

Cashew Chicken

Serves 2 to 3 as a main course with rice or 4 as part of a multicourse meal.

In America, cashew chicken is one of the most beloved dishes served in Chinese restaurants. Sadly it is often "Westernized," with deep-fried pieces of chicken in a heavy gravy. A true Cantonese cashew chicken should be seasoned with ginger, stir-fried with fresh sugar snaps, carrots, and celery, all in a light sauce that barely clings to the chicken. Look for fresh cashews of the best quality. I often buy unroasted cashews and dry stir-fry them in a dry skillet or wok over medium heat a few minutes, shaking the pan frequently until they are just light golden.

For a richer tasting sauce use dark soy sauce in place of regular soy sauce with the broth. The virtues of a "simple" stir-fry are demonstrated in this easy-to-make recipe.

1 pound skinless, boneless chicken thigh, cut into 1½-inch cubes
1 tablespoon minced garlic
2 teaspoons soy sauce
1½ teaspoons cornstarch
1 teaspoon plus 2 tablespoons Shao Hsing rice wine or dry sherry
¾ teaspoon salt
1½ teaspoon sugar
½ cup chicken broth
2 tablespoons peanut or vegetable oil
2 tablespoons minced ginger
½ cup sugar snap peas, strings removed
½ cup thinly sliced carrots
½ cup thinly sliced celery
½ cup unsalted roasted cashews

1. In a medium bowl combine the chicken, garlic, 1 teaspoon of the soy sauce, 1 teaspoon of the cornstarch, 1 teaspoon of the rice wine, ¾ teaspoon of the salt, and sugar. Stir to combine. In a small bowl combine the broth, the remaining 1 teaspoon soy sauce, 2 tablespoons rice wine, and ½ teaspoon cornstarch.

2. Heat a 14-inch flat-bottomed wok or 12-inch skillet over high heat until a bead of water vaporizes within 1 to 2 seconds of contact. Swirl in 1 tablespoon of the oil, add the ginger, then, using a metal spatula, stir-fry 10 seconds or until the ginger is fragrant. Push the ginger to the sides of the wok, carefully add the chicken, and spread it evenly in one layer in the wok. Cook undisturbed 1 minute, letting the chicken begin to sear. Stir-fry 1 minute, or until the chicken is lightly browned but not cooked through.

3. Swirl the remaining 1 tablespoon oil into the wok, add the sugar snaps, carrots, celery, and cashews, and sprinkle on the remaining ½ teaspoon salt. Stir-fry 1 minute or until the sugar snaps are bright green. Restir the broth mixture, swirl it into the wok, and stir-fry 1 minute or until the chicken is just cooked through.

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