

Crunchy Baskets for Serving *and* Eating

Add some crunch to your Chinese cooking. This delicate, crisp basket, made from dumpling wrappers, is quick and easy to make.

Turn plain noodles and dumpling wrappers into delicious deep-fried serving pieces

BY LILY LOH

One of my favorite ways to present a Chinese dish is to serve it in a graceful, edible basket. These crisp, crunchy containers blend form and function by soaking up some of the dish's sauce, and they're a traditional way to present stir-fried dishes.

SIMPLE EQUIPMENT, SIMPLE INGREDIENTS, BEAUTIFUL RESULTS

Baskets can be made with a variety of starchy ingredients; here I've used dumpling wrappers to create a beautiful platter of flower petals, and strands of woven noodles to make a lacy basket. These baskets can be made ahead of time and then warmed in a 300°F oven for five

minutes just before serving.

The strainer sets the shape. There are two types of Chinese strainers that make deep-frying the baskets much easier: a traditional strainer made of brass wires with a bamboo handle, and one made of stainless steel with holes punched in it. Just about any metal strainer will work, but keep in mind that the shape of your strainer will be the shape of your basket.

A wok is the perfect vessel for deep-frying these baskets. Its contoured shape gets hot quickly and provides the maximum surface area for frying.

Use lots of fresh oil. To ensure that the baskets cook quickly and evenly,

have enough oil in the wok to cover the basket completely. The more oil you use, the more constant the temperature will be, and the faster the basket will cook. Peanut, corn, and vegetable oils all have high smoking points and are good choices for deep-frying. Whichever oil you use, be sure it's fresh so it can tolerate high heat.

Choose your noodle. Ordinary dried spaghetti will make a great basket, but if it's authenticity you're after, use the long, dried wheat noodles that can be found in most Chinese markets. The Chinese noodles taste about the same as spaghetti, but they tend to stick together better when fried. You'll need

MAKING A PASTA BASKET



1 Loop strands of pasta into a strainer to create a delicate basket. Use ordinary cooked and drained spaghetti or angel hair pasta. To free both your hands, rest the strainer over a bowl.



2 A few extra strands on the bottom make a sturdier basket. Once you've finished the pattern, close any large gaps between strands—they'll be more noticeable once the basket is cooked.



3 To hold the noodles in place, put a second strainer (the same size or slightly smaller) inside the first one. Plunge the strainers into the hot oil. These baskets take less than five minutes to cook.



Photo: Beth Galton

about a quarter pound of dried noodles or spaghetti for each nine- or ten-inch-diameter basket.

I use thin, round dumpling wrappers, called *gyoza*, to make a petal-shaped basket (see photo above). Dumpling wrappers can be found in most supermarkets—look in the produce department or in the refrigerated section. Don't confuse them

with square-shaped wonton wrappers, which are often much thinner. You'll need about fifteen dumpling wrappers to make each large basket.

IS THE OIL HOT YET?

Many Chinese cooks use the "chopstick test" to decide when the oil is hot enough for deep-frying. Poke a dry, wooden chop-

stick into the oil; if the oil foams, it's hot and ready for frying. If the oil is too cool, the noodles will absorb too much oil, and the basket will be greasy.

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4 When the noodles turn golden brown, take the strainers out of the oil. Pour off the oil and set the strainer on paper towels to drain. Use a metal spatula to loosen the basket while it's still hot; it will be more difficult to remove if it cools first.



5 Cooled baskets stay crisp for several hours. To serve warm, reheat the baskets in a 300°F oven for five minutes. Traditionally used to serve stir-fries, these baskets can be filled with almost any sauté or light stew.

MAKING A GYOZA BASKET



Lay round dumpling wrappers in an overlapping pattern, starting at the center and working out in circles. Brush the wrappers with a loose mixture of cornstarch and water to seal. Continue with steps 3 to 5 at left to fry the basket.