



Grains of truth about ORIENTAL NOODLES

Definitions

Unlike American noodles, which are made from durum wheat flour and specified to contain egg, Oriental noodles are made from hard or soft wheat flours and generally do not contain egg. They are sometimes made with starches or flours from other grain sources.

Oriental noodles can be divided broadly into Japanese and Chinese types. Although a very small percentage of the ingredients, the use of salt accords the main difference between the two types. Where Japanese noodles use regular salt, Chinese noodles use alkaline salts, a common example of which is Kan-Sui, a mixture of potassium carbonate and sodium carbonate.

Japanese noodles are made with delicate, low-protein flours derived from soft wheats. Chinese noodles typically use strong, higher-protein flours from hard wheat. When combined with the alkaline salts, the high-protein flour makes a dough that is stronger and more elastic and a noodle that is chewier and more yellow than Japanese noodles.

More specifically, Oriental noodles differ according to their ingredients and preparation. Varieties depend greatly on the plant origin of the flour ingredients, with wheat flour noodles being the most common. Other types use wheat flour in combination with mung bean flour or starch, potato starch, or buckwheat flour. One unique type of noodle is produced completely from mung bean starch. Rice noodles are also available.

The moisture content and degree of precooking provide important distinctions in Oriental noodles. They are available as fresh (raw) noodles; wet (boiled) noodles; dried noodles; steamed and fried instant (ramen) noodles; and steamed and dried (alpha) noodles.

Oriental noodles come in all shapes and sizes: thin, medium or wide; square or round; long or short; in ribbons, rods or diced forms. Their color varies according to the ingredients used. Bean thread and starch noodles are optically clear. Noodles containing salt are opaque and white. Alkaline noodles are bright yellow.

Buckwheat noodles are brown. For premium white and yellow color, high grade flour milled from white wheat is used. Minor and optional ingredients such as eggs or gluten, gums or modified starch, emulsifiers, preservatives, and dried spinach or other coloring agents may affect color and texture.

History

The Chinese were enjoying noodles 5,000 years before the birth of Christ. At that time, Europe was still in the Stone Age. The great civilizations of Egypt, Greece and Rome would not exist for another 3,000 years. On the plains of the Americas, only tall grasses grew where much of the wheat used to make noodles is now produced.

Noodles, like other great Chinese concepts, spread to the surrounding Asian cultures and beyond. Today, from the hawker stalls in Singapore's markets to the buy-a-ticket fast food cafeterias of Japan, the pleasure and driving energy noodles provide are evident. Although definitely a convenience food, noodles are much more than fast food, offering variety, versatility and high-quality nutrition.

Availability

The more common types of Oriental noodles, such as udon, ramen, rice and buckwheat noodles, are now obtainable in mainstream U.S. food stores and supermarkets. Oriental food stores, which are now common throughout the United States, usually carry the range of noodle types as well as other ethnic ingredients. Perishable Oriental noodles (the fresh and wet varieties) may be located in either the refrigerated or frozen sections.

Storage

Inexpensive and easy to store, Oriental noodles are ideal for keeping on hand. Fresh noodles will keep for two to three days at room temperature and up to 20 days if packaged aseptically. Wet noodles will keep for four to five days under refrigeration. Fried and dried noodles remain stable for four to six months; steamed and dried (alpha) noodles, for up to one year.

Nutrition

The variety, versatility and satisfying flavor of noodles make them popular with all ages. They can add a new dimension to the traditional American meal, bringing exciting new flavors and excellent nutritional value to the table.

Because they are made primarily from wheat-based flours, Oriental noodles are low in calories, sodium and fat (except fried noodles, which are 15 to 25 percent fat). They are high in complex carbohydrates, the preferred form of food energy, and are a source of soluble dietary fiber. Noodles provide protein, B-vitamins and minerals such as calcium, magnesium, iron, zinc and copper. A half-cup serving of cooked noodles has about 60 calories, less than an apple or orange.

Oriental noodle cuisine may shock sodium-conscious sensibilities. (One teaspoon of salt equals 2,132 milligrams of sodium.) By omitting or reducing the amount of salt called for, reasonable levels are quickly achieved. Using less soy sauce or reduced-sodium soy sauce will also decrease sodium levels.

Cultural preferences

As with other foods, different people prefer different types of noodles. Preferences are associated with factors such as cost, convenience, taste, nutrition, tradition and culture.

Koreans, for example, prefer the relatively chewy texture of Chinese noodles, which are frequently served in Korean restaurants. In the Korean home, where convenience in preparation and cooking counts, instant fried noodles and dried noodles are popular.

The Japanese, on the other hand, prefer noodles with a tender bite, making the Japanese-style fresh and wet "Udon" noodles the most popular. Because of their convenience, instant and dried forms of these noodles are also popular.

A taste for a chewy noodle texture makes the Chinese-style fresh and wet noodles popular in China. Instant noodles are also well-liked in China, but the expense of frying oil makes them much less commonly eaten. In China and Korea, instant noodles are popular for lunch and as between-meal snacks, but are seldom prepared for dinner, when more time is allowed for food preparation and enjoyment of the meal. In Thailand, rice noodles are predominant because of an abundance of rice. In Malaysia and Singapore, preferences are similar to those in China.

Starch noodles, made principally from mung bean starch and sometimes from potato starch, are popular in all Oriental countries as vermicelli-sized strings. Consumption of starch noodles, however, is small compared to that of wheat noodles.

Ramen noodles are now the most popular type of noodles in both Asia and the United States, where ramen or Oriental noodle soups are often served as a main dish.

Recipe

VEGGIE/SHRIMP RAMEN NOODLES

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| ½ pound | peeled, de-veined small shrimp |
| 2 packages | Oriental-flavor instant ramen noodles (3 oz. packages) |
| 2½ cups | water |
| 2 cups | frozen Oriental vegetable mixture |
| 1/8 teaspoon | ground ginger |
| 2 tablespoons | green onion, thinly sliced |

In a large nonstick skillet, sauté' shrimp over medium heat for 2 to 3 minutes on each side. Do not over cook.

Remove shrimp from skillet; set aside. In same skillet, combine water, vegetables, noodles, ginger and seasoning packets.

Bring to a boil; reduce heat. Cover, simmer 3 minutes or until noodles are tender, stirring occasionally. Return shrimp to skillet; heat through. Stir in green onion before serving. Makes 3 servings.

Nutritional Analysis: One serving provides approximately: 322 calories, 26 g protein, 46 g carbohydrates, 5 g fiber, 2 g fat (0 g saturated), 115 mg cholesterol, 2 mcg folate, 5 mg iron, 108 mg calcium, 158 mg potassium, 959 mg sodium.

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