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Stir-Fries for Crisp Autumn Days

By MARTHA ROSE SHULMAN

I love stir-frying with the seasons. Right now I'm phasing out summer's tomatoes and corn, green beans and zucchini and picking up Chinese broccoli, mushrooms, cabbage and carrots at the farmers' market. I'm still finding an array of peppers and beautiful Asian eggplants to brighten my wok. Stir-fries can be adapted to any number of ingredients that may be lingering in your refrigerator, or in your freezer, like the frozen peas that liven up a fish and mushroom stir-fry that is one of this week's recipes.

I like to make a meal of a stir-fry, so I try to include a protein – chicken, fish, shellfish or, for vegetarian stir-fries, tofu or eggs. With meat or without it, the vegetables are the focus of these dishes. Twelve to 14 ounces of chicken breast (two of the organic free-range boneless skinless breasts that I use) is plenty to flavor and add substance to a stir-fry that will feed three people. I learned the velveting technique that these recipes call for from Grace Young; you marinate the cut-up chicken breast in egg white and cornstarch seasoned with a little rice wine or sherry and salt, and blanch it before stir-frying. This is a step worth taking and results in very succulent, tender chicken. I use the same water I've blanched vegetables in to blanch the chicken.

As always, remember when you look at a long list of ingredients required for a stir-fry that all of the time here goes into assembling the ingredients. It takes maybe 20 minutes. The stir-frying itself takes only about 5 minutes. Prepare whatever grains or noodles you're going to serve the stir-fry with in advance, and be ready to eat when you're ready to cook.

Stir-Fried Chinese Broccoli and Chicken With Hoisin

The extra step to "velvet" the chicken is worth it for such tender, succulent chicken. I always look for sustainably raised chicken.

12 ounces boneless, skinless chicken breast, cut across the grain in 1/4-inch-thick slices

1 tablespoon egg white, lightly beaten

2 teaspoons cornstarch

1 1/2 teaspoons plus 1 tablespoon rice wine or dry sherry

Salt to taste

2 tablespoons hoisin sauce

1 teaspoon low-sodium soy sauce

2 tablespoons peanut oil, rice bran oil or canola oil

1 bunch Chinese broccoli (about 1 pound), ends trimmed

1 tablespoon minced ginger

2 fat garlic cloves, minced

1/2 teaspoon red pepper flakes

8 shiitake mushrooms, stems removed, sliced thin

Rice, whole grains or noodles for serving

1. In a large bowl, stir together the egg white, cornstarch, 1 1/2 teaspoons of the rice wine or sherry, salt to taste and 1 1/2 teaspoons water. When you can no longer see any cornstarch, add the chicken and stir together until coated. Cover the bowl and place in the refrigerator for 30 minutes.

2. Bring 2 quarts of water to a rolling boil in a large saucepan and add the Chinese broccoli. Boil 2 minutes, until it is just crisp-tender, and transfer it to a bowl of cold water. Do not drain the water from the pot. Drain the broccoli and dry on paper towels. Cut into 2-inch lengths.

3. Combine the remaining rice wine, the hoisin sauce and the soy sauce in a small bowl and set near your wok.

4. Bring the water in the pot back to a boil, add 1 tablespoon of the oil and turn the heat down so that the water is at a bare simmer. Carefully add the chicken to the water, stirring so that the pieces don't clump. Cook until the chicken turns opaque on the surface but is not cooked through, about 1 minute. Drain in a colander.

5. Heat a 14-inch flat-bottomed wok or 12-inch steel skillet over high heat until a drop of water evaporates within a second or two when added to the pan. Swirl in the remaining oil by adding it to the sides of the pan and swirling the pan, then add the garlic, ginger and red pepper flakes and stir-fry for no more than 10 seconds. Add the mushrooms, chicken, broccoli, hoisin sauce mixture and salt to taste. Stir-fry for 1 to 2 minutes, until the chicken is cooked through, and serve with grains or noodles.

Yield: 3 main-dish servings.

Advance preparation: You can blanch the Chinese broccoli and marinate the chicken several hours ahead, but the stir-frying should happen at the last minute.

Nutritional information per serving: 316 calories; 13 grams fat; 2 grams saturated fat; 3 grams polyunsaturated fat; 5 grams monounsaturated fat; 73 milligrams cholesterol; 20 grams carbohydrates; 5 grams dietary fiber; 293 milligrams sodium (does not include salt to taste); 30 grams protein

Martha Rose Shulman is the author of "The Very Best of Recipes for Health."

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