

# Kung Pao Shrimp at Home

Tired of the dull, gloppy restaurant renditions of this Sichuan classic? With a few Asian pantry staples, you can make a spicy kung pao that puts most restaurant versions to shame.

BY ADAM RIED

**K**ung pao shrimp—or, as we have come to call it here in the test kitchen, kung P-O-W!!!!—can be much more fun to say than to eat. This classic Sichuan stir-fry of shrimp, peanuts, and chiles in a rich brown sauce is a Chinese restaurant standard, yet the kung pao I sampled in half a dozen well-reputed spots around Boston was hopeless. The first one was dismal, with tough, tiny little shrimp drenched in a quart of pale, greasy, bland sauce, and things just got worse from there.

This sorry collection of kung pao renditions served as a not-so-subtle hint that I'd be better off making this dish at home. Like most stir-fries, kung pao cooks quickly, so it is well suited for a weeknight meal. Moreover, I thought that by carefully examining the key cooking issues—the type and preparation of both the shrimp and the nuts along with the composition and texture of the sauce—I could come up with something much better than what I'd encountered in restaurants.

## Nuts over Shrimp

Most Chinese stir-fries go heavy on the vegetables, but kung pao dishes are different. The quantity of vegetables is limited, with the emphasis instead on the shrimp and the nuts. The restaurant versions I tried often included green pepper, and some added bamboo shoots, carrots, celery, scallions, and zucchini. I worked my way through these choices and more and settled on a modest amount of red pepper for sweetness and scallion for freshness, bite, and color. Kung pao needs nothing else from the vegetable kingdom.

Taking a step up the food chain, I looked at the shrimp next. Most restaurants use small to medium shrimp, which makes the dish seem skimpy. My tasters and I felt that larger shrimp made a more satisfying kung pao, and large shrimp were easier to peel, too. After checking out jumbo, extra-large, large, and medium, we selected extra-large (21/25 count) for their combination of succulence and generous appearance. (See “Size Matters” on page 9 to learn how shrimp are sized.)

The best way to prepare the shrimp was a matter of some debate. Traditionally, they are “velveting”—coated with egg white, cornstarch, and seasonings—and then fried in a generous quantity of oil. The idea here is to create a softly crisp coating that will help the sauce adhere. Though velveting did have its supporters, I was not



Extra-large shrimp, whole dried red chiles, peanuts, and a savory brown sauce are the hallmarks of great kung pao.

among them, for two reasons. First, the egg coating tended to cook up in unattractive clumps, which would later float about in the dish, and second, the two to three cups of oil required to deep-fry seemed both cumbersome and wasteful. Dealing with all that oil, from measuring it out to disposing of it later, edged the dish out of the realm of simple weeknight cooking. It would be much better, I felt, to quickly stir-fry the shrimp in a film of oil and to thicken the sauce slightly to help it coat the shrimp.

The nuts help define kung pao. In most of the restaurant dishes I tried, the flavor of the nuts was underdeveloped, so they acted more as a garnish than a key element. In contrast, I wanted to better integrate the nuts into the dish and to deepen their flavor. One move accomplished both goals. Whereas most recipes add the nuts near the end of the cooking time, I stir-fried them right along with the shrimp at the beginning. This way, they toasted briefly in the pan, intensifying in flavor, which they then contributed to the sauce. Most kung pao recipes rely on either peanuts or

cashews, and we appreciated the former for their savory flavor and crisp texture. By comparison, cashews seemed both sweet and a little soft.

## Stir-Fry and Sauce

Luckily for me, the test kitchen has conducted extensive investigations into stir-frying technique, so I knew that a wide, heavy skillet, preheated until the oil smokes, is a better mate with the flat American stovetop burner than a deeply curved wok. With all that heat, though, it would be easy to overcook, and therefore toughen, the shrimp and to burn the aromatic garlic and ginger that are part of the sauce. With a little care, though, both problems are easy to avoid. First, I learned not to cook shrimp all the way through at first because they will finish cooking in the sauce later; an initial stay in the pan of just under two minutes was ideal.

Second, while most stir-fry recipes add garlic and ginger near the beginning, at *Cook's* we prefer to add them near the end of cooking to prevent burning and preserve their fresh flavors.

When it came to the sauce, I pictured it deep brown, syrupy in texture, and glistening, with balanced elements of sweet, savory, salty, garlicky, and hot. I tried both chicken broth and water as a base and preferred the broth for the savory underpinning it provided. For a bit of sweetness I added sugar in amounts from 1 tablespoon down to 1 teaspoon, but even a mere teaspoon was overkill. Instead, I chose to add the classic Asian trio of hoisin sauce, oyster-flavored sauce, and sesame oil, all available (separately) in the supermarket and all good sources of color, flavor depth, and subtle sweetness. An ample supply of garlic—three cloves—gave the sauce authority, and ginger and rice vinegar added brightness. I liked Chinese black rice vinegar (called Chinkiang vinegar) even better because it was more complex—smoky, salty, plum-like, and slightly sweet—but it can be hard to come by. Cornstarch



## TASTING: Putting the POW! into Kung Pao

Without spicy chile heat, it's not kung pao. The recipes I consulted, however, offered little agreement about the best source of that heat. For the sake of convenience and simplicity, I immediately ruled out exotic chili sauces that can be had only in ethnic markets. Instead, I hit the supermarket up the street and picked up the most oft-repeated contenders, including whole dried chiles (the traditional choice), crushed red pepper flakes, fresh chiles, chili oil, and two popular and widely available Asian chili sauces, Sambal and Sriracha. Thus outfitted to heat things up, I returned to the test kitchen and conducted a side-by-side kung pao tasting.

The exact formula for Sambal, a chunky chili-garlic paste, varies from maker to maker. Ours was seasoned with salt, sugar, and rice vinegar. Smoother Sriracha is a popular Thai chili sauce, and ours was seasoned with salt, sugar, garlic, and fish extract. Both Sambal and Sriracha are common Asian table condiments, but tasters gave them thumbs-down in the kung pao because they lacked depth and tended to taste too salty. Chili oil was also passed by because the one we used, actually a chili-flavored sesame oil, was judged too mild, and it made the sauce a bit greasy. The fresh chiles—jalapeños, to be exact—provided sharp heat, but the tasters did not appreciate the distinct green, vegetal notes. Crushed red pepper flakes provided a bright, direct heat that was utterly acceptable, but the tasters' favorite by a long shot was the whole dried chiles, which infused the kung pao with a round, even spiciness that offered a deep, toasty, almost smoky dimension as well.

This finding, of course, begged the question of whether one particular type of dried chile would be best, as there are many varieties. With my sights set on relatively small chiles (large chiles simply looked wrong in the dish), I returned to the market and gathered six varieties, including an unnamed Asian specimen from the bulk bin, Japonese, Arbol, Guajillo, Costeño, and Cascabel. Tasters strained to detect distinctions between them in my kung pao. I concluded that any small whole dried red chiles will do quite nicely. —A.R.



SMALL WHOLE DRIED RED CHILES

CRUSHED RED PEPPER FLAKES

FRESH JALAPEÑO CHILES

CHILI OIL

SAMBAL SAUCE

SRIRACHA SAUCE

is the thickener of choice for Asian sauces, and 1½ teaspoons reliably gelled the sauce to a soft, glazey, shrimp-coating consistency.

Eager to see if I could streamline the recipe by omitting an ingredient (or maybe two?), I systematically retested all of the sauce components. Alas, my tasters and I agreed that each one brought a distinct flavor dimension to the party; without any one of them, the sauce suffered a bit, inching its way back toward the dreaded

restaurant kung pao I was determined to outdo.

Spicy chile heat may be kung pao's true calling card. My tasters and I unanimously chose whole dried chiles (see above), which are traditional for this dish. I altered the technique with which they are generally used, however, by stir-frying them with the shrimp and peanuts at the beginning of the cooking. This extra bit of pan time toasted the chiles, deepening their flavor noticeably.

## Size Matters



SMALL

51 to 60 per pound

MEDIUM

41 to 50 per pound

LARGE

31 to 40 per pound

EXTRA-LARGE

21 to 25 per pound

Shrimp are sold by size (small, medium, large, and so on) as well as by the number needed to make 1 pound, usually given in a range. Choosing shrimp by the numerical rating is more accurate than choosing by a size label, which varies from store to store. Here's how the two systems line up, with shrimp shown in actual sizes.

## KUNG PAO SHRIMP

SERVES 4

You can substitute plain rice vinegar for the black rice vinegar (available in Asian markets), but we prefer the latter for its fruity, salty complexity. If you prefer roasted unsalted cashews over peanuts, substitute an equal amount. Do not eat the whole chiles in the finished dish.

- 1 pound extra-large shrimp (21 to 25 count), peeled and deveined
- 1 tablespoon dry sherry or rice wine
- 2 teaspoons soy sauce
- 3 medium garlic cloves, pressed through garlic press or minced (about 1 tablespoon)
- 1 piece (½-inch) fresh ginger, peeled and minced (about 2 teaspoons)
- 3 tablespoons peanut or vegetable oil
- ½ cup roasted unsalted peanuts
- 6 small whole dried red chiles (each about 1¾ to 2 inches long), 3 chiles roughly crumbled, or 1 teaspoon dried red pepper flakes
- ¾ cup canned low-sodium chicken broth
- 2 teaspoons black rice vinegar or plain rice vinegar
- 2 teaspoons Asian sesame oil
- 1 tablespoon oyster-flavored sauce
- 1 tablespoon hoisin sauce
- 1½ teaspoons cornstarch
- 1 medium red bell pepper, cut into ½-inch dice
- 3 medium scallions, sliced thin

1. Toss shrimp with sherry and soy sauce in medium bowl; marinate until shrimp have absorbed flavors, about 10 minutes. Mix garlic, ginger, and 1 tablespoon oil in small bowl; set aside. Combine peanuts and chiles in small bowl; set aside. Mix chicken broth, vinegar, sesame oil, oyster-flavored sauce, hoisin sauce, and cornstarch in small bowl or measuring cup; set aside.

2. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in 12-inch skillet over high heat until just beginning to smoke. Add shrimp and cook, stirring about once every 10 seconds, until barely opaque, 30 to 40 seconds; add peanuts and chiles, stir into shrimp, and continue cooking until shrimp are almost completely opaque and peanuts have darkened slightly, 30 to 40 seconds longer. Transfer shrimp, peanuts, and chiles to bowl; set aside. Return skillet to burner and reheat briefly, 15 to 30 seconds. Add remaining 1 tablespoon oil, swirl to coat pan, and add red bell pepper; cook, stirring occasionally, until slightly softened, about 45 seconds. Clear center of pan, add garlic-ginger mixture, mash into pan with spoon or spatula, and cook until fragrant, 10 to 15 seconds; stir into peppers until combined. Stir broth mixture to recombine, then add to skillet along with reserved shrimp, peanuts, and chiles; cook, stirring and scraping up browned bits on bottom of pan, until sauce has thickened to syrupy consistency, about 45 seconds. Stir in scallions; transfer to serving plate and serve immediately.