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Squid and Chinese celery salad

Serves 6 as part of a shared meal

Chinese celery has a much stronger taste than regular celery, but if you can't find it, substitute the normal stuff by all means. The flavours here are very typical of a simple eastern Chinese cold dish, although we've taken a few liberties with the presentation — it's decidedly Western!

800 g (1 lb 12 oz) fresh squid
3 Chinese celery stalks, cut into thin strips,
plus 1 small handful celery leaves, to serve
3 spring onions (scallions), very finely sliced
on the diagonal

Dressing
2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
1 teaspoon caster (superfine) sugar
2½ tablespoons clear rice vinegar
2 tablespoons light soy sauce
2 tablespoons peanut oil
3 teaspoons sesame oil

To clean the squid, gently pull the tentacles away from the tube (the intestines should come away at the same time). Remove the intestines from the tentacles by cutting under the eyes, then remove the beak if it remains in the centre of the tentacles by using your fingers to push up the centre. Reserve the tentacles. Pull the transparent cartilage from inside the body and remove. Clean out the inside of the tube. Hold the tube under running water and peel the skin off; the wings can also be used. Place the cleaned squid tubes on a chopping board and use a sharp knife to cut each tube all the way down one side to open it out. Using the knife, score the inside of each tube in a fine crisscross pattern (be careful you don't cut all the way through), then cut the tubes into 4 cm (1½ inch) pieces.

Bring a large saucepan of water to the boil. Add the squid pieces and tentacles and cook for 1½–2 minutes, or until the squid pieces are tender and have curled — take care not to overcook them. Drain, then transfer the squid to a large bowl of iced water to cool. Drain well.

To make the dressing, put all the ingredients in a large bowl and whisk to combine well. Add the squid, celery strips and spring onions to the bowl and toss to coat well. Transfer to a platter or bowl, scatter over the celery leaves and serve immediately.



Stir-fried tofu sticks with green vegetables

Serves 4 to 6 as part of a shared meal

If there’s one thing we miss when we’re not in China it’s the variety of tofu available there. It comes in pressed sheets, rounds and shreds, and is variously firm, silky-soft, smoked and sometimes even stinky. Shaoxing is famed for its fermented tofu, which is often fried street-side — its aroma literally permeates whole neighbourhoods. Back home we have to be satisfied with the local fresh selection and products such as these dried tofu sticks. Here they bring excellent texture to a simple stir-fry of green vegetables.

- 100 g (3½ oz) dried tofu skin sticks, broken into 5 cm (2 inch) pieces

2 tablespoons vegetable oil

1 large garlic clove, finely chopped

2 cm (¾ inch) piece ginger, peeled and finely chopped

200 g (7 oz) sugar-snap peas, trimmed
- 1 bunch asparagus (about 12 spears), trimmed and cut into 5 cm (2 inch) pieces

400 g (14 oz) peas, podded, or 200 g (7 oz) frozen peas

2 tablespoons light soy sauce

2 teaspoons sesame oil

sea salt

Put the pieces of tofu sticks in a heatproof bowl, cover with boiling water and soak for 1 hour, or until soft, then drain well.

Heat the vegetable oil in a large wok over a medium–high heat until just smoking, then add the garlic and ginger and stir-fry for 30 seconds, or until fragrant. Add the tofu sticks and stir-fry for 2 minutes, then add the sugar-snap peas, asparagus and peas and stir-fry for another 4 minutes — the vegetables should still be a little crisp. Add the soy sauce and sesame oil and toss to combine. Season with sea salt, transfer to a platter and serve.





From left to right: Seafood poached in rice wine (page 150), served with Sweet soy-ginger sauce (page 151), XO sauce (page 151) and Spring onion and ginger dipping sauce (pages 196-7)

Pork with preserved mustard leaf and wine

Serves 6

This was a dish we ate in unhealthy quantities in Shaoxing, a city famous for its fermented and preserved foods and fragrant rice wine. They have a word there, mei, for an entire course of foods that involves preserved ingredients and tofu, and this is one such dish. Go to Shaoxing and you'll see preserved mustard leaf (sold in packets as 'potherb mustard') in aromatic, brown piles — it smells incredibly sweet and not unlike tobacco.

180 g (6½ oz) preserved mustard leaves	60 ml (2 fl oz/¼ cup) shaoxing rice wine
115 g (4 oz/½ cup) caster (superfine) sugar	1.5 kg (3 lb 5 oz) piece boneless pork belly, skin on
100 ml (3½ fl oz) dark soy sauce	

Put the mustard leaves in a bowl, cover with water and soak for 5 minutes, then drain well and gently squeeze out as much liquid as possible.

Put the mustard leaves in a large claypot with the sugar, soy sauce, rice wine and 250 ml (8½ fl oz/1 cup) water. Using a large, sharp knife, cut the pork belly in half widthwise and place, skin side down, on top of the mixture in the pot. Place the claypot over a medium heat and bring the liquid to a simmer, then reduce the heat to very low, using a simmer pad if necessary, cover the pot and cook for 1 hour. Carefully turn the pork over, then cook for another 4 hours, turning the meat every hour. After 4 hours the pork should be very tender and positioned skin side up. Remove the pot from the heat and set aside to cool to room temperature, then refrigerate overnight.

The next day, remove the pork from the claypot and, using a sharp knife, cut it into neat 3 cm (1¼ inch) square pieces. Return the pork pieces to the claypot, cover and gently reheat the mixture over a low heat for 30–40 minutes. Serve immediately.



Wonton noodle soup

Serves 4

Many is the market we’ve walked around and watched, in complete awe, as the fresh dumpling makers ply their craft. What takes mere mortals an hour of painstaking folding takes them the seeming blink-of-an-eye, as they smear a small dab of filling over a corner of a wrapper, then deftly fold (or, in some cases, artfully scrunch) the dumplings into life. This recipe makes more wontons than you will need for four serves, so add more wontons if you like or increase the quantities of the soup to serve six — or simply freeze any leftover for next time.

Pork and prawn wontons	sea salt and ground white pepper
3 dried shiitake mushrooms	60 square wonton wrappers (not frozen)
250 g (9 oz) raw prawn (shrimp) meat, chopped	
200 g (7 oz) minced (ground) pork, not too lean	Noodle soup
1 garlic clove, very finely chopped	250 g (9 oz) fresh, thin wheat noodles
6 tinned, drained water chestnuts, finely chopped	1.5 litres (51 fl oz/6 cups) chicken stock (page 405)
2 spring onions (scallions), very finely chopped	4 heads baby bok choy (pak choy), trimmed and halved lengthwise
1 tablespoon light soy sauce	
1 tablespoon shaoxing rice wine	

To make the pork and prawn wontons, put the shiitake mushrooms in a small heatproof bowl, cover with boiling water and soak for 30 minutes, or until softened. Drain well, squeeze very dry, then finely chop. Put the mushrooms, prawn meat, pork, garlic, water chestnuts, spring onions, soy sauce and rice wine in a food processor and process until a sticky paste forms. Season with sea salt and white pepper.

Place a teaspoon of filling in the centre of a wonton wrapper, then use your finger to dampen around the edge with a little water. Fold the wrapper in half to form a rectangle (make sure the edges are neat and aligned) and press to seal. Bring the two folded corners together and press firmly to seal. Place the completed wontons on a lightly floured tray. Bring a large saucepan of salted water to the boil. Add the wontons in batches and cook for 4–5 minutes, or until they rise to the surface and are cooked through. Drain well and set aside.

To make the noodle soup, cook the noodles in a saucepan of boiling water for 2–3 minutes (or according to the packet instructions), or until softened, then drain well.

Bring the stock to the boil in a large saucepan, add the bok choy, then cover and simmer for 2–3 minutes, or until cooked through. Add the cooked wontons to the stock to heat through. Divide the noodles, bok choy and wontons among four large bowls, pour over the hot stock and serve immediately.



Honeydew melon sago pudding

Serves 6

We know, we know ... many of us are scarred for life when it comes to sago through unhappy encounters with the stuff as children. In the south of China, they use it to great effect in creating light, refreshing desserts such as this one. Use rockmelon (cantaloupe) instead of honeydew if you like, but either way, make sure you get one with loads of sweet flavour or the pudding won't be as good.

195 g (7 oz/1 cup) sago	½ honeydew melon (about 1.2 kg/2 lb 10 oz), seeded
170 g (6 oz/¾ cup) caster (superfine) sugar	300 ml (10 fl oz) coconut milk

Put the sago in a saucepan, add 1.75 litres (60 fl oz/7 cups) water and slowly bring to a simmer, stirring often, over a medium–low heat. Cook, stirring often, for 25 minutes, or until the sago is translucent. Transfer to a sieve and rest it over a bowl or the sink for 20 minutes, stirring from time to time, to allow the excess thick liquid to drain off.

Meanwhile, combine the sugar with 125 ml (4 fl oz/½ cup) water in a small saucepan and slowly bring to a simmer, then cook, stirring occasionally, for 1–2 minutes, or until the sugar has dissolved.

Using a melon baller, cut about 24 small balls from the melon (alternatively, cut half of the melon into neat 1 cm/½ inch squares). Put the melon balls in a bowl, cover with plastic wrap and place in the fridge to chill. Peel and roughly chop the remaining melon, transfer to a food processor and process to form a smooth purée — you should have about 500 ml (17 fl oz/2 cups).

Transfer the sago to a large bowl, then stir in the sugar syrup, puréed melon and the coconut milk. Leave to cool to room temperature, then place in the fridge to chill. Divide the sago among six small bowls or glasses, top with some melon balls and serve.

