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A Beginner's Guide to Chinese Cookery

By Liz Canham

Introduction

When I first ate Chinese food in the UK in the 1970s, it was really quite unappealing. Everything came in a gloopy sauce and seemed to taste the same, due to the overuse of monosodium glutamate, supposedly a flavour enhancer but in reality, nothing of the kind. Then in the 1980s a new breed of Chinese restaurant arrived (at least it took that long to reach the provinces) which provided lighter, tastier Chinese cooking demonstrating regional differences. There was one drawback, however, which was that this new type of restaurant was much more expensive than the original cheap `n tasteless ones. Consequently, I thought how nice it would be to cook Chinese food at home but I had no idea where to start until BBC TV came to my rescue in the shape of Ken Hom, the USA-born chef of Cantonese parents.

Ken presented Chinese cuisine in such an easily-understandable way, demonstrating techniques and suggesting alternative ingredients should the originals not be available in your local supermarket. The book which accompanied the series, Ken Hom's Chinese Cookery became my bible and I still have my copy, pages stained with oil drips and smears of sauce.

To help you on your way to cooking Chinese food at home, I'm going to briefly describe the basic equipment, ingredients and techniques which you need to know so that you can produce some simple and tasty dishes. I hope you enjoy the article and that it inspires you to get cooking!

Equipment

Although there are many implements and pieces of equipment you can buy, to start on the road to cooking your own Chinese food, you really only need a good knife or two and a wok. Woks come in all shapes and sizes, they can be non-stick, flat-bottomed, they can even be electric these days but I still prefer my old carbon steel wok with it's rounded bottom and one wooden handle. This is a Pau wok. These are readily available in Chinese supermarkets and are much less expensive than other varieties. There is one important task though, before you will be ready to cook with such a wok and that is to season it. You will need to scrub it with a cream cleaner to remove any residues of machine oil and dry it carefully. Put the wok on the hob over a low heat. Rub the inside of the wok with two

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tablespoons of cooking oil using kitchen towel. Let the wok heat slowly for 10 to 15 minutes then wipe the inside with more kitchen towel. The paper will come away black. Carry on coating, heating and cleaning off until the kitchen towel comes away clean. Your wok is now ready to use. After use, wash only in water without detergent and dry thoroughly over a low heat. You may also apply a little oil if you wish. This should prevent the wok from rusting but if it does develop rust, just scrub and season again.

As well as the wok, you will need a wok stand, particularly if you have an electric hob. This keeps the wok stable if you are using it for braising or deep frying.

You will also need something to stir with - any spatula, slice or slotted spoon will do - metal for a metal wok and plastic or wooden for a non-stick wok.

Ingredients

Before you rush out and buy up the whole Chinese section at the supermarket, bear in mind that some ingredients don't keep well if left unused. Just select something simple from your chosen cookery book and buy the things that you need for that then you can expand your selection as you progress through different dishes.

Some common store-cupboard ingredients that you will almost certainly need are dark and light soy sauce, some sort of cooking oil and sesame oil, cornflour and rice wine or sherry. For more information, see my article [Chinese Cooking – Ingredients and Equipment](#).

Techniques

Stir-Frying

The most well known Chinese cooking technique is stir-frying. This is where your wok comes into its own as its shape and size (at least 14 inches diameter with deep sides) is ideal for quick cooking. The secret to successful stir-frying is to have all your ingredients ready in advance.

Meat should be cut according to the recipe but normally in thin strips. Vegetables likewise but in any event should be of similar shapes and sizes to ensure even cooking. Long thin vegetables such as spring onions, carrots or asparagus are often cut on the diagonal so that more surface area is exposed for quicker cooking. Measure out sauce ingredients – check the recipe – if they are all added to the dish at the same time, you can put them all in one small bowl. If cornflour is included, don't forget to give it a good stir before adding to the other food.

Once you have everything prepared, heat your wok until it is very hot then add oil and using your chosen stirring implement ensure that the oil is evenly distributed over the surface of the wok. Before you add your ingredients the wok should be so hot that it is almost smoking – this will prevent the food from being greasy. The exception to this is if you are flavouring your oil with garlic, chilli, spring onions, ginger or salt – these will burn if the oil is too hot.

Now add your other ingredients in the order stated in the recipe and toss them over the surface of the

wok ensuring that nothing rests in one place for too long and moving the food from the centre of the wok to the sides. I suggest that you wear an apron or other protective clothing for this operation as the food often spits due to the high temperature it is cooked at.

Deep Frying

You can use your wok for deep frying but be very careful that it is safely balanced on its stand. Under no circumstances leave it unattended. Deep frying in a wok uses less oil than a deep fryer or saucepan but you may find these safer and easier to use.

When deep frying, make sure that the oil is hot enough before adding ingredients or the food will end up very greasy. Test it by dropping in a small piece of prepared food or a cube of bread. If the oil bubbles up around what you dropped in then it's hot enough.

Make sure that food to be deep fried is dried thoroughly on kitchen paper or drained of its marinade before cooking otherwise it will spit.

Shallow Frying

This is the same as the Western technique. Fry food on one side, then the other and drain off any excess oil before adding sauce ingredients. A normal frying pan is fine for this.

Steaming

Steaming is widely used in Chinese cookery. You can use a bamboo steamer in a wok, a heat-proof plate placed on a rack in a wok or other large pan or you can use a normal European steamer.

If using a bamboo steamer or plate in a wok, bring about 2 inches of water to a simmer. Put your rack into the wok (if the bamboo steamer is big enough and will sit on the sides of the wok without being in the water, you don't need a rack) and balance your plate or steamer of food on it. Put the lid on your steamer or wok and check occasionally to see if the water needs topping up (use water which is already hot).

Whichever method you use, make sure that the food is above the water level and isn't getting wet.

Braising

As with Western cooking, braising is used for tougher cuts of meat and involves gentle cooking of meat and/or vegetables in flavoured stock. Red-braising is the technique where food is braised in a dark liquid such as soy sauce which gives the food a red/brown colour. This type of braising sauce can be frozen and re-used.

Liz Canham: As well as a love of Asian cooking and travel as you can see in her

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websites, Liz seeks to help newcomers to the world of internet

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The History of Chinese Cuisine

By Liz Canham

In China, food and its preparation has been developed so highly that it has reached the status of an art form. Rich and poor, the Chinese people consider that delicious and nutritious food is a basic necessity. There is an old Chinese saying "Food is the first necessity of the people".

This art has been cultivated and refined over hundreds of years. Legend has it that the culture of Chinese cuisine originated in the 15th century BC during the Shang dynasty and was originally introduced by Yi Yin, it's first Prime Minister.

The two dominant philosophies of Chinese culture both had extreme influences on the political and economic history of the country but it is less well known that they also influenced the development of the culinary arts.

Confucius emphasised the artistic and social aspects of cookery and eating. The Chinese don't gather together without involving food – it is considered to be poor etiquette to invite friends to your home without providing appropriate food.

Confucius established standards of cooking and table etiquette, most of which remain to this day. The most obvious example of this is the cutting of bite-sized pieces of meat and vegetables during the course of the food preparation in the kitchen, rather than using a knife at the table which is not considered to be good manners.

Confucius also encouraged the blending of ingredients and flavourings to become a cohesive dish, rather than tasting the individual components. Harmony was his priority. He believed and taught that without harmony of ingredients there could be no taste. He also emphasised the importance of presentation and the use of colour, texture and decoration of a dish. Most importantly, cooking became an art rather than a task to be endured and certainly he was instrumental in promulgating the philosophy of "live to eat" rather than "eat to live".

On the other hand, Tao encouraged research into the nourishment aspects of food and cookery. Rather than concentrating on taste and appearance, Taoists were more interested in the life-giving properties of food.

Centuries on, the Chinese have discovered the health-giving properties of all sorts of roots, herbs, fungus and plants. They have taught the world that the nutritional value of vegetables is destroyed by over-cooking (particularly boiling) and in addition have found that things with a great flavour also have medicinal value.

Home cooked Chinese food is extremely healthy, even though much of it is fried. This is due to the use of polyunsaturated oils (used only once and discarded) and the exclusion of dairy products. In addition the inclusion of animal fat is minimal because portions of meat are small.

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