

Flavors of the World: MSG

Presented 8/21/2018 by Jon Mark Bolthouse

Chineasy Cucumber Salad

Adapted from *101 Easy Asian Recipes* by Peter Meehan & the Editors of *Lucky Peach*

Makes about 2 servings but is easily multiplied

This summer salad combines flavors from Xi'an cooking, a region in North Central China known for its spicy cuisine. As the Lucky Peach editors say, "Do not skip the peanuts; like the rug in *The Big Lebowski*, they really tie the room together."

The two key ingredients in the salad are the Chinkiang vinegar and the Spicy Chili Crisp. Chinkiang vinegar is sharp, deep and a little sweet; often called black vinegar. Laognma brand Spicy Chili Crisp is a MSG-laden flavor punch that 1, defies definition and 2, seems to make any Asian dish better. I've used it in all my Chinese dishes, several Korean beef recipes, Malaysian Sambals and as my "secret ingredient" in my fresh Thai spring roll peanut sauce. Don't be discouraged by the sourpuss lady on the label. She's Tao Huabi, the creator of the sauce and the company that sells it. Her net worth is in the hundreds of millions.



Ingredients

- 1 Tablespoon Chinkiang vinegar (found in most Asian grocery stores)
- ½ teaspoon Sichuan chili oil
- 1 teaspoon sesame oil
- 1 Tablespoon Spicy Chili Crisp Sauce (specifically Laognma Brand)
- 1 teaspoon turbinado sugar
- ¼ teaspoon kosher salt
- 3 Persian or Kirby cucumbers or 1 English cucumber
- 1 teaspoon toasted sesame seeds
- 2 Tablespoons crushed roasted unsalted peanuts
- 2 Tablespoons cilantro leaves

Directions

1. Whisk together the vinegar, chili oil, sesame oil, Chili Crisp sauce, sugar and salt in a medium-sized bowl until sugar dissolves. Set aside.
2. Halve the cucumbers lengthwise. If using English cucumbers, remove the seeds and discard. Set the cucumbers cut-side down on a cutting board and lightly smash them with the side of a cleaver or large chef's knife until the cucumbers crack in a few places. Cut the cucumbers crosswise into ¾-inch-thick half-moons.
3. Toss the cucumbers in the dressing, portion them out onto plates and top each service with sesame seeds, peanuts and cilantro.

Japanese Macaroni Salad

Adapted from *Japanese Soul Cooking* by Tadashi Ono & Harris Salat
Serves 4

Japanese macaroni salad comes from a style of Japanese cooking called Yoshoku, which means “Western-style cooking.”

After Japan opened its doors to foreigners during the Meiji Restoration, the ingredients and recipes brought from other countries started to influence Japanese cuisine. Over time, Western dishes have been adapted and transformed, eventually evolving into a singular Japanese culinary style. Dishes made in the Yoshoku style include Ebi (shrimp) Gratin, Omu Rice (Rice Omelet), Yoshoku Steak, Hamburg (Salisbury steak) and potato and macaroni salads.



In 1883 a French missionary built the first macaroni factory in Japan.

Over time, potato and macaroni salads have become as ubiquitous as sushi and tempura throughout Japan. While the recipe below is fairly straightforward, it’s the mayonnaise that makes it Japanese, and Kewpie mayonnaise is the key. Made with less oil, a blend of apple and malt vinegars, along with a nice shot of MSG, the taste of Kewpie mayonnaise is unique. In Wisconsin, the only place I know that carries it is Yue-Wah Oriental Foods, 2328 Park St., Madison. Otherwise, it can be ordered online.

Ingredients

- 4 ounces elbow macaroni
- 3 ounces cucumber, thinly sliced (if using Japanese or Persian cucumbers, leave skin on; otherwise, peel and remove seeds)
- ½ medium carrot (about 2 ounces), peeled and julienned
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ cup water
- 3 ounces sliced ham, cut into small strips
- ½ cup sweet corn kernels
- ¼ Spanish onion, sliced very thin
- 2 hardboiled eggs, coarsely chopped
- 1 teaspoon rice vinegar
- ¼ cup Kewpie-brand mayonnaise
- Ground pepper to taste

Directions

1. Cook the macaroni according to package instructions. Strain and cool the noodles under cold, running water. Set aside
2. Add the cucumber, carrot and ½ teaspoon of the salt to a medium bowl. Using your hands to mix the ingredients, make sure they’re coated well with the salt. Rest for 5-10 minutes.
3. Add the water to the vegetables and swirl the ingredients to remove the salt. Squeeze the cured vegetables tightly with your hands to expel the liquid.
4. Add the vegetables, macaroni, ham, corn, onion and eggs to a large bowl and mix together well. Add the vinegar and mix to combine. Add the mayonnaise, pepper and the remaining ½ teaspoon salt. Mix together well and serve.

Miso Soup for Busy People

Adapted from *Washoku: Recipes from the Japanese Home Kitchen* by Elizabeth Andoh

Makes about 4 servings

Miso soup is incredibly easy to make from scratch. However, unlike nearly all Western soup stocks, the base stock of Japanese soups – dashi – must be made the same day, preferably as close to mealtime as possible. The Japanese have got around this limitation by creating hon dashi, an instant soup stock that mimics the real stuff like no bouillon cube I've ever tasted.

It's essential for both dashi recipes that you do not boil the stock in any way. Care must be taken to stop the heating of the water before it reaches the boiling point.

I've detailed the super easy, super-fast way to make dashi below, but also included Elizabeth Andoh's method for making dashi from scratch. Andoh is the undisputed English-speaking master of the Japanese kitchen. Any one of her books is a wealth of traditional, modern and regional Japanese cookery. *Washoku* happens to be my favorite of the many I own.



Super-fast Dashi

Ingredients

4 teaspoons Hondashi (instant dashi powder)

4 cups cold water

Directions

1. Slowly bring the water to a boil in a medium-sized pot. When the water is just bubbling (but not a rolling boil), remove from heat and slowly add the Hondashi, stirring as you add.

Not-so-fast Dashi

Ingredients

15-20 square inches kombu (dried kelp)

1 package (5 g) katsuobushi (dried, smoked skipjack tuna (bonito) shaved into fine flakes)

4¼ cups water

2-3 dried shiitake mushrooms (optional)

Directions

1. Pour the water into a medium sized pot. Add the kombu and the mushrooms (if used) to the water and let soak for 15-20 minutes.
2. Place the pot over medium heat. As soon as small bubble break the surface, remove from heat and slowly add the katsuobushi to the pot. Do not stir. When all the tiny flakes settle near the bottom of the pot (3-4 minutes, maximum), strain the stock using a very fine mesh strainer or coffee filter. Set aside.

Variations:

The above dashi recipes are known as *awasedashi*, and are pretty much the standard way dashi is made throughout Japan. However, one can substitute and mix ingredients to create a variety of dashi tastes. Substituting varieties of kombu is the most popular. There are multiple varieties of kombu, though 90 percent of all kombu is grown off the shores of Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island. All varieties of kombu are rich in natural glutamates, which can be observed as a white powder on the dried leaves.

- **Ma kombu** comes from the Southern end of Hokkaido. It produces a rich, clear and refined stock.
- **Rishiri kombu** comes from extreme north of Hokkaido. It's more savory than dashi (or ma) kombu and is often used in food arrangements due to its strikingly dark color. It is very popular as an ingredient in the traditional kaiseki dishes of Kyoto.
- **Hidaka kombu** comes from the southern (Pacific) side of Hokkaido. It is characteristically soft and cooks quickly. It's used primarily in dashi stock and other *nimono* (simmered) dishes.
- **Rausu kombu** comes from the northern part of Hokkaido. It produces a fragrant, soft, rich and characteristically colored kombu stock.

The katsuo bushi flakes can be substituted for a number of items:

- **Niboshi** (small dried sardines) are substituted to make *irokodashi* (Shikoku's style of dashi)
- **Dried shiitake mushrooms** can be used instead of katsuo bushi to create a vegetarian dashi (kombu-Jiru)

Miso Soup

Ingredients

4 cups Dashi

3 Tablespoons red (*aka*) or 3½ Tablespoons white (*shiro*) miso paste

1 block silken tofu, cut into very small cubes

2-3 scallions, chopped thinly, both white and green part of scallion

Enoki mushrooms (optional)

Directions

1. If needed, reheat the dashi, but take care not to boil.
2. In a small dish, combine part of the miso with a spoonful or two of the hot dashi, creating a slurry. Add slurry to the pot. Repeat until all the miso is combined with the dashi.
3. Add the tofu, scallions and optional mushrooms to the soup, and heat for a few minutes.
4. Serve in individual bowls making sure each bowl has appropriate amount of tofu, scallions and mushrooms. Don't worry: you'll know.