

## The 'Wok Rules'



A wok is the name of a high sided frying pan used for cooking all over Asia. In the UK it's a style of cooking we associate mainly with the Chinese but it's also used in Malaysia, Singapore, all over Indonesia, Thailand and many other Asian countries. The method of cooking associated with a wok is stir frying although in low income households the wok is sometimes the only cooking pan and will also be used for boiling and deep frying too.

Cooking with a wok is easy as long as you follow some simple rules!

### **Successful wok cookery**

Always prepare all the ingredients before you start because stir frying takes a short amount of time but ingredients have to be added to the wok in quick succession. It's essential to get everything ready before you begin to cook.

You will always find in Asian cooking that the ingredients in a dish will be cut a similar shape. For chicken with walnuts and red peppers, the walnuts dictate the shape the rest of the ingredients will be cut up into. The peppers and chicken will be cut into walnut size pieces. This ensures that the dish is easy to handle in the wok and all cook at the same pace. There is also consideration made for the fact that the dish will be eaten with chopsticks. Stir fry dishes that are to be mixed with noodles will have the vegetables cut into long strips. This means the ingredients will mix together easily during cooking and be easier to eat.



- Make sure that the ingredients are added in the correct order. Carrots, for example, unless very finely sliced, need more cooking time than red peppers. So consider each addition in terms of cooking time needed and how crunchy you like your vegetables to be. Bean sprouts which are mostly water should always be added last as they take very little cooking and taste better crunchy.
- Chicken or meat should be cooked prior to the vegetables and then added again to heat through just at the end of the cooking time.
- Fish especially if it is cut into strips takes a short time to cook. This again can be cooked first but take care so the pieces don't break up.

### **Asian flavours**

People are often disappointed when they try to cook Asian food for the first time at home as it can be difficult to replicate the big bold flavours. For instant success try some of the sauce ideas below, once you have got the hang of it put your own ideas together.

Always use vegetable or sunflower oil for cooking. It is a waste using extra virgin olive oil for a stir fry dish (unless it's Italian style) as the flavour does not compliment Asian ingredients. Using a light olive oil is of no benefit as they offer the same taste as vegetable oils but are more expensive.

Always use fresh ginger and garlic if you can get it – the flavour impact is far greater than dried or preserved alternatives. The same applies to fresh herbs like basil and coriander.

Buy your own Asian ingredients for your store cupboard. Soy Sauce, Oyster sauce and fish sauce are inexpensive especially if you have a speciality store near you.



## **Cooking Rules !**

Asian people cook on gas. Street stalls and restaurants have special gas rings for woks which is simply a huge jet of flames. The wok gets hot all around not just on the bottom and the heat is fierce. The cooking happens over an extremely high heat for a short period of time. This is a difficult style of cooking to properly replicate in a western kitchen but you can do a pretty good job if you follow the guide:

### **Match your wok to your cooker**

If you are cooking on an electric cooker or hob you need to use a flat based wok or a large non-stick frying pan. If you have a gas hob then you can use a rounded bottom pan on the largest ring. Chinese people use a wok stand if their wok is rounded so that it doesn't tip over. The rounded shape is preferred as you gain maximum contact with the flame during cooking. If you don't have a stand, be careful that the wok doesn't tip while you cook.

### **Heat the Wok**

Put the required amount of oil in the pan and allow it to get really hot before you start to cook. The oil should be almost smoking before you start. Make sure all your ingredients are laid out in the order in which you are going to use them. Use oven gloves to protect hands and a long handled wooden spoon for moving the ingredients around. Stir frying as the title suggests means the food being cooked should be stirred in the pan for the duration of the cooking period. This is so all the food gains contact with the heat of the pan so the water will evaporate and the food cooks evenly.

### **Add Sauces Around the Rim**

Adding liquid ingredients like stir fry sauces and seasoning should be done by drizzling the sauce in around the top side of the pan. This helps the water evaporate out and stops you being left with a soggy puddle in the bottom of the wok. If this happens you will be boiling your food not stir frying. The temperature in the wok will drop and food will become soggy so keeping the heat up is crucial. Remember cooking like this is perfectly safe as long as you are suitably dressed for cooking. As in any cooking scenario hair should be tied up, a protective apron and long sleeve overall and sensible shoes should be selected. Oven gloves should be used to protect hands.



## **Selecting a wok**

### **Traditional wok**

There are many different woks available. Cheaper ones tend to be thin metal without a non-stick coating. These woks are fine but they are usually seasoned prior to use and need to be rubbed with oil after use otherwise they will rust.

### **Non –Stick Wok**

For most people a non- stick wok is preferable as it doesn't need to be looked after and seasoned like a traditional version, Take care not to use metal cooking tools with this style of pan as you will scratch off the non-stick surface.

### **Shape of the base**

The base of a traditional wok is round. All Asian kitchens have a wok ring specifically for this style of pan so it sits firm and will not tilt during cooking, they also exclusively use gas, It is rare for gas hobs in the UK to have a wok size ring. Cooking with a wok on a flat surface halogen hob or an electric ring is the biggest challenge. For this type of cooker a flat bottomed non stick wok or large frying pan is preferable to a traditional style wok.

## **Ingredients**

There are 4 types of ingredients that are fundamental to successful wok cooking, these are: fresh herbs and spices, fresh vegetables, sauces and condiments.

### **Fresh herbs and spices**

In their unprocessed form these seasonings are wonderful. Available in most supermarkets and ethnic shops they should be easy to buy. If you really can't find them easily go ahead and use the dried versions they will still create a wonderful taste.

Green salad onion or spring/salad onions are used often in stir fry dishes they have a mild flavour and cook very quickly. Use traditional white onions if you like but make sure they are very finely sliced.

Fresh Ginger grated or finely sliced this is key ingredient in many Asian dishes. If you want to save time chop the ginger roughly (no need to peel just wash the skin thoroughly) and puree with some vegetable oil in a blender. This keeps in the fridge for 3-4 days. If you are going to use garlic pop a few cloves in with the ginger.



Garlic is used in copious amounts all over Asia. In the UK we use the modest amounts in our cooking. Fresh garlic is far better to use and just needs to be peeled and crushed and finely chopped or grated before use.

Fresh Coriander is used in so many different cuisines from Greece, Portugal, Italy, China, Thailand and Indonesia. It lends an unusual flavour to stir fried foods but no heat.

Fresh green basil is easy to buy here but is a variety used in Italian cooking and less pungent than the variety used in Asia, still, it lends a great taste to vegetable stir-fries. If you have an Asian grocery store near to you see if they have sweet basil.

Chillies – Just a simple rule to follow here the smaller the chilli the hotter it will be. Use larger fresh chillies and remove the seeds and white membrane and the heat will reduce. Never put your fingers in your eyes or rub them if you have just chopped up a fresh chilli it will burn for an hour or so.

If you don't like any of the above ingredients leave them out it's your choice

### **Fresh vegetables**

You can use almost any vegetable for stir frying. Root vegetables are the only ones that don't lend themselves particularly well apart from carrots. Whenever these are used make sure they are finely sliced, diced or cut into thin strips (julienne) so they cook quickly. Experiment with other root vegetables too. Softer varieties like peppers, mushrooms, cauliflower, broccoli are fine again cut up into even size slices or chunks. Leaves and bean sprouts are always added last.

### **Sauces**

The backbone of all stir fry cooking is the sauces and oil used to enhance the flavours. Whilst using ready made stir fry sauces is a quick remedy they are often high in salt and quite expensive. The initial outlay of buying the ingredients needed to replicate these at school/home is cost effective in the long term.

### **Ingredients**

#### **Soy Sauce**

Always look for naturally fermented soy sauce. If it doesn't say it on the label it isn't and will contain high levels of salt and Mono-Sodium Glutamate (MSG).



Naturally fermented soy sauce takes longer to make but doesn't need MSG as the flavour has been allowed to develop naturally. Select a low sodium version as soy sauce is naturally high in salt.

### **Oyster sauce**

This flavourful sauce is made by cooking oyster concentrate with soy sauce. Used in cooking and as a condiment it's an essential in Chinese/Asian cooking. Vegetarian versions are also available.

### **Rice wine**

Used in copious amounts in China for cooking this can be replaced here if necessary with Vermouth or Sherry. For cooking at school you can leave it out completely.

### **Sesame Oil**

This oil has a very low burning point like butter and is usually used with another oil like vegetable oil to counter that fact. Used more commonly as a finishing oil by stirring in at the end of cooking. This oil gives the essential flavour of Asian food.

Here is a classic recipe for a stir fry sauce that gives you that authentic Chinese taste every time.

### **Soy, Oyster and Ginger Sauce**

Use this to season a stir fry of vegetables and you won't be disappointed. Once made it keeps for several weeks in the fridge. Make ahead of a practical or demonstrate at the start of a class. This can be used as a marinade for meat and fish, a drizzler for after cooking or as seasoning during cooking.

### **Makes just over a 1 litre**

100g fresh ginger, peeled and grated (or whizz with soy sauce & wine with peel still on in a blender)

800ml of light, low sodium soy sauce

75ml Chinese cooking wine or sherry (optional)

1 dessertspoon of brown sugar

2 tablespoons Oyster sauce

### **Method**



1. Prepare the ginger by your chosen method.
2. Put all the ingredients into a saucepan together and bring up to the boil over a medium heat.
3. Remove from the heat and cool. Place in a large jar or bottle in the fridge and use when needed.

This will keep for several weeks in the fridge

### **To finish off!**

#### **Sesame Oil**

For many Asian dishes this is fundamental to getting the right taste. Beware this oil has a very low burning point like butter so it isn't used for frying foods. It used as finishing oil. A teaspoon or two tossed into a stir fry dish of vegetables and noodles after cooking gives the classic Asian flavour.

#### **Noodles**

There are many different noodles to choose from. The most common are yellow egg noodles that take very little time to prepare and are economical to buy. Avoid the 'wok ready' type as they are much more expensive. There are noodles made with wheat flour and rice flour. Those made with rice flour are an excellent choice for those who are gluten intolerant and cannot normally eat pasta or noodles. These are used a lot in Thai, Vietnamese and Indonesian cookery. Many of these noodles also need far less cooking time (2-3 minutes) and some simply need to be soaked in boiling water prior to use. So these are useful when practical time in class is limited.

Here is a recipe for a quick classic stir fry dish – you can lay out all the ingredients in sections for clarity.

Allow one sheet of noodles or bundle per pupil (they are cleverly divided up that way and each one represents one portion)

### **Stir Fry Vegetables with Noodles**

#### **First prepare the noodles :**

Bring a small pan of water to the boil and add the noodles cook for 3-4 minutes (or follow on pack instructions) then remove from heat and drain into a colander. Rinse with cold water to stop them sticking together.



### **Now prepare the vegetables:**

Select 200g of vegetables – carrots, peppers, mushrooms, sweet corn, Chinese leaf, bean-sprouts (these should be finely sliced apart from the corn) keep all the sizes similar so they cook evenly.

To give the vegetables some flavour – select from these ingredients :

Finely chopped: garlic, onions, spring onions, fresh ginger, large red chilli or dried crushed chilli flakes (easy on the chilli)

Seasoning ingredients to finish off – sesame oil, soya sauce, tabasco, chilli sauce or 2 dessertspoons of soy and ginger sauce.

Remember to assemble all your ingredients before you start!

### **Method :**

1. Heat 2 tablespoons oil in a large frying pan or wok.
2. Add onions, garlic, ginger etc first and cook gently for 2-3 minutes.
3. Add the vegetables, starting with hard vegetables and adding the soft ones last. Stir fry for one minute between adding each vegetable.
4. Return the noodles to the pan and heat through. Add the seasoning ingredients of your choice to finish the dish with a sprinkle of sesame oil.

Best eaten straight away!