

Kung Pao Tofu

By Ham El-Waylly

Updated May 31, 2024

4 Servings - Prep time 35 minutes, total time 65 minutes

Fiery from dried chiles, tingling with Sichuan peppercorns and studded with peanuts, this kung pao tofu recipe is a vegetarian take on kung pao chicken, the classic Chinese American restaurant staple. Though variations on this dish abound, this version swaps in tofu for chicken, treating the tofu similarly. Pressing the tofu removes excess moisture, leaving more room for flavor to penetrate and giving it a denser, chewy texture. The cornstarch coating helps the tofu brown, makes it crisp and acts as a sponge for the savory, spicy, tingly sauce.

Ingredients

14 Ounces extra-firm tofu

1/4 cup soy sauce
2 tablespoons brown sugar
2 tablespoons hoisin sauce
2 tablespoons rice wine or sake
1 tablespoon black vinegar (or sherry vinegar)
2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil
1/2 teaspoon freshly ground white pepper or 1/4 tsp finely ground white pepper
3 garlic cloves, finely grated
1 (1-inch) piece fresh ginger, peeled and finely grated
2 teaspoons cornstarch (for the sauce)
1/3 cup water

salt
1/4 cup cornstarch (for the tofu)
grapeseed or other neutral oil, as needed

1 red bell pepper, cut into 1/2-inch squares
2 celery stalks, cut into 1/4-inch slices
4 scallions, cut into 1-inch chunks

1 teaspoon Sichuan peppercorns (optional)
4 whole Tianjin chiles or chiles de árbol, crushed

1/3 cup roasted peanuts
1/4 cup roughly chopped cilantro leaves and tender stems

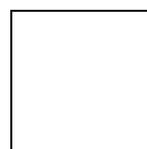
1/4 inch slices



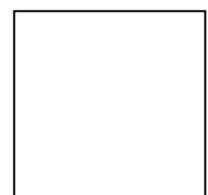
1/2 inch squares



3/4 inch cubes



1 inch slices



Directions

1. Drain the tofu, wrap in a clean kitchen towel, set on a plate and put a cast-iron skillet or other weighty object on top. Let it press for at least 10 minutes and up to 1 hour.
2. While the tofu is pressed, prepare the sauce:
In a medium bowl, whisk the soy sauce, brown sugar, hoisin, rice wine, vinegar, sesame oil, white pepper, garlic, ginger, 2 teaspoons cornstarch and 1/3 cup water until combined.
3. After the tofu has been pressed, unwrap it and cut into 3/4-inch cubes. Transfer tofu to a medium bowl, season with salt and coat in 1/4 cup cornstarch; set aside.
NOTE – I only use 1/8 cup cornstarch for 7 ounces of tofu.
4. In a large cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat, add enough neutral oil to coat the bottom of the pan. When it starts shimmering, add the tofu. Cook until one side is golden brown and crisp, about 3 minutes, then flip. Cook until the other side is crisp and golden brown, another 3 minutes. Remove with a slotted spoon and transfer to a plate.
5. Add the red bell pepper, celery and scallions. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the red bell pepper starts to soften while maintaining some bite and the vegetables char, about 4 minutes. Add the Sichuan peppercorns and chiles and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute.
6. Reduce heat to low. Add the tofu and sauce and stir to coat. Make sure the sauce simmers and thickens, about 2 minutes.
7. Finish with the peanuts and cilantro, stir again, then serve immediately with rice.

RG notes

- I only use half as much tofu, since I prefer more vegetables
- Try not to reduce the sauce TOO much at the end
- You can seed the chilies to reduce the heat. You also need to remove the chilies from the leftovers, otherwise they will get hotter.