

Asian spices in your pantry pave the way for tasty dishes

Written by Cindy Welch - Food Columnist
Wednesday, 21 January 2009 11:22



If your basic pantry is well-stocked, you are ready to expand your cooking horizons to include other foods that you love. You don't have to eat out to get great Chinese, Thai or Vietnamese food. The list of ingredients for Asian style dishes can be long and intimidating, but don't worry – once you have the basics, hundreds of delicious dishes can be made. The great thing about Asian condiments is that most of them are pickled, dried or fermented, so they have a long shelf life in the refrigerator or in your pantry.

Sometimes, we Americans can be pretty naïve when it comes to the cuisine of other cultures. We assume all food from the Pacific Rim is the same. If it is stir-fried, served with rice and includes soy sauce, we attribute it to China. In researching this article, I discovered some websites with Asian ingredients actually listed mostly items for Japanese cuisine (another article in itself).

There are more than 400 groups of people in China, each with its own language or dialect.

We don't believe barbeque in Memphis is the same as it is in Lufkin. Why would we assume all the Chinese eat the same thing? The northern areas of China use more wheat noodles and dumplings, while the southwestern areas of Sichuan and Hunan eat more rice.

Some regions specialize in dishes that are hearty, others focus on seafood, and many use hot peppers and spices. Add in the familiar dishes of their neighbors Thailand and Vietnam, and the variety is extensive.

China is broken into four major areas of cuisine, but these can also be divided into many regions with their own specialties.

Asian spices in your pantry pave the way for tasty dishes

Written by Cindy Welch - Food Columnist
Wednesday, 21 January 2009 11:22

The Cantonese cooking of Western China is the most familiar to Americans. It uses sauces and favors stir-frying, steaming and roasting a wide variety of meats, poultry and seafood. The Cantonese also created dim sum, a variety of pastries and dumplings that originated in China's teahouses.

In the Beijing cuisine of Northern China, hearty fare of soups, hot pots and dumplings are created with noodles and dough made from wheat. Mutton and pork are popular choices, as are the strong flavors of garlic, leeks and onions. Meat wrapped in pancakes is also very popular.

Southern cuisines include Hunan and Szechuan. They favor hot, spicy dishes such as Kung Pao Chicken and use dried and fresh peppers as well as Szechuan peppercorns, which are actually dried fruit of the prickly ash tree. They also eat rice with almost every meal and often use spices borrowed from the curries of India.

Eastern Chinese cooking is the most varied. It features both wheat and rice products, includes a liberal amount of sugar to sweeten dishes (such as sweet and sour pork) and meat is often cooked by the "red-cooking" method that simmers the meat in dark soy for a long time until it has a reddish tinge.

Below is a very basic list to help you begin. A lot of the items can be found in our local markets. Some will require a trip to an Asian market or a store such as Whole Foods in Dallas.

Asian Pantry

Sauces, Oil and Vinegars:

Soy sauce: fermented soy beans used to flavor most sauces, stews, marinades, meat and fish dishes

Plum sauce: a traditional sauce for duck and pork that is made with plums and apricots

Black bean sauce: Made from fermented soybeans, ginger and orange peel. Very strong.

Hoisin sauce: sweet and spicy, a table condiment made with soybeans, garlic and chile peppers

Peanut oil: a flavorful oil with a high smoking point used for stir-frying

Sesame oil: made from toasted sesame seeds, very strong flavor

Rice Wine Vinegar: Somewhat sweet and tart

Chili paste: An important ingredient made from fermented fava beans, red chiles, flour and garlic

Oyster sauce: made from boiling oysters and other seafoods until a thick, pungent sauce is produced

Dry and Fresh Ingredients:

Asian spices in your pantry pave the way for tasty dishes

Written by Cindy Welch - Food Columnist
Wednesday, 21 January 2009 11:22

White pepper: Preferred for its lighter color and subtle taste

Star anise: used for stewing and braising. Adds a licorice taste

Sichuan or Szechuan pepper: the dried fruit of the prickly ash tree

Dried hot chili: used in the spicy dishes of the south

Ginger: dried and fresh, adds a fresh spark to dishes

White and brown rice: varies from sticky to long grain depending on what you are cooking

Five-spice powder: A mixture of Szechuan peppercorns, cinnamon, cloves, fennel seeds and star anise. Like curry, it has different mixtures.

Sesame seeds: Mild and nut-like, sesame seeds are used to add texture and flavor to a variety of Chinese dishes.

Eggroll and wonton wrappers: Wheat-based wrappers used for eggrolls, dumplings and won-tons

Vietnamese and Thai Additions:

Basil: sweet basil may be used, but try Thai basil and Holy basil if you can get it

Cilantro: Eaten fresh in noodle bowls and ground into paste for meat dishes

Coconut milk: Made from fresh coconut, it is used in soups and sauces

Rice paper wrappers: Rice-based wrappers used for spring rolls and Vietnamese egg-rolls

Curry pastes: Adopted from Indian cuisine

Fish sauce: The most essential ingredient in Thai and Vietnamese cuisine. Used to flavor all sauces and dishes.

These condiments can take up a lot of space in your pantry and money from your wallet. Begin with a few in the smallest containers you can find and have fun learning to cook your favorite Asian dishes.

*

For the past 20 years, Cindy Welch has been involved with all aspects of cooking, including formal culinary training, experience as food service director for First Baptist Church of Euless, a personal chef and owner of Cindy's Casa Cuisine. Cindy's favorite hobby is "providing delicious food for the people of Sulphur Springs." Her columns cover all aspects of the cooking experience.