

Vegetarian Mapo Tofu

SERVES Serves 4 to 6

TIME 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ hours

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS

Our version of vegetarian mapo tofu is bold in flavor, with a balanced spiciness. We started with cubed soft tofu, poached gently in salted water to help the cubes stay intact in the braise. For the sauce base, we used plenty of ginger and garlic along with four Sichuan pantry powerhouses: Asian broad bean chili paste (doubanjiang), fermented black beans, Sichuan chili powder, and Sichuan peppercorns. A small amount of finely chopped mushrooms acted as a seasoning, not as a primary component of the dish. In place of the chili oil often called for, we used a generous amount of vegetable oil, extra Sichuan chili powder, and toasted sesame oil. We finished the dish with just the right amount of cornstarch to create a velvety texture.

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INGREDIENTS

- 2** cups water
- Salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$ ounce dried shiitake mushrooms
- 1 tablespoon Sichuan peppercorns
- 12 scallions
- 28 ounces soft tofu, cut into 1/2-inch cubes
- 9 garlic cloves, peeled

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

***** Asian broad bean chili paste (or sauce) is also known as doubanjiang or tobak djan; our favorite, Pixian, is available online. Lee Kum Kee Chili Bean Sauce is a good supermarket option. If you can't find Sichuan chili powder, an equal amount of Korean red pepper flakes (gochugaru) is a good substitute. In a pinch, use 2 1/2 teaspoons of ancho chile powder and 1/2 teaspoon of cayenne pepper. If you can't find fermented black beans, you can use an equal amount of fermented black bean paste or sauce or 2 additional teaspoons of Asian broad bean chili paste. You may need to order

- 1 (3-inch) piece ginger, peeled and cut into 1/4-inch rounds
- 1/3 cup broad bean chili paste
- 1 tablespoon fermented black beans
- 1/2 cup vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon Sichuan chili powder
- 4 ounces fresh shiitake mushrooms, stemmed, or oyster mushrooms, trimmed
- 2 tablespoons hoisin sauce
- 2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch

Sichuan peppercorns online, but they are also sold at some Chinese markets. Serve with steamed white rice.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1** Microwave water, 1/2 teaspoon salt, and dried mushrooms in covered large bowl until steaming, about 1 minute. Let sit until softened, about 5 minutes. Drain mushrooms in fine-mesh strainer, reserving liquid; set aside soaked mushrooms and return liquid to large bowl.
- 2** Place peppercorns in small bowl and microwave until fragrant, 15 to 30 seconds. Let cool completely. Once cool, grind in spice grinder or mortar and pestle (you should have 1 1/2 teaspoons).
- 3** Using side of chef's knife, lightly crush white parts of scallions, then cut scallions into 1-inch pieces. Place tofu and scallions in bowl with reserved mushroom liquid and microwave until steaming, 5 to 7 minutes. Let stand while preparing remaining ingredients.
- 4** Process garlic, ginger, chili paste, and black beans in food processor until coarse paste forms, 1 to 2 minutes, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Add 1/4 cup vegetable oil, chili powder, and 1 teaspoon peppercorns and continue to process until smooth paste forms, 1 to 2 minutes longer. Transfer spice paste to bowl.

5 Place reserved soaked mushrooms and fresh shiitake mushrooms in now-empty processor and pulse until finely chopped, 15 to 20 pulses (do not overprocess). Heat 2 tablespoons vegetable oil and mushroom mixture in large saucepan over medium heat, breaking up mushrooms with wooden spoon, until mushrooms begin to brown and stick to bottom of saucepan, 5 to 7 minutes. Transfer mushroom mixture to bowl.

6 Add remaining 2 tablespoons vegetable oil and spice paste to now-empty saucepan and cook, stirring frequently, until paste darkens and oil begins to separate from paste, 2 to 3 minutes. Gently pour tofu with mushroom liquid into saucepan, followed by hoisin, sesame oil, and mushroom mixture. Cook, gently stirring frequently, until dish comes to simmer, 2 to 3 minutes. Whisk soy sauce and cornstarch together in small bowl. Add cornstarch mixture to saucepan and continue to cook, stirring frequently, until thickened, 2 to 3 minutes longer. Transfer to serving dish, sprinkle with remaining peppercorns, and serve. (Mapo tofu can be refrigerated for up to 24 hours.)

Skillet-Charred Green Beans

SERVES Serves 4

TIME 35 minutes

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS

Deep-frying green beans evenly softens and blisters them, leaving them with a soft, appealingly dense, satisfying chew and concentrated flavor. To achieve those results without the hassle of frying, we first softened the beans by steaming them in the microwave. Then we charred them in a skillet with just a couple tablespoons of hot oil. We didn't stir the beans for the first few minutes so that they developed deep color and flavor on one side; then we tossed them in the pan so that they blistered all over. Once they were charred, we seasoned them with a lemony salt-and-pepper mixture.

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INGREDIENTS

- ½ teaspoon** grated lemon zest plus 1 **teaspoon** juice
- ½ teaspoon** kosher salt
- ¼ teaspoon** pepper
- 1 pound** green beans, trimmed
- 2 tablespoons** vegetable oil

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- *** Microwave thinner, more tender beans for 6 to 8 minutes and thicker, tougher beans for 10 to 12 minutes. To make the beans without a microwave, bring $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of water to a boil in a skillet over high heat. Add the beans, cover, and cook for 5 minutes. Transfer the beans to a paper towel-lined plate to drain and wash the skillet before proceeding with the recipe.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1** Combine lemon zest, salt, and pepper in small bowl. Set aside.

2 Rinse green beans but do not dry. Place in medium bowl, cover, and microwave until fully tender, 6 to 12 minutes, stirring every 3 minutes. Using tongs, transfer green beans to paper towel-lined plate and let drain.

3 Heat oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over high heat until just smoking. Add green beans in single layer. Cook, without stirring, until green beans begin to blister and char, 4 to 5 minutes. Toss green beans and continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until green beans are softened and charred, 4 to 5 minutes longer. Using tongs, transfer green beans to serving bowl, leaving any excess oil in skillet. Sprinkle with lemon-salt mixture and lemon juice and toss to coat. Serve.