

UNRAVELING CHINESE NOODLES

THE REQUEST for a variety of Chinese pasta dishes goes hand in hand with the desire to understand the multifarious Chinese noodle. Which rice noodle is required for a deep-fried garnish? Which brand is best? How do I store fresh noodles? Just a walk down the aisle displaying noodles at a well-stocked Chinese market will send an aspiring cook into a state of utter confusion. Chinese pasta, however, is less bewildering when one realizes that there are only three primary, commonly used types: rice noodles, made of rice and water; cellophane noodles, made of mung-bean flour and water, and egg noodles, made of eggs, flour and water.

Rice noodles are available both fresh and dried. The fresh ones are called chow fun. They are best purchased from the stores that make them right on the premises. These same little shops, which dot Mulberry and Mott Streets, also make their own bean curd, various doughs for dim sum and other noodles.

Chow fun is steamed in the shape of large circles that are then brushed with oil, folded and placed in a plastic bag for sale. They are sold in one-pound quantities. When you arrive home, take a cleaver and cut the folded dough about the same size as fettuccine. Place the noodles in a bowl and toss them with a tablespoon of sesame oil. This will prevent them from sticking together. (This tip can be applied to any Chinese pasta, whether fresh chow fun, fresh lo mein that has been boiled and drained, or dried-rice noodles that have been soaked and drained.) Optimally speaking, chow fun should be stir-fried the same day, but it can be stored for two days in the refrigerator in a tightly covered bowl. When ready to cook them, always stir-fry these noodles in very hot oil. The hotter the heat source, the better, since scorching adds a new dimension to their flavor. Once removed from the wok, they are not added again until the vegetables, meat and seasonings are cooked. After the final combining, their smoky flavor permeates the whole dish. Served piping hot, they are an excellent testimony for Cantonese peasant fare.

For those of us who do not live near a Chinese community, a more practical choice of rice noodles would be the dried, of which there are many. They can be stored up to a year. Once opened, they should be stored in a covered glass container.

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Rice sticks are noodles that are flat and thin like linguine. Recommended brands are Companion, Double Swallow, Eagle, Hsin Chu and May Pride, all sold in clear plastic bags. These noodles must be placed in a bowl and soaked for one hour in cold water before being drained and stir-fried.

Rice vermicelli is also sold in a clear plastic covering. Similar in size to angel's hair, these noodles are much thinner than the rice sticks. They must be soaked for 30 minutes in cold water before being drained and stir-fried. The Double Swallow, Eagle and Sailing Boat brands are recommended.

Another kind of rice sticks, known as py mei fun, comes in a green package. These are not soaked, but rather are broken into clusters before being deep-fat fried for a few seconds in very hot oil (375 degrees) until they puff. They should be removed from the oil after they have puffed but before they turn brown (even the slightest trace of brown). Used for garnishing, they have a visual appeal that transforms a lackluster dish into an exciting one. The recommended variety is from Foo Lung Ching Kee Company.

Cellophane noodles, made from mung-bean flour, represent a separate category of dried noodles. Many people confuse them with rice noodles. Cellophane noodles are tied in bunches and sold wrapped in a clear plastic covering. As with rice vermicelli, they too are soaked in cold water for 30 minutes in order to be reconstituted. They are used in stir-fried

dishes and soups. Recommended brands are Long-Kow, Lungkow and Great Wall.

Besides rice noodles and cellophane noodles, there are also Chinese egg noodles (lo mein), both fresh and dried. Although fresh and dried are interchangeable in most recipes, the fresh are far more desirable. Sold in one-pound plastic packages, they can be found in the refrigerated section of Chinese grocery stores. You can store them for several days in the refrigerator or freeze them for several months. If freezing them, you should divide the one-pound quantity in half by pulling them apart while in their fresh state. Two recommended brands that do not contain any yellow food coloring or preservative are West Lake Noodle Company and Canton Noodle Company.

Egg noodles can be purchased in various thicknesses. Both the thin and thick ones can be used for stir-fried lo mein and chow mein dishes. Only the thicker ones, however, should be used for the popular dish of cold noodles with spicy sesame sauce, since thin ones become overly tangled and impossible to separate when serving.

Fresh egg noodles are always boiled, drained, rinsed, then tossed with a little peanut or sesame oil. If being used in a recipe requiring a cold mix (such as cold noodles with spicy sesame sauce), they require no further cooking. If being made into noodle pancakes, they are then either browned on both sides in a wok with a small amount of oil (or rendered poultry fat) or are shallow-fried on one side in one-inch-deep hot oil. They can also be stir-fried.

(Recipes are on the following page.)

ROAST PORK LO MEIN

- 1/4 cup dark soy sauce
- 2 tablespoons oyster sauce
- 1 cup poultry stock, preferably homemade
- 2 tablespoons water-chestnut powder or 2 tablespoons cornstarch
- 3 tablespoons medium-dry Sherry
- 3/4 pound fresh egg noodles (lo mein)
- 1 tablespoon sesame oil
- 6 1/2 tablespoons rendered poultry fat or 6 1/2 tablespoons peanut oil
- 1 cup mung-bean sprouts
- 2 cloves minced garlic
- 1 tablespoon minced ginger root
- 1 1/2 cups shredded leeks (white part only)
- 1/2 cup soaked, stemmed and shredded Chinese mushrooms
- 1 cup shredded bok choy (white part)
- 1 cup pared and shredded hairy melon (see note)
- 1 cup strung and shredded snow peas
- 1/2 cup cleaned, seeded and shredded sweet red pepper
- 1/2 cup cleaned, seeded and shredded yellow pepper
- 1 cup shredded bok choy (green part)
- 1/2 pound shredded barbecued Chinese roast pork.

1. Combine the soy sauce, oyster sauce and one cup of stock and set aside.

2. Mix the water-chestnut powder and Sherry and set aside.

3. To prepare the noodles, bring four quarts of water to a boil. Add the noodles and boil for about two or three minutes. While the noodles are cooking, lift them with a pair of chopsticks to prevent their sticking together. Pour the noodles into a colander to drain; rinse with cold water. Toss with one tablespoon of sesame oil.

4. Preheat the oven to 250 degrees.

5. Place a wok over high heat for about one minute. Add one and one-half tablespoons of poultry fat and heat until hot but not smoking. Spread one-third of the noodles in the bottom of the wok so they form a flat, round shape. To prevent the noodles from sticking, shake the wok about every 10 seconds. Cook the noodles until they are very brown, then flip the "noodle pancake" and allow the other side to brown, continuing to shake the wok every 10 seconds. Remove the noodle pancake from the wok onto a heatproof, flat dish. Repeat two more times with the remaining one-half pound of noodles, frying one-quarter of a pound at a time in one and one-half tablespoons of poultry fat. Place the three noodle pancakes on the serv-

Chinese noodles are not as bewildering as many cooks think. Presented here are recipes that put them to good use.

ing dish so they form a border around it. Place the serving dish, uncovered, in the preheated oven while you are stir-frying the pork and vegetable mixture.

6. In a saucepan, bring the mixed soy sauce, oyster sauce and stock to a simmer.

7. Place the wok over high heat for about one minute. Add the bean sprouts. Scorch without oil, shaking the wok once. After about one minute, flip the sprouts and scorch them for another minute. Remove the bean sprouts from the wok and reserve.

8. Heat the remaining poultry fat in the wok over medium heat. Add the garlic and ginger, and stir-fry for a few seconds. Add the leeks and mushrooms, and stir-fry for two minutes.

9. Turn the heat to high, add the white part of the bok choy, the hairy melon, snow peas and red and yellow peppers, and stir-fry for one minute.

10. Add the simmering stock mixture around the sides of the wok and let it come to a boil.

11. Restir the water-chestnut mixture and add to the vegetables along with the green part of the bok choy and the roast pork. Mix well. Add the bean sprouts. Mix briefly.

12. Place the vegetable-pork mixture in the center of the dish so the noodles will form a border.

Yield: Four servings.

Note: Unpeeled zucchini can be substituted for the hairy melon.

CHILI OIL

1 cup peanut oil

6 tablespoons chili powder.

Place a wok over high heat for about one minute. Pour in the oil and heat over a medium flame until it reaches 375 degrees. Remove the wok from the heat and let it stand one minute. Add the chili powder all at once. Stir a few seconds with chopsticks. Allow the chili oil to cool in the wok. Line a strainer with cheesecloth and pour the oil through it into a glass jar. Cover and store in the refrigerator. It will last one year.

Yield: One cup.

BEEF CHOW FUN

(Fresh rice noodles with beef)

- 1/2 pound trimmed flank steak
- 1/2 egg white
- 2 tablespoons, plus 1 teaspoon, medium-dry Sherry
- 2 teaspoons water-chestnut powder or 2 tablespoons cornstarch
- 1 pound chow fun (fresh rice noodles)
- 1 1/2 tablespoons dark soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon oyster sauce
- 1/4 pound mung-bean sprouts
- 5 tablespoons peanut oil
- 2 chopped scallions (white and green parts)
- 1 1/2 cups strung and shredded snow peas.

1. Partially freeze the flank steak, which facilitates slicing. Slice, then shred.

2. Prepare a marinade by combining the egg white, one teaspoon of Sherry and one teaspoon of water-chestnut powder. Mix the beef in the marinade and refrigerate for at least one hour or as many as 12 hours.

3. Cut the chow fun into noodle shapes, approximately the size of fettuccine (one-and-one-half inches wide, five inches long).

4. Prepare a seasoning sauce by combining one teaspoon of water-chestnut powder, two tablespoons of Sherry, the dark soy sauce and the oyster sauce.

5. Preheat the oven to 250 degrees.

6. Place a wok over high heat for about one minute. Add the bean sprouts. Scorch without oil, shaking the wok once. After about one minute, flip them and scorch for another minute. Remove the bean sprouts from the wok and reserve. Return the wok to high heat. Add three tablespoons of oil and heat until it is hot but not smoking. Add the chow fun and stir-fry for two to three minutes. Remove the noodles to a heatproof, flat serving dish. Do not cover: Place in the preheated oven.

7. Return the wok to high heat and add one tablespoon of oil. Add the scallions and snow peas, and stir-fry for 30 seconds. Remove the vegetables from the wok to the same serving dish containing the noodles.

8. Return the wok to high heat and add another tablespoon of oil. Restir the beef in the marinade and add to the wok. Stir-fry for two minutes, or until the beef loses its redness.

9. Restir the seasoning sauce and add to the wok, stirring a few seconds to mix well with the beef.

10. Return the vegetables and the noodles to the wok and mix over high heat until all the ingredients are well combined. Empty the contents of the wok into the same heatproof dish and serve immediately.

Yield: Four servings.

COLD NOODLES WITH SPICY SESAME SAUCE

- 1 tablespoon minced garlic or 3 medium-sized cloves
- 3/4 cup sesame-seed paste (tahini)
- 1 scant cup of steeped black Chinese tea
- 5 tablespoons dark soy sauce
- 5 teaspoons strained chili oil (see recipe)
- 3 tablespoons sesame oil
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 2 tablespoons red-wine vinegar
- 1 pound fresh lo mein noodles
- 1/2 cup chopped scallions (white and green parts)
- 1/2 cup shredded cucumber.

1. To prepare the sesame sauce, drop the garlic cloves down the feeding tube of a food processor. Process until minced. Remove the cover and add the sesame-seed paste, Chinese tea, dark soy sauce, chili oil, two tablespoons of sesame oil, the sugar and red-wine vinegar. Process until smooth.

2. Bring a large kettle filled with water to a rolling boil. Add the noodles and boil for about two minutes. (Time will vary according to the size of the noodles.)

3. Drain the noodles in a colander and rinse them under cold running water.

4. Mix in one tablespoon of sesame oil.

5. Place the noodles in a bowl and add the sauce and the scallions, tossing until well combined. Add the shredded cucumber and toss again.

6. Serve at room temperature.

Yield: Eight servings.

Note: The sesame sauce can be made several weeks ahead and refrigerated, provided the scallions and garlic are added just prior to tossing. Chili oil can be purchased or made at home.

(Recipes continue on Page 108.)