

SAUCE IS THE THING

WESTERN fascination with Chinese food often begins with the memorable sauces that flavor the dishes. From our dining-out tradition, we Americans acquired a taste for the sauces, and now want to have them on hand when we come home at night too tired to spend hours in the kitchen but wanting something to eat that is not less than special.

Sauces are a harmonious blend of captured flavors, and the Chinese capture flavors — mild, mellow, sweet, sour, salty, bitter, bland, spicy, rich, piquant, pungent, hot — as miraculously as a composer captures sound.

Purchasing the necessary ingredients is the prelude to a remarkable dining experience at home. Basic ingredients, such as garlic, scallions and fresh ginger, are easy to find in one's neighborhood. But the Chinese section of your pantry should also include certain pastes and sauces that were developed in ancient China. Happily, the Chinese still make the modern counterpart to these prepared pastes and sauces. As these staples will last a year or so, an annual trip to a local Korean market or a nearby Chinatown will yield the ingredients. The list you carry should include hoisin sauce, plum sauce, bean sauce, oyster sauce, sesame oil and chili paste. Once opened, these items must be refrigerated, and those in tins should be transferred to covered glass jars. The staples that require no refrigeration are fermented (salted) black beans, vinegar and dark soy sauce.

With these ingredients on hand, you can prepare one or more sauces over the weekend and then enjoy them during the week at a moment's notice. All may be stored in tightly sealed glass jars in the refrigerator for up to five days, or frozen, minus a few fresh ingredients, for several months. If you freeze the sauces, you should substitute glutinous rice powder for the cornstarch.

Having made the sauces in advance, you can accelerate the whole process of preparing a Chinese-inspired meal — stir-frying vegetables, beef, lamb, pork, veal, chicken, seafood or a combination thereof; steaming a whole fish in fermented black bean sauce or red ginger barbecue sauce, and/or roasting a variety of meats in a Chinese barbecue sauce.

If you are in the mood for a fresh, crisp vegetable dish, select the seasonal vegetables of your choice. Short on time, bring home pre-chopped vegetables from the salad bars found around town in supermarkets or vegetable stands. Prepare them with velvety brown stir-fry oyster sauce and serve alone or with Chinese egg noodles, commonly called lo mein.



MICHAEL GEIGER

*The secret to a real Chinese touch —
and to the quick and easy during-the-week
cooking — is the preprepared sauce.*

Because it has the ability to intensify the natural flavors of a dish and add a special nuance of its own, this simple sauce is frequently found in Chinese restaurants, typically over broccoli or bok choy, and sometimes string beans or asparagus.

For stir-fried beef, veal, lamb, pork, chicken or seafood dishes, Sichuan brown sauce (often called Sichuan brown sauce), is an excellent choice because of its complexity of flavors. This sweet, salty, sour, hot, aromatic creation is more a popular American adaptation than an authentic sauce you would find when traveling through the western province of Sichuan, China. Still, its hot spiciness, its sophisticated contrast of flavors with the stimulating seasoning of chili paste, is typical of Sichuan, which is a tropical inland area where chili peppers grow in abundance.

The pungency of fermented black bean sauce provides another savory possibility for stir-frying beef, veal, lamb, pork, chicken or seafood (such as shrimp, scallops, lobster and crab). This versatile sauce is also exceptionally satisfying over a steamed whole fish, providing a lusty accent over, for instance, a fillet of steamed Norwegian salmon.

When broiling and roasting meat, a unique addition is a Chinese barbecue sauce. Red ginger barbecue sauce, with its tomato base, can be used in the same fashion as its American counterpart. It is eminently good as a marinade for roast chicken, steak or pork. Seafood lovers also find this multi-purpose sauce outstanding with stir-fried scallops or shrimp.

With the knowledge of how to prepare, use and store these four Chinese sauces at home, you have a headstart on the dinner hour. While the sauces sit in the refrigerator and you in a chair, your response to the question "What are you doing?" can be "Capturing flavors."

(Recipes are on the following page.)

STEAMED WHOLE FISH WITH BLACK BEAN SAUCE

- 1 sea bass, about 1½ pounds (see note)
- 1 tablespoon medium dry sherry
- 1 recipe fermented black bean sauce (see below)
- 1 tablespoon sesame oil.

1. Have the fishmonger scale and gut the fish and remove the fins. Rinse the fish under cold running water and pat dry with paper towels. Place the fish on an oval shaped dish that will fit into a turkey roaster. Place the dish on a high-legged rack (or empty tin can from which the top and bottom have been removed) that will fit into the bottom part of the roaster. Pour the sherry over the fish.

2. Pour two inches of water into the bottom of the turkey roaster, set the rack into it and then the dish containing the fish. Cover and steam for 12-15 minutes.

3. Place a wok over high heat for about 1 minute or until it smokes. Add the juices from the fish (collected in the plate) and bring to a boil. Reduce the juices by half.

4. Add the fermented black bean sauce and bring to a boil. Add the sesame oil. Turn off the heat, pour over the fish and serve immediately.

Yield: Two servings

Note: For the sea bass, you can substitute red snapper, pompano, sea trout or striped bass.

FERMENTED BLACK BEAN SAUCE

- 2 teaspoons cornstarch
- 2 tablespoons sherry
- 1 tablespoon peanut oil
- 2 tablespoons fermented black beans, minced
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh ginger
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic (see note)
- ¼ cup scallions cut in ½-inch rounds, white and green parts (see note)
- ¾ cup chicken stock
- 1 tablespoon oyster sauce
- 2 teaspoons dark soy sauce.

1. Make a binder by mixing the cornstarch and sherry. Set aside.

2. Place a wok over high heat for about one minute or until it smokes. Add the peanut oil and heat until it is hot. Add the black beans and ginger; stir-fry for about 15 seconds. Add the chicken stock, oyster sauce and dark soy. Bring to a boil and reduce two minutes, stirring occasionally.

3. Restir the binder and add it to the sauce, stirring until it thickens. Remove the sauce from the wok.

4. Allow the sauce to cool, then refrigerate in a glass jar with a tight-fitting cover.

Yield: Enough to season one pound of meat, fish, or poultry

Note: If using the sauce the same day it is made, add the garlic and scallions along with the ginger. If using after refrigerating or freezing, add the garlic and scallions on the day it is used.

STIR-FRIED CHICKEN WITH SICHUAN SAUCE

- 1 teaspoon cornstarch
- 1 teaspoon medium dry sherry
- 1 pound boneless skinless chicken breasts, trimmed and diced into ½-inch pieces (see note)
- 2½ tablespoons peanut oil
- ¼ cup scallions, cut in ½-inch rounds, white and green parts
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- 2 teaspoons minced fresh ginger
- 1 recipe Sichuan sauce (see below)
- 1 teaspoon sesame oil.

1. Prepare a marinade by combining the cornstarch and sherry. Add the diced chicken, stir vigorously with chopsticks and allow to marinate in the refrigerator at least one-half hour or up to 12 hours.

2. Place a wok over high heat for about one minute or until it smokes. Add the peanut oil and heat until hot. Restir the chicken in the marinade and add to the wok all at once, stirring about two to three minutes or until the chicken turns white.

3. Add the scallions, garlic and ginger. Continue to stir-fry another 30 seconds.

4. Restir the Sichuan sauce and add it to the wok all at once. Stir-fry over the highest possible heat for another 30 seconds or until the sauce has evenly glazed the chicken. Turn off the heat. Add the sesame oil, mix briefly and serve immediately.

Yield: Three servings

Note: For the chicken, you can substitute boneless pork, steak, veal or lamb, which should be partially frozen and then sliced or shredded. Other substitutes for the chicken are shrimp that have been peeled, split, washed, drained and dried or scallops that have been rinsed and dried.

SICHUAN SAUCE

- 1 tablespoon hoisin sauce
- 1 tablespoon bean sauce
- 2 teaspoons plum sauce
- 1 tablespoon medium dry sherry
- 1 tablespoon Chinese red vinegar
- 1 to 2 teaspoons chili paste
- 1 tablespoon dark soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon peanut oil
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- 2 scallions cut in ½-inch rounds, white and green parts
- 2 teaspoons minced fresh ginger
- 1 teaspoon sesame oil.

1. Combine all the ingredients in a bowl except the peanut oil, garlic, scallions, ginger and sesame oil.

2. Refrigerate in a glass jar with a tight-fitting cover.

3. When ready to use the sauce, sauté in peanut oil the garlic, scallions and ginger for one minute. Add the sesame oil at the last minute.

Yield: Enough to season one pound of meat, fish or poultry

STIR-FRIED BROCCOLI WITH OYSTER SAUCE

- 1½ tablespoons peanut oil.
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- ¼ cup scallions cut in ½-inch rounds, white and green parts
- 4 cups broccoli florets, blanched
- 1 recipe stir-fry oyster sauce (see below).

1. Place a wok over high heat for about one minute or until it smokes. Add the peanut oil and heat until hot. Add the garlic and scallions; stir-fry a few seconds. Add the blanched broccoli and stir-fry one minute.

2. Add the stir-fry oyster sauce. Bring to a boil and cook until the sauce thickens, continuing to stir. Serve hot or at room temperature.

Yield: Four servings.

STIR-FRY OYSTER SAUCE

- 2 teaspoons cornstarch
- 1 tablespoon medium dry sherry
- 1 tablespoon peanut oil
- 2 teaspoons minced fresh ginger
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic (see note)
- 2 scallions cut in ½-inch rounds, white and green parts (see note)
- 1 tablespoon oyster sauce
- 1 tablespoon dark soy sauce
- ½ cup chicken stock.

1. Make a binder by mixing the cornstarch and sherry. Set aside.

2. Place a wok over high heat for about one minute or until it smokes. Add the peanut oil and heat until hot. Add the ginger; stir-fry a few seconds. Add the oyster sauce, soy sauce and chicken stock. Bring to a boil.

3. Restir the binder and add it to the sauce, stirring until it thickens. Remove the sauce from the wok.

4. Allow the sauce to cool, then refrigerate in a glass jar with a tight-fitting cover.

Yield: Enough for four cups of vegetables.

Note: If using the sauce the same day it is made, add the garlic and scallions along with the ginger. If using after refrigerating or freezing, add the garlic and scallions on the day it is used.

CHARRED SHRIMP IN RED GINGER BARBECUE SAUCE

- 1 pound medium large shrimp (21-25 per pound)
- 2 tablespoons peanut oil
- 1 recipe red ginger barbecue sauce (see below).

1. Using a pair of scissors, cut but do not remove the shell along the back of the shrimp, then cut off the legs. Rinse the shrimp under cold running water; drain, then dry well on several different changes of paper towels until the shrimp are completely dry.

2. Place a wok over high heat for about one minute or until it smokes. Add one tablespoon of the peanut oil and heat until hot. Add half the shrimp to the wok and let them scorch. This will take about 30 to 45 seconds. Turn the shrimp and let them scorch on the other side. Remove the shrimp from the wok, add the remaining one tablespoon of oil and repeat this procedure.

3. Return the shrimp along with the red ginger barbecue sauce to the wok. Stir-fry over the highest possible heat for about one minute. The sauce should evenly glaze the shrimp. Serve hot or at room temperature.

Yield: Three servings.

RED GINGER BARBECUE SAUCE

- 3 tablespoons tomato paste
- 2 tablespoons medium dry sherry
- 2 tablespoons dark brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon, plus 1 teaspoon, dark soy sauce
- 2 teaspoons red-wine vinegar
- 1 teaspoon chili paste
- 1 tablespoon peanut oil
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh ginger
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic (see note)
- ¼ cup scallions cut in ½-inch rounds, white and green parts (see note).

1. In a bowl combine the tomato paste, sherry, sugar, soy sauce, vinegar and chili paste.

2. Place a wok over high heat for about one minute or until it smokes. Add the peanut oil and heat until hot. Add the ginger and stir-fry a few seconds. Add the contents of the bowl to the wok. Bring to a boil and then turn the heat to low. Simmer about two minutes or until the sauce thickens. Remove the sauce from the wok.

3. Allow the sauce to cool, then refrigerate in a glass jar with a tight-fitting cover.

Yield: Enough to season one pound of meat, fish, or poultry.

Note: If using the sauce the same day it is made, add the garlic and scallions along with the ginger. If using the sauce after refrigerating or freezing, add the garlic and scallions on the day it is used.

Use this sauce as a marinade for roast chicken and for barbecued steak or pork chops. Add it to stir-fried chicken. It is even good as a substitute for ketchup on hamburgers. ■