Tool of the Trade 創意廚具

Jon Wall

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Feel the heat

熱力四射

For high-temperature stir-frying, the wok is your go-to pan

中式炒镬是烹調高溫煸炒菜式的最佳選擇

A staple of the Chinese kitchen since the time of the Han Dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE), the wok is a broad, high-sided cooking pot or pan that usually has a round bottom and is commonly used for stir-frying. As its concave shape distributes heat evenly around the inside surface and ensures that all ingredients are cooked at roughly the same temperature, it’s enjoyed increasing global popularity during the last few decades as an alternative to the Western-style frying pan.

It’s believed that the wok – the word is Cantonese – was originally used to dry grain; it was only during the Ming Dynasty (1368 to 1644 CE) that it began to be employed for cooking purposes, not only stir-frying but also deep-frying, boiling, searing and countless other processes. Soups can be made in a wok and, when a lid is used, it can even function as a steamer.

Originally the wok, which for domestic purposes is typically around 35-37cm in diameter (ones used by bigger families or in commercial kitchens can be considerably larger), would be made from cast iron. Today, however, more modern and lighter materials are often used, such as carbon steel or aluminium – though some professionals believe that cast iron is best, as it’s easier to season (ie, it develop a carbonised coating that prevents sticking).

Contemporary woks can also have cooking surfaces covered in Teflon or some other non-stick material, while for use on modern cooking ranges some also have flat bottoms.

When stir-frying with a wok, it’s best to use oils that can withstand high temperatures, such as vegetable or peanut oil, which should be heated until they begin to smoke. In this respect, one distinctive aspect of cooking with a wok is what’s known as the “wok hei” (wok’s breath), a smoky flavour that’s especially linked to stir-frying over a high open flame (above 200 degrees Celsius), with each toss of the wok causing tiny oil particles to bring a taste of fire into the wok. Also adding to the flavour are the concentrated aromas of earlier ingredients that have been caught on the wok’s seasoned surface.

By Jon Wall

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