
Coconut Milk	whole milk in equal amounts, if possible with coconut extract. For coconut cream, substitute half and half or whipping cream (with coconut extract if possible).

Galangal (used in Thai Cooking)	Fresh ginger
Fresh Ginger	Candied ginger
Garlic Cloves	1/8 tsp. garlic powder
Hoisin Sauce	Equal amounts ketchup and molasses Also, sweet bean sauce
Hot Red Chili	Crushed red pepper
Lemon Grass (Used in Thai Cooking)	Zest of a lemon
Lotus Root flour	Cornstarch (Cornflour)
Mushrooms (Straw, Clouds Ear)	Fresh mushrooms (the taste will be different)
Oyster Sauce	Soy sauce
Rice Wine Vinegar (also called Rice Vinegar)	Dry sherry, white wine vinegar, malt vinegar
Sesame Oil	1 Tbs. Sesame seeds fried in 1/2 cup vegetable oil
Soy Sauce	Japanese tamari or Worchester sauce.
Water Chestnut	Jicama (commonly found in the Southern United States)

**From the Kansas State University site

Beginning Cooks Frequently Asked Questions

How do I clean my Wok?

Never use soap or an abrasive cleaner. Instead, wash the wok in hot water. If necessary, you can use a copper scouring pad to remove particles of food sticking to the bottom. (Hint: If you find this problem occurring regularly, the next question may be of help).

Why does food stick to the bottom of the wok?

It all comes down to the oil. Heat the wok first, turning the heat up as high as possible. After about thirty seconds, add the oil, pouring so that it circles around the sides of the top before reaching the bottom. After about another thirty seconds the oil should be hot enough to add the food. If you follow this procedure carefully, you shouldn't have any more problems with food sticking.

What type of soy sauce should I use?

Light and dark are the two main types of soy sauce used in Chinese cooking. The dark sauce has a heavier flavor, while the light sauce is saltier. Both can be found at Asian markets. However, some people prefer to use other soys such as Kikkoman, which is neither as heavy nor salty.

If you are on a sodium-restricted diet, try one of the low sodium brands and don't add any other salt to the dish. Persons with soy intolerance (similar to lactose intolerance) may want to try using a bouillon cube mixed with a few tablespoons of boiled water as a substitute.

How to Make Rice at Home?

Rice is pretty important to the Chinese people. It is serviced with other dishes for lunch and dinner in most Chinese family. Rice really varies from brand to brand and you may want to try different ones until you settle on a favorite. You're not going to find a nice selection of brands until you go up to the 25 lb bags.

Ingredients

- 3 cups long grain rice
- 3 1/4 cups water

I've read western instructions for cooking rice and they usually use 1 part rice to 2 parts water. This ratio results in a much wetter and softer rice than most Asian families like to have. We use a rice cooker because the convenience outweighs the slight loss in quality in the cooked rice, but cooking rice Asian style in a pot is not very difficult either. You want something slightly more than a 1 to 1 ratio of rice to water. How much more depends on preference and the age of the rice. Newer rice takes less water. For 3 cups of rice, start out using about 3 1/4 cups of water and adjust to your taste. Bring the rice and water to a boil in a pot that is good for slow cooking. Once it boils, put a lid on it and turn it down to the lowest your burner can go. If you have one, a diffuser works well here. Cook for 15 – 20 minutes. All the water should be absorbed. Turn off the heat and let it sit for another 15 minutes or so to finish steaming. Try not to peek too many times. Fluff with chopsticks before serving.

Rice Cooking Tips

Use long grain white rice when cooking Chinese food. Medium grain rice is also acceptable, but the Chinese use short grain rice mainly for dishes such as congee.

Don't use instant or precooked rice. Large bags of long grain white rice are available in Asian markets and most supermarkets - Dragon King is a good brand.

Opinions vary on converted rice - rice that has been parboiled with the husks on. While it is more nutritious than white rice, I find it tastes rather bland. It takes longer to cook than regular rice so if you do use it, follow the instructions on the box carefully.

For fluffier, faster cooking rice, try soaking it in cold water for about thirty to sixty minutes prior to cooking.

Before cooking, rinse the rice several times, until the water comes out clear. This removes any starch and residue - otherwise the rice may be sticky.

When cooking rice in a saucepan, be sure to use a pot with a heavy bottom - copper is best. This will give the rice a thinner crust.

Don't use salt or butter when cooking plain rice - this kills its natural sweet flavor. Another tip if your rice is taking a long time to cook - do you know how long the bag has been sitting in the cupboard? Older rice can lose some of its moisture, requiring more water and a longer cooking time than fresh rice.

Leftover rice will keep for days, and it's perfect for making fried rice. Just be sure to wait until the rice is perfectly cold before storing it in the refrigerator. For the best results, wait a couple of days before making the fried rice - this gives the ingredients more time to blend together. If the cold rice is a bit lumpy, try sprinkling a bit of cold water on it.

For a bit of variety, try one of the scented rices such as jasmine or basmati. Just remember that the amount of water required and the cooking time will be less than for other types of long grain white rice.

How to Peel the Garlic

Part I: Begin at the end

Looking at the garlic clove, you'll see a tough piece at the end. This is the part that was attached to the bottom of the garlic head

before the clove was removed.

Place the garlic clove on the chopping block, and using the tip of your knife, slice off that end.

Part II: Break the skin

Keeping the garlic on the chopping block, use your thumb and index finger to hold the sides of the clove. Hold the knife with the other

hand.

Again using the tip of the knife, carefully make a vertical slit from top to bottom in the skin of the garlic.

Part III: Tap into it

Keeping the garlic on the chopping block, tap the clove once or twice with the back of the blade of the knife.

Part IV: Peel it off

The skin should be nicely loosened at this point and can easily be pulled off in one piece. If the skin is still not loose enough, repeat Part III.

Carefully making a slit down the side of the skin may help matters. The garlic is now ready to be crushed, chopped, minced, or used whole.

Yes, you've read it correctly: whole garlic! Try it in stews or with grilled vegetables.

Open a Coconut

Part I: Drain the liquid

Collecting the coconut milk means that your kitchen will stay a lot drier.

1. Find the three "eyes" of the coconut, on the smaller end of the shell.
2. Take that clean screwdriver, and tap the end of it about two inches into one of the eyes with the knife or hammer. If you use a knife, use the back of it to tap the end of the screwdriver through.
3. Remove the screwdriver, and pour the liquid off into the glass.

Part II: Crack the shell

There's a natural fracture point on the coconut's shell which will become apparent as you follow these steps:

1. Place the coconut on a flat surface, and locate a point about a third of the way from the smaller end.
2. Take the knife and give that spot on the coconut a light whack with the back of the knife blade. Rotate slightly and hit the coconut again the same distance from the end.
3. Repeat this several times as you rotate it on the surface.

Once you see the fracture develop, insert the tip of the knife into it and pry upwards. The coconut should separate in such a way that you can easily get at the white "meat."