

NOODLES

These are of paramount importance – pad thai is a noodle dish, after all, and when the noodles are badly cooked, they invariably drag everything else down with them. You need what are often called "rice sticks" – dried thin, flat noodles, which, it turns out, are incredibly difficult to cook properly.

First of all, they require soaking before use, using boiling water, which counts as cooking and is apparently a no-no where the purists are concerned. Soak the noodles in cold water until they're soft enough to wind easily around your finger – like very al dente pasta.

THE SAUCE

Strictly speaking, there's no such thing as pad thai sauce. However, for an amateur, seasoning the dish in the wok seems almost an impossible feat so, apart from the stress of tipping in three separate bowls while keeping everything moving in the wok, to adjust the flavour, it is best to heat the three principle ingredients, tamarind, palm sugar and fish sauce, together. You can then taste it and adjust until you achieve your perfect balance of sweet, salty and sour.

Try to remember that pad thai has a base of pureed shallot, garlic and chilli, which gives it a sweet heat. Other condiments are vivid red shrimp paste in oil, the fish sauce and the volley of tiny dried shrimp and a pinch of chilli powder.

THE PROTEIN

It's possible to customise pad thai with whatever you like, but prawns and firm tofu seem to be the most popular choice. Eggs are also near ubiquitous; you can try duck eggs for authenticity, but again, once they're scrambled, it's hard to differentiate the taste.

**EXTRAS AND GARNISHES**

Garlic is always welcome – the crunchy Chinese chives offer enough onion flavour and a more interesting texture.

Perfect beginner's pad thai

Ingredients:

(serves 2)

120g 2-3mm wide flat rice sticks
60ml fish sauce
60ml tamarind water (you can use tamarind concentrate, thinned with a little water)
60g palm sugar
Pinch of chilli powder, to taste

25g preserved salted radish, chopped

1 tbsp small dried shrimp

100g bean sprouts

4 stalks Chinese chives, chopped

50g roasted peanuts, roughly chopped

Lime wedges, chilli flakes, fish sauce and sugar, to garnish

Method:

Soak the rice sticks in cold water for about half an hour until pliable but al dente. Drain. Meanwhile, make the sauce by combining the fish sauce, tamarind and palm sugar in a small pan. Heat gently to dissolve the sugar and taste – add more of any of the ingredients as you wish. Season with chilli to taste. Set aside.

Lay out all the ingredients within easy reach of the hob in the order they'll be used. Put a wok on a high heat and add half the oil. Add the garlic, stir fry for a few seconds, and then add the noodles and a splash of water. Stir fry until they're drying out, and then add the sauce. Fry until they are almost soft enough to eat (they should be slightly chewy).

Push the noodles to the side of the wok and add the rest of the oil. Fry the tofu and prawns until the tofu is beginning to colour, then push to the side and add the eggs. Pierce the yolks and, when starting to set on the bottom, scramble.

Stir through the noodles and add the radish, dried shrimp, bean sprouts, chives and peanuts. Stir fry until well combined, then serve with the garnishes for people to add as they wish.

Compiled by LS desk

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