

**To Asia,
With
Love**



To Asia, With Love

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A note on the photography

When I had the idea for *To Asia, With Love*, I imagined a book that not only conveyed nostalgia, but also captured a strong sense of home. Hence, it just felt right that I would take the photos myself.

I am not a professional photographer, but the act of taking photos was ingrained in me from a very young age. My father was an avid amateur photographer and always had cameras lying around the house. He took a lot of photos, developed film in a makeshift darkroom in our laundry and always traveled with a huge camera case. One of my favorite childhood memories is sitting in a dark room as he projected home movies onto our walls. I inherited many of his cameras, and one of my most treasured possessions is his Nikon FE, which I still use in my everyday photography.

All the food photos in this book were taken on 35 mm or medium format film, and are unfiltered and largely unedited. Film delivers a nuance, a timeless elegance and honesty that is almost impossible to replicate in digital photography. Film is evocative, it invites the viewer into the frame and it makes us *feel*.

All the photos were taken at my home in Brooklyn. The surfaces are predominantly my kitchen bench, my dining table, my side table and my coffee table. The forks, knives and spoons are all my own, and the bowls, plates, tablecloths and linen are not props, but are from my personal collection. The mess in the kitchen is also real, and the hands are those of my children, who are always in the real-time act of eating when the photo is taken—they are never waiting for me to perfect the frame. It's not always pretty, but it's my real life.



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Introduction

To Asia, With Love is my homecoming, a joyous return to all the humble yet deeply nurturing flavors and meals of my childhood. It is also a celebration of the exciting and delicious possibilities of modern Asian cooking.

The food that we grow up eating stays with us forever. My mother didn't work outside the home, but she was always busy. Her kitchen was constantly in motion—on the stove there would be tong (soup) bubbling away, jook (congee) simmering for lunch, and by the sink a tangle of greens sat in colanders, ready to be trimmed. Throughout the house there was always evidence of our next meal, or food for the future. In our laundry room there were huge jars of preserved eggs and pickling ginger, and salted pork and fish dangled under fine netting on a makeshift clothesline on the porch, alongside our washed clothes. All around the house there were crates of fruit, boxes of ma ma mian (our preferred brand of instant noodles) and no less than three freezers, brimming with pre-made dumplings, fried rice and wontons, ready to be thawed at a moment's notice for a delicious meal. As is often the case with immigrant cooks, my mother's food was unfussy and frugal. She never wasted food and even though she cooked a fresh meal for the family every night, she would often keep leftovers for her own lunch or dinner. She grew her own food in our suburban backyard—scallions, gourds, chiles, mandarins,

kumquats and greens—and managed to create stunning meals from these humble ingredients. It is with this ethos that I have created the recipes in this book, showcasing big flavors achieved from minimal ingredients, using everyday vegetables.

Today, as I navigate the happy anarchy of raising three children, I find myself going back to the simple food of my youth. I yearn to recreate the same uncomplicated, colorful, soul-enriching Cantonese food for my own family. The memory of my childhood home, with the incessant scraping of my mother's wok chuan (spatula), the omnipresent thrum of her kitchen exhaust and the clatter of chopsticks and bowls as our table was set, are sounds that I want my children to hear as well.

The flavors in this book are not strictly Chinese, but they are Asian(ish). *To Asia, With Love* offers recipes that are rooted in the East, with hints of the West. The recipes are Asian in origin, but modern in spirit; they are inspired by tradition, with a global interpretation. Many of the recipes represent my exploration of my personal culinary roots as a Chinese girl born in Australia, and as an adult living between disparate cultures. Most importantly, this book is a celebration of how flavor can so powerfully connect us to our past and create pathways to our future.



A new, green frontier for Asian(ish) food

There are many misconceptions when it comes to Asian food. Many believe that the ingredients are intimidating, that Asian flavors are hard to achieve at home, or that Asian food is “meaty.” This book will dispel all these myths and more.

While meat does feature heavily on Asian restaurant menus, Asian home cooking is much more balanced and actually leans more heavily on the side of greens. Traditionally, meat was rationed and a luxury in Asian homes. The stir-fry is a great example of “meat-rationing,” making the meal go further with the inclusion of ample greens. On these pages, my aim is to democratize Asian food, showing home cooks how to create big-flavored vegetarian (and often vegan) Asian dishes, featuring lots of vegetables and always made using the simplest of everyday ingredients.

Over the years, I’ve met many readers who have commented that they would eat Asian food every day if they knew how to make it. *To Asia, With Love* will show home cooks how easy it can be to achieve healthy, bright Asian flavors using ingredients you can find at your local supermarket. While there are a handful of ingredients that may require a trip to the Asian grocer (or a few clicks online), most of the ingredients are basic and easy to find.

The recipes in this book are accessible, familiar and comforting, but will also challenge you to think differently about the possibilities of cooking modern Asian flavors at home.

Embracing a third culture

I was culturally confused for most of my life. I didn't understand who I was, until I started to cook. In food, I found the connection to my cultural identity that I'd been searching for my entire life.

My parents immigrated to Australia from Guangdong province, a coastal region of southeast China, which borders Hong Kong and Macau. In the early 1960s, they married in Sydney and moved out to a Victorian semi-detached house in the south-western suburbs, where my siblings and I grew up, and where my mother and brother still live today. At the time, we were one of three Chinese families on the street—the other two families were my aunt, uncle and cousins who lived right next door, and my other aunt and grandmother who lived on the corner. At home, we were a typical Chinese immigrant family—my siblings and I spoke Cantonese to our parents and English to one another, and Chinese customs and traditions were observed with reverence. My mother cooked constantly, and at times it felt like food was her way of staying connected to her distant motherland. For breakfast, she served hearty savory meals—fried rice, macaroni soup and noodles, which we devoured while watching our favorite cartoons. Dinnertime was sacred in our house—every night at 5 pm, just as the closing credits of *Gilligan's Island* or *The Brady Bunch* rolled on the television, my mother would holler “sikh fan” (literally “eat rice” in Cantonese, but the phrase actually means to “eat dinner”), summoning her children to the table. We ate a traditional Chinese banquet every night—soup, followed by an array of stir-fried meats and greens, served alongside bowls of white rice.

Growing up, I was not always comfortable with my identity. Even though I was born in Australia, I didn't particularly feel Australian, or Chinese for that matter. I was always teetering somewhere in between. I spent a lot of my childhood in a holding pattern, neither here nor there. As the children of immigrants, in many ways assimilation was our burden—we were the ones tasked with learning to co-exist in two worlds, to speak two languages, to translate for our parents, to write our own sick notes for school, to be the bridge between home and the outside world.

Assimilation was not a concept completely foreign to my parents. For school, my mother packed me a very “normal” lunch—Vegemite on white bread and an apple for snack. On Mondays we were allowed to order “party pies” from the school canteen (back then it was hard to purchase loaves of bread on Mondays because the commercial bakeries were closed on weekends). On the school playground I got a taste of what it was like to be a “true blue” Aussie.

After the birth of my third child, Huck, I started cooking in earnest, and this is when everything clicked into place. The more I cooked, the more connected I felt to my mother and her cultural heritage. When I was running my salad-delivery business, my mother would join me in the kitchen to provide advice (Chinese mothers love to give unwanted advice) and we talked all day. She would also bring me traditional Chinese ingredients like black fungus, lotus root or seaweed and not-so-gently hint at what an excellent salad ingredient they would be (she was always right too!). This time was seminal for me, allowing

me to delve deeper into my mother's life beyond being my mother. I saw her humor, her tenacity and her wisdom. I saw her in me, and me in her. Cooking alongside my mother allowed me to understand the confluence of culture, how we can be a mixture of a lot of things and still exist in harmony.

While many of the recipes in this book are very traditional, others are not. Although I love to explore the foods that I grew up eating, there is a rebellious side of me that often feels a strong pull to dismantle these traditions and create new ones. You will see examples of this in the dumplings chapter of the book; while I adore traditional Chinese dumplings, at my home you're more likely to find my family eating dumplings filled with spinach and feta than water chestnuts or napa (Chinese) cabbage. The way I cook is, in many ways, third-culture cooking, a cross-pollination of ideas and techniques that are grounded in my Chinese heritage, yet greatly influenced by growing up in the Western world. It is not distinctly Chinese, nor Australian, but rather a third interpretation of the two cultures.



How to cook Asian food, any day of the week, with everyday ingredients (and a few notes on how to use this book)

Asian food offers many layers of flavor, which may taste complex, but are actually easily achieved at home on any day of the week. Asian food is everyday food. The meals I grew up eating—stir-fried greens, stews, noodles, rice—were all basic foods made with unfussy ingredients. In recent years, as I have explored the foods of my heritage and embarked on learning to cook them myself, while also adapting them to my vegetarian diet, I have discovered techniques, shortcuts and tricks that make cooking Asian food at home a lot more simple.

Load up your “Asian” pantry

I have said this many times before: your pantry is your ultimate not-so-secret weapon in creating incredible weeknight meals. If you cook often, chances are you’ll already have most of the ingredients in this book in your pantry. Most people will have staples like soy sauce, sesame oil, rice vinegar and coconut milk. I also use a lot of tahini in my Asian cooking—it’s a worthy substitute for Chinese sesame paste, which is also made of toasted sesame seeds. Always have a few varieties of noodles on hand—rice noodles, egg noodles, wheat noodles, mung bean vermicelli (just to name a few) are dried and keep indefinitely. If I’m at the supermarket or an Asian grocer, I will often buy fresh noodles that I will freeze when I get home (they don’t have to be thawed, just drop the frozen noodles straight into a pot of salted boiling water).

Explore umami

The secret to tasty food is umami. Known as the “fifth taste,” umami translates to “pleasant savory taste” or “deliciousness” in Japanese. Umami foods include soy sauce, sesame oil, fermented black beans, shiitake mushrooms, seaweed and miso—basically, the ingredients that make food delicious. I encourage you to use this book to explore the world of umami, playing with these everyday foods in your daily cooking.

Oodles of noodles

For the noodle dishes in this book, don’t get too caught up in the type of noodle specified. The noodles in my recipes are the *ideal* type but not the *only* type that can be used. Just use whatever you have on hand, and perhaps buy some different varieties next time you’re shopping. The noodle recipes in this book are an excellent reason to load up your pantry with a range of dried noodles.

Nice rice

Growing up, we only ate one type of rice—SunRice brand white long grain. As a result, I’m not overly fussy about the type of rice we eat. Use what you have. I have even made fried rice with leftover basmati rice, with pleasing results. For an everyday grain, I recommend Koshihikari rice, an extremely versatile Japanese-style short-grain rice. It retains moisture longer, has lovely separated grains and is also great for sushi or onigiri. Also, pay special attention to recipes that call for “glutinous rice” (also known as “sticky” or “sweet” rice)—this is a very different type of rice, which needs to be soaked before cooking, and will break down when cooked and become gluey.

The good oil

Generally, I use a neutral oil like vegetable, sunflower or grapeseed oil in my Asian cooking. But sometimes I also use olive oil when the occasion, or lack of alternative, demands it. I am not overly strict when it comes to the type of oil I cook with, but I'm always aware that olive oil imparts a lot more flavor, so be conscious of this when you are preparing your food. Sesame oil is essential to Asian cooking, so always have some on hand to bring that special touch to a dish.

On heat

In previous books I've taken a restrained approach to chile, but in this book I've unleashed my inner spice fanatic. I am obsessed with chile and in recent years I have taken to topping almost every meal with chile oil, hot sauce or sliced fresh chile. But don't fret if you don't love chile— just add the level of spice you're comfortable with. I use the “everything oil” on page 25 in a lot of recipes (it's not called that for nothing), but if you don't like spice I encourage you to make my everything oil without the chile, thus turning it into an “aromatic oil.” Even without the chile, the spices of ginger, garlic, star anise and cinnamon will impart a melodic liveliness to the oil.

Make it vegan

While writing this book, I realized that our diet growing up was largely dairy free. My mother, having grown up in China, where dairy wasn't a part of her daily diet, is lactose intolerant and traditionally food from Southeast Asia just doesn't include much cream, cheese or milk. Eggs, however, are a huge part of Asian cooking. We ate a lot of eggs growing up—my mother's frizzled-edged wok-fried eggs, laced with soy sauce, are still comfort food for me. One of my earliest memories was my grandmother rolling peeled, hard-boiled eggs across my forehead after I fell and hurt my head (there is an old wives' tale that boiled eggs help bruises to heal).

In this book, I encourage you to “veganize” any recipes that do include dairy or eggs. In many cases this could be as simple as substituting with homemade cashew cheese or commercial vegan cheese—there are excellent vegan products on the market now, including sour cream, yogurt, feta, mozzarella, cream cheese and more. And, of course, there are many alternatives to dairy milk—coconut, oat and macadamia are a few of my favorite nondairy varieties.





The everyday Asian pantry

Honestly, there is not a lot of difference between your “everyday” pantry and your “Asian” pantry. We are so lucky to live in an age when the “international” aisles of our local supermarkets are so well stocked with ingredients, allowing us to easily create multicultural meals at home. Here are my essential Asian(ish) pantry items.

Black fungus

Also known as cloud ear or wood ear mushrooms, I prefer the simple name of black fungus. Like shiitake mushrooms, Chinese black fungus generally comes dried, so it must be rehydrated in hot water before use. You may be able to find it fresh but it’s quite rare. Black fungus is a great absorber of flavor. In traditional Chinese cooking, it is most often used in stir-fries and braises, but I love its crinkly, crisp texture in salads. Black fungus is usually available from the international aisle of your supermarket, otherwise you’ll find it at Asian grocers and online. It can be stored in an airtight container in a cool place for six months or longer.

Curry powder

There are many varieties of curry powder on the market, made with a different mix of spices. In Asian cooking, I prefer to use Malaysian curry powder, which is a blend of coriander seeds, cumin, fennel, cinnamon, cloves, black peppercorns and dried red chiles. I don’t make my own curry powder at home—I usually use the store-bought Ayam brand, which is the one my mother uses, but any kind of mild curry powder will work.

Dried shiitake mushrooms

These are an essential pantry staple, a foundation ingredient in Chinese cooking. Dried shiitakes are potent in umami flavor, and the smell of them soaking in hot water and/or cooking takes me straight back to my childhood. They can be used in stews, braises, broths, dumplings and more. My mother would chop off the stems and add them to jook as a special treat for me—once cooked, they became thick and chewy and they were my favorite. To rehydrate, simply soak in hot water for 20–30 minutes, though you can leave them for longer to get them really plump if you have the time. And remember, don’t throw that rehydrating water away—keep it for stock or for flavoring the finished dish (just make sure you strain it to remove any sediment). Dried shiitake mushrooms can be easily found at most supermarkets nowadays—store them in an airtight container in a cool place for six months or longer.

Fermented black beans

Fermented black beans (dou chi) will require a trip to the Asian grocer (or a few clicks online), but they are totally worth the effort. They add such incredible flavor to stir-fries and salad dressings. For vegans especially, fermented black beans are life-changing, delivering an intense, delicious flavor (make sure you try my black bean Caesar dressing on page 185). Fermented black beans are made from dried and salted soybeans and are sold in bags at Asian grocers. At home, store

them in an airtight jar in your pantry and they will last for months. When cooking, make sure you rinse them first to reduce some of the strong saltiness. I have a recipe for homemade black bean sauce in this book (see page 143), which I highly recommend you make. Of course, if you can't locate fermented black beans, commercial black bean sauce is a worthy substitute (though it does have a lot more additives).

Gochugaru

Gochugaru is ground Korean chile, with a texture that is part flake, part powder. It imparts a gentle heat, with a hint of sweetness, smokiness and fruitiness. It is used in kimchi but also in soups, stews and chile oil. You may need to visit an Asian grocer (or look online) to find gochugaru and if you do, buy a big bag, as it keeps well in an airtight container. If you can't find it, you can substitute with regular chile flakes or cayenne pepper, but you'll need to reduce the quantities greatly, because gochugaru is nowhere near as spicy.

Gochujang paste

Synonymous with Korean food, gochujang is a vibrant red spicy paste that is also salty and a little sweet. Made with chile, glutinous rice, fermented soybeans and salt, it has a thick, sticky texture, and is commonly used in marinades and sauces, and to add flavor to rice, soups and broths. I love using gochujang (diluted with olive oil or yogurt) as a spice rub for vegetables, or as a condiment with roasted vegetables, fried eggs and rice.

Kecap manis

Kecap manis is a sweet, syrupy, caramelized soy sauce from Indonesia. It is particularly great for creating intense flavors and adding sweetness. In Australia, it is relatively easy to find in the international aisle at major supermarkets. In other parts of the world, kecap manis can be harder to locate in everyday supermarkets, so you may need to visit an Asian grocer or buy online. If you see a product called "sweet soy sauce" (Kikkoman makes one, but there are other brands too), this is very similar to kecap manis and can be used as a substitute. If you can't find kecap manis, make your own by combining 1 tablespoon of dark soy sauce with 1 tablespoon of soft dark brown sugar, honey or maple syrup.

Kimchi

Kimchi is a Korean staple of salted and fermented vegetables—usually napa (Chinese) cabbage or radish—seasoned with gochugaru, ginger and scallion. Kimchi is also an important part of daily banchan (side dishes), which are served with every Korean meal. While I often make my own (see my recipe for a quick kimchi on page 38), there are also many great store-bought varieties. If you are vegetarian, make sure you opt for a vegan kimchi as many commercial brands contain fish sauce. Kimchi is such a versatile item to have in your fridge—I use it in fried rice, tacos, sandwiches, noodles, in practically everything. And it is also good for you—kimchi is fermented, so it contains "healthy bacteria" called lactobacillus, which aids digestion.



Kimchi

Maggi Seasoning Sauce

Maggi is my magic elixir, the sauce from my childhood that makes everything taste better. As a child, we only really got to have Maggi with our jook, but now, as an adult, I shamelessly leave it out on my dining table—a small splash on eggs, jook, soup or noodles brings the magic. Maggi is more than soy sauce—it has more umami and it's more delicious. Though ubiquitous in Asia, Maggi originally comes from Switzerland and is eaten in many countries around the world—from Africa to the Middle East and Mexico. In fact, there are many variations, and in some countries they are spicy or more garlicky. Maggi is available at most supermarkets. Just make sure you don't substitute Maggi for soy sauce as it is not the same thing; use it sparingly—just a few drops on your finished dish goes a long way.

Mirin

This sweet rice wine is a staple in Japanese cooking, used to make marinades, teriyaki sauce or to finish Japanese soups, including miso soup. For me, it is also essential for Asian-inspired salad dressings. Mirin is similar to sake but has less alcohol and a higher sugar content—the sugar occurs naturally during the fermentation process so it does not contain any added sugar. Mirin is often referred to as “sweetened sake.” If you can't find mirin at your market, you can make a good substitute by adding ½ teaspoon of sugar to every 1 tablespoon of dry white wine or rice vinegar.

Miso

Miso is an essential source of salty, earthy and funky flavor. Made of fermented soybeans and koji (a mold that's also used to make sake), there are many varieties of miso that differ depending on how long they have been left to ferment—the longer the fermentation, the darker and more complex in flavor miso becomes. In regular supermarkets you will usually find two different varieties: white (shiro) miso is mellow in flavor and is usually the type I choose, while red (aka) miso has a much more intense taste. Sometimes you may find yellow (shinshu) miso, which is somewhere in the middle in terms of flavor and color. There are also varieties of miso made with chickpeas, barley and brown rice.

Rice vinegar

Rice vinegar (sometimes labelled rice wine vinegar) is an essential ingredient in Asian salad dressings. It is less acidic than white vinegar and has a mild, delicate flavor with just a hint of sweetness. Seasoned rice vinegar has small amounts of sugar and salt added, perfect for sushi rice or salad dressings.

Seaweed

Allow me to wax lyrical about seaweed for a moment. Seaweed is one of the world's most sustainable and nutritious foods. I have long believed seaweed to be the future of food because of how few resources it needs to grow—it is a zero-input food, meaning it does not require fresh water, fertilizer, feed or arable land to thrive. It readily absorbs dissolved nitrogen, phosphorus and carbon dioxide directly from the sea and reproduces at a phenomenal rate—it can grow as much as an inch (2.5 centimeters) a day. It also contains more calcium than milk, more vitamin C than orange juice, and more protein than soybeans. In fact, fish do not naturally produce omega-3 fatty acids; they obtain these nutrients by eating seaweed. I love seaweed, but I do acknowledge it can still be difficult to find or expensive to purchase. Because of this, I have minimized the number of seaweed-centric recipes in this book, but I do encourage you to include more seaweed in your life. There are many types of dried seaweed—wakame and kombu are both great for salads and also for making Japanese dashi stock. Seaweed is also rich in umami. In fact, in 1908, chemistry professor Kikunae Ikeda at the Tokyo Imperial University identified the glutamic acid in kombu seaweed as umami, the fifth taste. I often add seaweed to soups or homemade stocks to amp up the flavor. If you can't find dried seaweed at your local supermarket, stock up on your next trip to the Asian grocer or buy it online.

Sesame oil

For me, a drop of sesame oil makes just about every dish better, imparting an umami-rich deliciousness. There are two types of sesame oil: regular, untoasted sesame oil is made from raw seeds and is generally considered better for cooking; toasted sesame oil has a richer, more intense flavor and is often used in the final stages of cooking or when serving. To make my life easier, and to maximize pantry space, I only ever use toasted sesame oil. Some say it becomes bitter when cooked over high heat, but I've never noticed this myself. Popular opinion says that a little bit of toasted sesame oil goes a long way, but I don't mind using a brave splash for a more assertive flavor.

Sesame seeds

Sesame seeds add an earthy nuttiness to dishes. White seeds have a more delicate flavor, while black sesame seeds have a stronger aroma, which works really well in desserts. The seeds are available either toasted or untoasted. Being a lazy-ish cook, I usually buy the toasted variety to save on one step of the cooking process. To toast raw seeds, pour them into a large frying pan and place over low heat; move the seeds around constantly using a pair of wooden chopsticks or a wooden spoon until they are golden. Allow to cool, then pour them into a jar for storage.

Shaoxing rice wine

Shaoxing rice wine (also spelled shaohsing) is fermented from glutinous rice and does contain some wheat, so it is not gluten free. Shaoxing rice wine is an important ingredient in traditional Chinese cooking.

My mum always had a bottle by her wok for stir-fries, deglazing or for braising meats and fish. I love to use shaoxing rice wine to add a rich, aromatic quality to marinades or sauces. If you don't have any, substitute with dry sherry or simply omit.

Soy sauce, tamari, liquid aminos and coconut aminos

It may surprise some, but I am very undisciplined when it comes to soy sauce and I don't particularly have a favorite brand. I use soy sauce, tamari, liquid aminos and coconut aminos interchangeably. I've always had a variety of "soy sauces" in my pantry, but nowadays I tend to stick with tamari, liquid aminos and coconut aminos, which are all gluten free. Traditional soy sauce contains wheat, and is slightly more salty and darker in color, but essentially all these sauces taste the same.

In the past, Asian cuisine was difficult for sufferers of celiac disease or those with wheat intolerances because of the pervasive use of soy sauce, but when cooking at home it is now very easy to substitute with these gluten-free alternatives. Dark soy sauce is not essential, but it does come in handy when you are looking for a deeper color or or a less salty, more sweet addition to your meals. In Chinese, dark soy sauce is called *lǎo chōu*, meaning aged, which perfectly sums up the richer, slightly thicker quality of this variety.

Sriracha and other chile sauces

A trip to the Asian grocer will reveal hundreds of chile sauces, with each country or region in Asia offering their own unique variety. Growing up, my mother always had Koon Yick brand chile sauce in the fridge—it is not the spiciest sauce, but it provides a nice, bright heat to most dishes (this is the kind you often find at Cantonese restaurants or at dim sum). I also like Sriracha, a chile sauce with a healthy kick of garlic.

Tahini

Some may be surprised by how extensively tahini is featured in this book—I use it as a substitute for Chinese sesame paste (*ji ma jiang*), a thick paste made from roasted sesame seeds. The texture is much thicker than tahini, closer to the feel of peanut butter, but since it's hard to find in regular supermarkets, I am happy enough with the results I get from using tahini instead. Of course, if you are at the Asian grocer, pick up a jar of sesame paste to experiment with the slightly heavier consistency. I always opt for hulled tahini (made from seeds that have the exterior coating removed), as it is smoother and less bitter.

Tamarind

Made from the pulp from tamarind tree pods, tamarind is most often used in stir-fries or noodle dishes to give that kick of pleasant sourness. Tart yet sweet, it is often the secret ingredient in pad thai noodles. For ease, I prefer to use tamarind purée, which is tamarind paste that has already been diluted. Tamarind can also be purchased in a block, which is more like pulp. This needs to be diluted in warm water.



All about chile oil

I have loved spicy food ever since I was a child. When I go to a Chinese restaurant, I ask for the chile sauce even before I sit down. Adding a hot sauce or oil to my Asian food has become my ritual. Here are two of my favorite chile oils—everything oil (my homemade version of Sichuan chile oil) and rayu (a Japanese-style spicy sesame oil). If you only have one chile oil for the rest of your life, it must be everything oil. As the name suggests, I add it to everything, and I hope you will too.

I know many home cooks don't love chile as much as I do. Of course that is fine, but I encourage you to add a tiny bit of heat to suit your preferred level of spice. It's all about finding the balance that works for you.

Everything oil

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS (500 ML)

This is my version of Sichuan chile oil (sometimes called mala hot sauce), which I have called “everything oil” because, well, it makes everything taste better. Like my ginger–scallion oil (see page 28), it can be used as a salad dressing, a stir-fry sauce, a dumpling dip or simply as a topping. Such is my passion for this oil, you will see it as an ingredient in many recipes in this book because it hits all the right notes—heat, spice, salt, umami—without needing to reach for too many ingredients. The Sichuan peppercorns leave a slight numbing and tingly feeling in your mouth. If you don't care for this sensation, or can't get hold of Sichuan peppercorns or gochugaru, then just use red chile flakes instead (you may need to reduce the quantity, though, as chile flakes are spicier).

This oil definitely gets better with time. The longer it sits, the more flavorful and aromatic it becomes.

A note for those who don't love spice: make this oil without the chile flakes, or use a dramatically reduced amount. The oil will still be aromatic from the ginger, garlic, star anise and cinnamon, and a worthy addition to *everything* you eat.

2 tablespoons red chile flakes
 2 tablespoons Sichuan peppercorns
 2 tablespoons gochugaru (Korean red chile flakes)
 1 tablespoon sea salt
 1 cup (250 ml) vegetable or other neutral oil
 2-inch (5 cm) piece of ginger, peeled and finely chopped
 4 garlic cloves, finely chopped
 2 star anise
 1 cinnamon stick

In a heatproof bowl, add the chile flakes, Sichuan peppercorns, gochugaru and sea salt.

Place the oil, ginger, garlic, star anise and cinnamon in a small saucepan over medium–high heat for 3–4 minutes—the oil is ready when it looks thin, like water. Remove from the heat and very carefully pour the hot

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