

The Wonderful Wok: Stir Frying Basics

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Purchase your wok. You don't need to spend hundreds of dollars on state-of-the-art cookware. A standard, stainless-steel wok, purchased for less than \$50, will serve its purpose well. The heavier the wok, the better it will retain heat. This is important because you must cook at a high temperature to avoid stewing or steaming your ingredients.

Season your wok. Before you use your wok for the first time, you must season it. Seasoning the wok is a way to "break it in" to ensure even heat-distribution during stir-frying, and helps lock in the flavors of the food as it's cooking. When you remove your wok from its packaging, you may notice a greasy film on the surface. Wipe this film away, and wash your wok in warm, soapy water. To season your wok, put it on the stove over medium-high heat for a few minutes. Add a drop or two of oil, and swirl it around to coat the surface evenly. Remove from the stovetop to let cool for a bit, and then use a paper towel to wipe out the oily residue. You may want to season your wok once more before you begin cooking with it.

Gather your utensils. Professional chefs use a mesh ladle to toss meat and vegetables around in the wok, but if you don't have one of these, a wooden spoon will do just fine. Place several large, clean bowls and plates on the counter next to your wok so you can set your cooked items aside as you prepare them in batches. Other items you'll need: a chef's knife, cutting board, and several bowls of different sizes to store liquid mixtures and chopped herbs and vegetables.

Cut and dry food prep. The most time-consuming part of stir-frying is preparing the ingredients. You'll want everything portioned out and cleaned, chopped, sliced and diced in advance. The actual stir-frying is fast and furious (you've probably heard those pans rattling like mad while waiting for your Chinese takeout!) so meat, vegetables, noodles, spices and oils should be ready and within reaching distance so you can grab and get on with it. Chop everything into bite-sized chunks to ensure quick and thorough cooking. Make sure there's no extra water or other liquid in your wok while stir-frying meat and vegetables. As mentioned earlier, liquid in the wok will cause your meal to stew instead of lightly fry.

Stir-fry in batches. Properly stir-fried food retains its crisp, firm exterior and tender, juicy inside by cooking small portions at a time. Heat the wok, drizzle in enough oil to coat the surface, and add enough small cuts of beef, pork or chicken to just cover the bottom. Fry on medium-high heat, tossing the entire time. When your first batch of meat is thoroughly cooked, remove from the wok and drain on paper towels. Fry the second batch in a little more oil, and then set aside. Oil the pan once more, toss in a few cloves of crushed garlic and/or ginger, and stir-fry the vegetables, adding the thicker ingredients like potatoes and carrots first, and then tossing in quicker-cooking ingredients like scallions and mushrooms at the end. When the vegetables are done, return the meat to the pot with the vegetables, and finish with your liquid sauces and seasonings. Give everything a quick toss, simmer for a few minutes and then remove from heat.

Learn the flavors. Thai cooking is immensely popular right now; similar to Chinese, but with its own exotic spices and flavorings, some of which take their cue from Indian cuisine. Malaysian, Japanese, Vietnamese and Korean fare all boast their signature recipes as well. With practice, you'll learn which spices and sauces go with what and how to identify their flavors. You can buy most of what you need at an Asian specialty store.

Always have some Asian cooking staples on hand: soy sauce, oyster sauce, hoisin sauce, fish sauce. Fresh ginger, garlic, chillies, galangal, Asian shallots, scallions, kaffir lime leaves, cilantro and lemongrass. Green or red curry paste, shrimp paste. Noodles and rice. And of course... plenty of fresh meat, fish, tofu and vegetables. Pork, chicken, beef, shrimp, prawns, scallops. Onions, carrots, broccoli, snow peas, bok choy (Chinese cabbage),

mushrooms (regular, oyster mushrooms, shitake mushrooms).

There really is no limit to what you can do with a wok, an assortment of meats, vegetables, spices and sauces. If you're the creative chef, feel free to experiment. If you're a "by the book" cook, go out and purchase a stir-fry cookbook which will explain each technique in detail as well as familiarize you with the exotic ingredients. Above all: know that stir-frying is a healthy way to prepare and enjoy the foods you love in the comfort of home.

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