

rice vinegar (also called Chinkiang vinegar) even better because it was more complex—smoky, salty, plumlike, and slightly sweet. Cornstarch is the thickener of choice for Asian sauces and 1½ teaspoons reliably gelled the sauce to a soft, glazy, shrimp-coating consistency.

For heat, I chose whole dried chiles, which are traditional for this dish (although red pepper flakes work well also). I altered the technique with which they are generally used, however, by stir-frying them with the shrimp and peanuts at the beginning of the cooking. This extra bit of pan time toasted the chiles, deepening their flavor noticeably.

Sichuan peppercorns are the other defining flavor in authentic kung pao dishes, as I discovered from my cursory research on this dish, but I had trouble finding recipes that use them. Curious, I dug a bit deeper to find that from 1968 to 2005, it was illegal to bring Sichuan peppercorns into the U.S. (they are carriers of a tree disease that can potentially harm citrus crops). Since they're now available (mostly at Asian markets and specialty spice purveyors), I tested different amounts and was amazed to realize that some recipes include handfuls of this potent spice. I found that a teaspoon, crushed and added with the peanuts and chiles to bloom in the hot pan, was just the right amount to tingle my palate and give this kung pao shrimp the authenticity it demanded.

—SARAH WILSON, *America's Test Kitchen Books*

KUNG PAO SHRIMP

SERVES 4

You can substitute plain rice vinegar for the black rice vinegar (available in Asian markets), but I prefer the latter for its fruity, salty complexity. Don't eat the whole chiles in the final dish; if you can't find small dried red chiles, substitute 1 teaspoon red pepper flakes. Serve with steamed white rice.

SAUCE

- ¾ cup low-sodium chicken broth
- 1 tablespoon oyster sauce
- 1 tablespoon hoisin sauce
- 2 teaspoons black rice vinegar or plain rice vinegar (see note)
- 2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil
- 1½ teaspoons cornstarch

STIR-FRY

- 1 pound extra-large shrimp (21 to 25 per pound), peeled and deveined
- 2 teaspoons soy sauce
- 2 teaspoons Chinese rice wine or dry sherry
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 teaspoon minced or grated fresh ginger
- 2 scallions, minced
- 2 tablespoons plus 1 teaspoon vegetable oil
- 6 small whole dried red chiles (each about 2 inches long) (see note)
- ½ cup roasted unsalted peanuts
- 1 red bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and cut into ½-inch pieces
- 1 teaspoon Sichuan peppercorns, crushed

1. FOR THE SAUCE: Whisk all of the ingredients together; set aside.

2. FOR THE STIR-FRY: Toss the shrimp with the soy sauce and rice wine in a small bowl and let marinate for 10 minutes, or up to 1 hour. In a separate bowl, mix together the garlic, ginger, scallions, and 1 teaspoon of the vegetable oil; set aside. In a third bowl, crumble half of the chiles coarsely, then toss with the remaining whole chiles and peanuts; set aside.

3. Heat 1½ teaspoons of the remaining vegetable oil in a 12-inch nonstick skillet over high heat until just smoking. Add half of the shrimp and cook, without stirring, until the shrimp are browned at the edges, about 1 minute. Stir in the chiles and peanuts and cook until the shrimp are almost completely opaque and the peanuts have darkened slightly, about 30 seconds longer. Transfer the mixture to a medium bowl and repeat with 1½ teaspoons more vegetable oil and the remaining shrimp; transfer to the bowl and set aside.

4. Add the remaining 1 tablespoon vegetable oil to the skillet and return to high heat until just smoking. Add the red bell pepper and Sichuan peppercorns and cook until the bell pepper is slightly softened and the peppercorns are fragrant, about 1 minute.

5. Clear the center of the skillet, add the garlic mixture, and cook, mashing the mixture into the pan, until fragrant, 15 to 20 seconds. Stir the garlic mixture into the peppers. Stir in the shrimp mixture with any accumulated juices. Whisk the sauce to recombine, then add to the skillet and cook, tossing constantly, until the sauce is thickened, about 30 seconds. Transfer to a platter and serve.