

BOK CHOY

ALTHOUGH A MEMBER OF THE CABBAGE FAMILY, BOK CHOY RESEMBLES leafy greens, especially chard. Its crisp, ivory stalks and crinkly, dark green leaves are easy to recognize. Unlike so many leafy greens, bok choy doesn't shrink down to nothing when cooked. The stalks are crisp and fleshy—like celery but not stringy. In fact, when cooked fully, they become creamy, with an almost meat-like texture and underlying sweetness. In contrast, the leaves become tender and soft, having an earthy, robust flavor similar to chard or even spinach.

But for all bok choy's virtues, there are some issues to look at when cooking this vegetable, especially for American cooks who are not familiar with its

characteristics. If not prepared properly, bok choy can turn mushy and pallid. Our goal was to devise a cooking method that would produce perfectly cooked (and seasoned) bok choy, both the leaves and the stems. (We decided to focus on regular bok choy but also wanted to develop a recipe for baby bok choy—see page 33 for details on bok choy varieties.)

We combed through several dozen cookbooks looking for bok choy recipes. A few non-Chinese sources suggested cooking the stalks and greens together. We were skeptical since all the Chinese sources we consulted called for slicing the stalks and leaves separately so that the stalks could be cooked longer. We went ahead and tried stir-frying roughly chopped bok choy (stalks and greens together) and were disappointed. If the cooking time was brief, the greens were fine but the stalks were way too crunchy, almost like raw celery. Increasing the stir-fry time softened the stalks, but

the leaves turned limp and unappealing.

We needed to separate the white stalks and green leaves before cooking. We started by trimming and discarding the bottom inch of the bunch, which is often tough and blemished. This also separated the stalks so each one could be washed and patted dry individually. With a chef's knife, it's then easy to cut the leafy green portion away from the white stalks (see the illustrations on page 34). For eating purposes, we found it best to slice both the stalks and the leaves thinly.

With the bok choy prepped, it was time to start testing cooking methods. Most methods we uncovered in our research made some effort to deal with the fact that the stalks require a longer cooking time than the greens. We quickly dismissed blanching or steaming the stalks. Steaming was better than blanching (which washed away too much flavor), but both methods made the bok choy watery.

We had better luck stir-frying bok choy in a large nonstick skillet—the test kitchen's preferred vessel for stir-frying because of its wide, flat surface area, especially as compared with a wok. Throwing the sliced stalks into the pan first gave them the necessary head start. After five minutes of stir-frying, the stalks were crisp-tender and beginning to brown. We could then add the leaves and

sauce and continue stir-frying for another minute or so until the leaves wilted.

Some sources suggested covering the pan (or wok) once the leaves were added. Although this seemed to cook them a tad faster, it made the stir-fry a bit soupy, since the sauce couldn't evaporate and thicken. We decided it was better to just leave the cover off for the entire cooking time.

INGREDIENTS: Buying Bok Choy



BOK CHOY



BABY BOK CHOY



SHANGHAI



BABY SHANGHAI



BOK CHOY SUM

Although most supermarkets carry only one kind of bok choy—the green-leaved, white-stalked variety—in Asian markets, you might see three or four different vegetables labeled “bok choy.”

BABY BOK CHOY In addition to varietal differences, bok choy also comes in various sizes, from diminutive baby bok choy that weigh just 4 ounces to mammoth heads that weigh more than 2 pounds. Any variety of bok choy (with either white or green stems) picked at an early age can be called baby bok choy. Most heads weigh just three or four ounces and fit in your hand. Because of their small size, the stalks are fairly tender, so there's no need to cook them separately. Baby bok choy are best halved and seared. (See the recipe on page 37.)

SHANGHAI BOK CHOY has jade-colored stalks that are slightly wider than the ivory stalks on regular bok choy and that are shaped like Chinese soup spoons. Shanghai bok choy can be handled like regular bok choy.

BOK CHOY SUM has small yellow flowers sprouting

from the center of its dark green leaves. As with broccoli rabe, the flowers are edible. To keep the flowers bright, slice and cook them with the leaves and stir-fry rather than braise them.

What you are likely to see in the supermarket are medium or large heads of regular bok choy. In general, heads between 1 1/2 and 1 3/4 pounds are your best bet—one head yields four side-dish servings but the stalks are still thin enough to cook up tender. In testing, we've found that stalks on larger heads (weighing 2 pounds or more) can be spongy and woody in the center. In terms of appearance, the leaves should be bright green and crisp. Wilted or yellowing leaves are signs of age. The stalks should be bright white. If the stalks are covered with tiny brown spots, the bok choy is past its prime.

Once you get bok choy home, store it like other leafy greens—in a loosely sealed plastic bag in the refrigerator for up to two or three days. Don't wash bok choy until you are ready to cook it. In tests, we found that prewashing sped up the rotting process.

This stir-fry method has plenty of advantages. It's simple, and the seasonings can be changed endlessly. However, the stalks were still crisp-tender (increasing the stir-frying time didn't seem to help much) and not as creamy as some of the bok choy dishes we've eaten in Chinese restaurants. We liked stir-fried bok choy but wondered if there was another option.

Several recipes we consulted suggested braising bok choy, as you might do with kale or another tough green, in a covered pan with some liquid. We stir-fried the stalks to give them color (and flavor from the browning), added the greens and some broth, and let the bok choy simmer away. After 10 minutes, the stalks were soft but not mushy. Their texture was creamy and delicious. The leaves were completely tender. Best of all, the flavor of the bok choy seemed more robust and earthier.

Both stir-frying and braising have their advantages. Stir-frying results in a fairly dry dish, making bok choy a good partner on most dinner plates. Braising is not much more work than stir-frying. Braised bok choy is very moist and soft, making it an ideal partner

to lean meat, fish, or chicken. The bok choy functions as both vegetable and sauce.

Master Recipe for Stir-Fried Bok Choy with Ginger and Soy

SERVES 4

Stir-frying preserves some of the texture of the bok choy, especially the stalks.

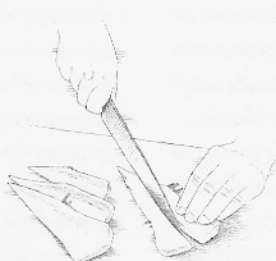
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 2 tablespoons peanut oil
- 1 medium head bok choy (1 1/2 to 1 3/4 pounds), prepared according to the illustrations below (about 5 cups each sliced stalks and sliced greens)
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh ginger

1. Combine the soy sauce and sugar in a small bowl.
2. Heat the oil in a large nonstick skillet over high heat until almost smoking. Add the bok choy stalks and cook, stirring occasionally, until lightly browned, 5 to 7 minutes. Add the ginger and cook, stirring

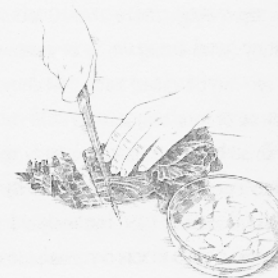
PREPARING BOK CHOY



1. Trim the bottom inch from the head of bok choy. Wash and pat dry the leaves and stalks. With a chef's knife, cut the leafy green portion away from either side of the white stalk.



2. Cut each white stalk in half lengthwise and then crosswise into thin strips.



3. Stack the leafy greens and then slice them crosswise into thin strips. Keep the sliced stalks and leaves separate.

frequently, until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add the bok choy greens and the soy sauce mixture. Cook, stirring frequently, until the greens are wilted and tender, about 1 minute. Serve immediately.

➤ VARIATIONS

Stir-Fried Bok Choy with Oyster Sauce

This variation is ideal with seafood. If serving meat or chicken, replace the oyster sauce in this recipe with an equal amount of hoisin sauce. See page 15 for more information about oyster sauce.

Follow the master recipe, replacing the soy sauce with 2 tablespoons oyster sauce and 1 tablespoon rice vinegar. Add 2 minced garlic cloves along with the ginger.

Stir-Fried Bok Choy in Sweet and Spicy Peanut Sauce

The sweet and salty flavors of the honey-roasted peanuts complement the bok choy nicely. See the illustration on page 280 for tips on grating ginger.

- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon hoisin sauce
- 1 tablespoon smooth peanut butter
- 1/2 teaspoon sugar
- 2 1/2 tablespoons peanut oil
- 1 medium head bok choy (1 1/2 to 1 3/4 pounds), prepared according to the illustrations on page 34 (about 5 cups each sliced stalks and sliced greens)
- 1 teaspoon hot red pepper flakes
- 1/2 teaspoon grated fresh ginger
- 1/3 cup honey-roasted peanuts, chopped coarse

1. Combine the soy sauce, hoisin sauce, peanut butter, and sugar in a small bowl.

2. Heat 2 tablespoons of the oil in a large nonstick skillet over high heat until almost

smoking. Add the bok choy stalks and cook, stirring occasionally, until lightly browned, 5 to 7 minutes. Clear a space in the center of the pan and add the pepper flakes, ginger, and the remaining 1/2 tablespoon oil. Cook, stirring frequently, until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add the bok choy greens and soy sauce mixture. Cook, stirring frequently, until the greens are wilted and tender, about 1 minute. Sprinkle with the peanuts and serve immediately.

Master Recipe for Braised Bok Choy with Garlic

SERVES 4

This dish is fairly saucy, making it an excellent accompaniment to seared pork chops, sautéed chicken breasts, or a firm fish like cod.

- 2 tablespoons peanut oil
- 1 medium head bok choy (1 1/2 to 1 3/4 pounds), prepared according to the illustrations on page 34 (about 5 cups each sliced stalks and sliced greens)
- 4 medium cloves garlic, minced or pressed through a garlic press
- 3/4 cup low-sodium chicken broth
- Salt and ground black pepper
- 1 teaspoon rice vinegar

1. Heat the oil in a large nonstick skillet over high heat until almost smoking. Add the bok choy stalks and cook, stirring frequently, until lightly browned, 5 to 7 minutes. Add the garlic and cook, stirring frequently, until fragrant, about 30 seconds.

2. Add the bok choy greens, broth, and salt and pepper to taste. Cover, reduce the heat to medium-low, and cook, stirring twice, until the bok choy is very tender, 8 to 10 minutes.

3. Remove the cover, raise the heat, and

cook until the excess liquid evaporates, 2 to 3 minutes. (The bok choy should be moist but not soupy.) Stir in the vinegar and adjust the seasonings, adding salt and pepper to taste. Serve immediately.

➤ VARIATIONS

Braised Bok Choy with Shiitake Mushrooms

The dried mushrooms add a meaty quality to this dish. See the illustrations at right for tips on rehydrating dried mushrooms.

Soak 6 dried shiitake mushrooms in 1 cup hot water until softened, about 15 minutes. Drain and slice the mushrooms, discarding the stems. Strain the soaking liquid through a sieve lined with a paper towel and reserve. Follow the master recipe, replacing the garlic with 1 tablespoon minced fresh ginger and replacing the broth with the mushroom liquid and sliced mushrooms.

Braised Bok Choy with Bacon and Shallots

Bok choy works well with American flavors, such as bacon and cider vinegar. For additional crunch, add toasted, chopped pecans to this dish along with the bacon.

- 3 ounces (about 3 strips) bacon, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
- 1 medium head bok choy (1 1/2 to 1 3/4 pounds), prepared according to the illustrations on page 34 (about 5 cups each sliced stalks and sliced greens)
- 2 small shallots, minced (about 1/4 cup)
- 3/4 cup low-sodium chicken broth
- 1 teaspoon cider vinegar
- Salt and ground black pepper

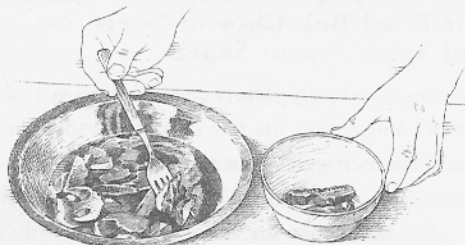
1. Cook the bacon in a large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until crisp, about 5 minutes. Using a slotted spoon,

transfer the bacon to a plate lined with paper towels and set aside.

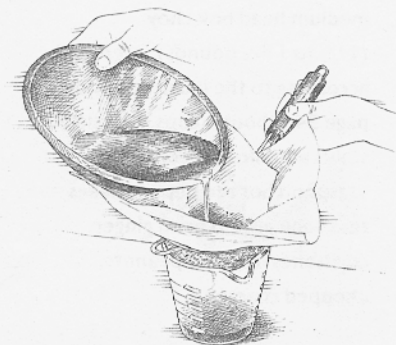
2. Add the bok choy stalks and shallots to the rendered bacon fat in the skillet (you should have about 2 to 3 tablespoons) and cook, stirring frequently, until browned, 5 to 7 minutes. Add the bok choy greens and broth. Cover, reduce the heat to medium-low, and cook until the bok choy is tender, 8 to 10 minutes.

SOAKING DRIED MUSHROOMS

Dried mushrooms must be reconstituted before being added to recipes. Soak the mushrooms in hot tap water in a small bowl until softened, 10 to 20 minutes, depending on the variety of mushroom. Here's how to make sure any sand or dirt released by the mushrooms doesn't end up in your food.



1. Most of the sand and dirt will fall to the bottom of the bowl, so use a fork to lift the rehydrated mushrooms from the liquid without stirring up the sand.



2. Never discard the flavorful soaking liquid, which can be added to soups, sauces, rice dishes, or pasta sauces. To remove the grit, pour the liquid through a small sieve lined with a single sheet of paper towel and placed over a measuring cup.

3. Remove the cover, raise the heat, and cook until the excess liquid evaporates, 2 to 3 minutes. (The bok choy should be moist but not soupy.) Stir in the vinegar and salt and pepper to taste. Sprinkle the bok choy with the reserved bacon and serve immediately.

500-03 u/km

Master Recipe for Sesame-Glazed Baby Bok Choy

SERVES 4

This recipe is best with baby bok choy weighing no more than 4 ounces. If your market sells slightly larger baby bok choy, remove a layer or two of large outer stalks so that the vegetable will cook through properly. Toast the sesame seeds in a small skillet over medium heat until fragrant and lightly browned, about 4 minutes.

- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 2 tablespoons low-sodium chicken broth
- 1 tablespoon rice vinegar
- 2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 3 tablespoons peanut oil
- 4 baby bok choy (about 4 ounces each),
each head halved lengthwise
- 3 medium cloves garlic, minced or
pressed through a garlic press
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh ginger
- 2 medium scallions, sliced thin
- 1 tablespoon sesame seeds, toasted

1. Combine the soy sauce, broth, vinegar, sesame oil, and sugar in a small bowl.

2. Heat 2 tablespoons of the peanut oil in a large nonstick skillet over high heat until almost smoking. Place the bok choy, cut-side down, in the skillet in a single layer. Cook without moving until lightly browned, about 2 minutes. Turn the bok choy and cook until

lightly browned on the second side, about 1 minute. Transfer the bok choy to a platter.

3. Add the garlic, ginger, and scallions to the empty pan and drizzle with the remaining 1 tablespoon peanut oil. Cook, stirring constantly, until fragrant, about 20 seconds. Add the soy sauce mixture and simmer until thickened, about 20 seconds.

4. Return the bok choy to the pan and cook, turning once, until glazed with the sauce, about 1 minute. Sprinkle with the sesame seeds and serve immediately.

INGREDIENTS: Sesame Oil

Toasted sesame oil, also known as dark or Asian sesame oil, is an aromatic brown oil used as a seasoning in sauces. Because of its low smoke point, it is not used for cooking. Do not substitute regular sesame oil, which is pressed from untoasted seeds and meant for salad dressings and cooking.

Japanese brands of sesame oil are commonly sold in American supermarkets and are generally quite good. Sesame oil tends to go rancid quickly, so store it in a cool cabinet or refrigerate an opened bottle if you will not use it up within a couple of months.

INGREDIENTS: Peanut Oil

You may think all peanut oils are the same. Think again. Highly refined oils, such as Planters, are basically tasteless. They are indistinguishable from safflower, corn, or vegetable oils. In contrast, unrefined peanut oils (also labeled roasted or cold-pressed peanut oil) have a rich nut fragrance straight from the bottle. When heated, these oils smell like freshly roasted peanuts.

In the test kitchen, we find that unrefined or roasted peanut oil is a real plus in simple stir-fries. Like good olive oil, good peanut oil makes many dishes taste better. Three brands that we particularly like are Loriva, Hollywood, and Spectrum.