

How to Make Asian Dumplings

Match two wrappers with three fillings, eight shapes, and four cooking methods for dozens of flavorful Asian-style dumplings.

BY NICOLE ROUTHIER



For best texture, add boiling broth to dumplings that have been sautéed until just browned.

Dumpling wrappers can be used to wrap any number of fillings for quick Asian dumplings. Usually, the first question is: Commercial or homemade? Fresh homemade wrappers and dried commercial versions are analogous to fresh and dried Italian pastas: There is no reason to think of commercial dumpling wrappers as second-rate. They let you spend your time preparing special fillings and sauces — where the extra effort really pays off.

The main advantage of commercial wrappers is that they are moisture-free and can be combined with almost any cooking method. In addition, these dried sheets are infinitely easier to work with than homemade wrappers which, because they are moist, often are sticky during rolling and can cook up gummy or mushy.

Two types of wrappers are readily available in supermarkets and Asian food stores. Wonton wrappers (also called skins) are delicate and paper-thin, usually about a thirty-second of an inch thick. They typically come in three-inch squares and are made from flour, eggs, and salt. These wrappers, which are Chinese in origin, are suitable for boiling, steaming, deep-frying, and pan-frying. They are sold fresh

and can be frozen for up to two months if not used within a week. (If you decide to freeze them, do so in small batches since they cannot be separated from each other until completely thawed, and once thawed, do not take well to refreezing.)

Round gyoza wrappers, also called potsticker skins, are usually about three and a half inches in diameter, and are made from flour, salt, and water, without the eggs used in wonton skins. These Japanese dumpling wrappers are slightly thicker and more resilient than wonton skins. Gyoza wrappers tend to dry out and harden when steamed, but can be used in recipes where dumplings will be boiled, deep-fried, or pan-fried. As with wonton skins, fresh gyoza skins can be refrigerated for a week or so. Once frozen they can

be stored for about two months.

Both wonton and gyoza wrappers vary in quality from brand to brand, with thickness being the most important variable. Look for at least fifty wrappers per pound. Brands with fewer wrappers per pound should be avoided since they will be too thick and may taste doughy.

Basic Cooking Methods

Since these wrappers contain little or no fat, dumplings made with them should be cooked using moist heat methods such as steaming, boiling, or frying. (If baked, grilled, or stir-fried, they become extremely dry and unpalatable.) Each of the recommended cooking methods will yield a different result, especially in terms of the final texture of the wrappers.

Boiling in a large quantity of water allows the wrappers to absorb plenty of moisture and expand as they cook. It also keeps the exterior especially moist and tender and is the best choice if dumplings will eventually be floated in a bowl of soup. When boiling, make sure to seal the dumplings securely. Since boiled dumplings will invariably become a bit watery

no matter how tightly sealed, season the filling especially well.

Steaming yields moist but resilient dumplings with chewy skins. Unlike boiling, it does not dilute the flavors in the filling and is a good choice for protecting delicate ingredients. As an added bonus, the nutritional value is retained, since vitamins and minerals are not dissolved away.

As a third alternative, dumplings can be completely submerged in hot oil. A temperature of 350 degrees is best. Deep-frying yields crisp, tasty dumplings with an appealing golden color. And because fried dumplings brown, they develop a natural sweetness from the caramelization of sugars — a phenomenon that does not, of course, occur in steamed or boiled versions.

Somewhere between frying and steaming is pan-frying, a popular means of cooking potstickers because it combines two methods and retains the advantages of both. The dumplings are first browned in hot oil in a skillet and then steamed to tenderness. Pan-fried dumplings, which must have at least one flat side for browning, combine crispy and chewy textures, plus the rich flavor associated with browning.

Dumplings, with their rather bland dough wrappers, benefit from tangy and savory dipping sauces. Two examples of all-purpose sauces are found below. Either can be paired with any of the fillings or dumpling shapes.

Use the following fillings in one or more of the dumpling shapes outlined on pages 16 and 17. Refer to “Four Cooking Methods” on page 15. Serve with dipping sauce. All fillings may be made one day in advance.

SHRIMP FILLING WITH GINGER AND SESAME

Makes about 1½ cups, enough for 32 dumplings or 16 shao mai

- 6 ounces shelled raw shrimp, coarsely chopped
- 2 ounces ground pork
- 6 peeled water chestnuts (fresh or canned), minced
- 1½ teaspoons finely grated fresh ginger
- 1½ teaspoons dry sherry or vermouth
- 1½ teaspoons cornstarch
- 2 teaspoons oyster sauce
- 1 teaspoon sesame oil
- ½ large egg white, lightly beaten
- ½ teaspoon sugar



Any filling can be used in these dumplings, but the best cooking method to use depends on the type of wrapper.

- ¼ teaspoon salt
- Ground black pepper to taste
- 2 tablespoons minced greens from 2 medium scallions

Mix all ingredients in medium bowl; let stand about 30 minutes. Refrigerate until ready to make dumplings.

CURRIED CHICKEN FILLING WITH CARROTS AND BASIL

Makes about 1½ cups, enough for 32 dumplings or 16 shao mai

If red curry paste is unavailable, increase curry powder to one and a half teaspoons and add a pinch of cayenne pepper. See Sources and Resources, page 32, for mail-order sources for Asian ingredients.

- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1 small onion, minced (½ cup)
- 1 small celery stalk, minced (¼ cup)
- 1 small clove garlic, minced (at least ½ teaspoon)
- 2 medium carrots, shredded (about 1 cup)
- ½ teaspoon Thai red curry paste
- 3 tablespoons unsweetened coconut milk
- 6 ounces ground chicken
- 2 teaspoons fish sauce
- ½ teaspoon curry powder
- 2 tablespoons shredded fresh basil leaves

1. Heat oil in large skillet. Add onions, celery, and garlic; sauté until almost softened, about 3 minutes. Add carrots; sauté until vegetables soften, about 2 minutes longer. Add curry paste and coconut milk; cook over medium-high heat, stirring to incorporate curry paste, until most of coconut milk has been ab-

sorbed. Transfer vegetable mixture to a bowl; cool to room temperature.

2. Mix in remaining ingredients. Let stand about 30 minutes. Refrigerate until ready to make dumplings.

SESAME BEEF AND CABBAGE FILLING

Makes about 1½ cups, enough for 32 dumplings or 16 shao mai

- ¼ small Napa cabbage, finely shredded (about 2 cups)
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 4 ounces ground beef
- 1 medium scallion or shallot, minced (about 2 tablespoons)
- 1 medium clove garlic, minced (1 teaspoon)
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- 2 teaspoons sesame seeds, toasted
- 2 teaspoons sesame oil
- Pinch cayenne pepper (optional)

Toss cabbage and salt together in colander; let stand until cabbage wilts, 15 to 20 minutes. Rinse cabbage; squeeze dry. Mix cabbage with remaining ingredients. Refrigerate until ready to make dumplings.

CHILE DIPPING SAUCE

Makes 1 cup

- ½ cup unseasoned rice vinegar or distilled white vinegar
- ¼ cup plus 2 teaspoons light brown sugar
- 2 medium cloves garlic, minced (at least 1 teaspoon)
- ¼ cup fish sauce

- 2 teaspoons Thai hot sauce (sriracha sauce), or 1 teaspoon crushed dried red chile pepper

Bring vinegar and sugar to boil in small saucepan, stirring briefly, until sugar dissolves. Pour into bowl; stir in garlic, fish sauce, and hot sauce. Can be covered and refrigerated overnight.

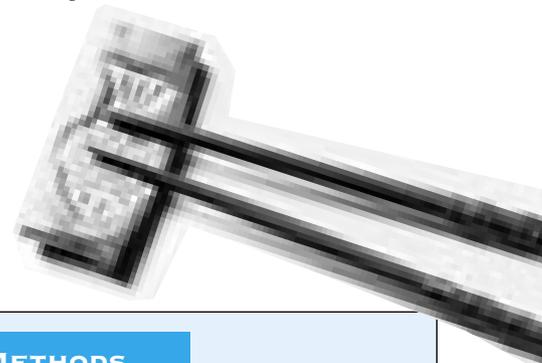
SOY-GINGER DIPPING SAUCE

Makes 1 cup

- ¼ cup soy sauce
- ¼ cup unseasoned rice vinegar
- 2½ teaspoons sugar
- ½ medium scallion, minced
- 2 teaspoons finely shredded fresh ginger
- ½ teaspoon sesame oil
- ½ teaspoon chile oil

Bring soy sauce, vinegar, sugar, and ¼ cup water to boil over medium heat, stirring briefly, until sugar dissolves. Pour into bowl; stir in scallion, ginger, and sesame and chile oils. Can be covered and refrigerated overnight. ■

Nicole Routhier is the author of *Cooking Under Wraps* (William Morrow, 1993).



FOUR COOKING METHODS

With all of the methods that follow, cook the dumplings in small batches to avoid overcrowding the pan and to ensure proper cooking. Serve dumplings as soon after cooking as possible, with dipping sauces passed separately.

To pan-fry dumplings: Bring ½ cup water or chicken broth to simmer in small saucepan. Meanwhile, heat 2 tablespoons vegetable oil in large skillet over medium-high heat. When oil is hot and hazy, add dumplings, flat sides down. Fry until bottoms are brown, about 2 minutes. Add simmering broth to skillet, pouring around dump-

plings. Cover and cook until liquid is absorbed, about 3 minutes longer. Uncover and let dumplings fry until bottoms are crisp again, about 1 minute.

To deep-fry dumplings: Heat 2 to 3 inches vegetable oil to 350 degrees in wok or heavy skillet. Add dumplings, a few at a time, and fry until golden, about 2 minutes. Remove with slotted spoon and drain on wire rack set over jelly-roll pan. Keep warm in 200-degree oven while frying remaining dumplings.

To boil dumplings: Bring 4 quarts water to boil; add

1 tablespoon salt and dumplings. Reduce heat to medium; simmer, uncovered, until filling is cooked through, 2 to 3 minutes. Remove dumplings with slotted spoon. Serve with dipping sauces or drop into hot broth.

To steam dumplings: Grease a collapsible steamer basket (cooking spray works best). Fill large soup kettle with enough water to come to bottom of basket. Bring to simmer over medium-low heat; lower basket into kettle. Arrange dumplings ½-inch apart in basket. Increase heat to high; cover and steam until dumplings are cooked through, about 5 minutes.

Shaping and Filling Asian Dumplings



Shao mai, wonton shapes, and pyramids should be made with square wonton wrappers. Potstickers, mandus, and pel'menis can be made with round gyoza or with square wonton wrappers that have been cut into

rounds (see Shao Mai, illustration 1). Choose any of the fillings on pages 14 and 15 and serve with either of the dipping sauces. See "Four Cooking Methods," page 15, for detailed cooking instructions.

SHAO MAI



1. Use a cookie cutter to make square wonton skins round.



2. Hold a wonton skin in the cup of your hand; place two rounded teaspoons of filling in the center.

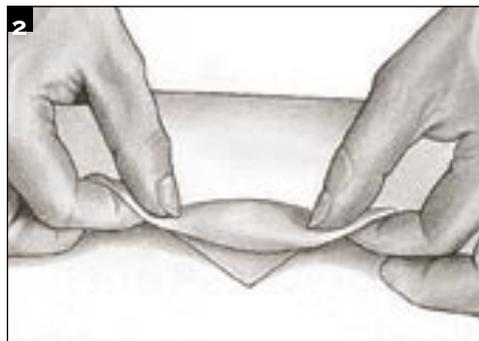


3. Cup your hand around the wonton skin, gathering folds up around the filling. Press the gathered folds lightly around the filling to adhere, forming a cup-shaped dumpling. Top with a fresh pea, if desired. Proceed with steaming.

TORTELLINI-SHAPED WONTONS



1. Position a square wonton wrapper with one point facing you. Place one rounded teaspoon of filling in the center. Fold the wrapper in half to form a triangle.



2. Fold the long edge containing the filling over, leaving the top of the triangle exposed about a half inch.



3. Moisten the underside of the right point, then bring the two points together, right over left, to overlap away from the tip of the triangle. Pinch the points together to seal the dumpling. Proceed with boiling, steaming, or deep-frying.

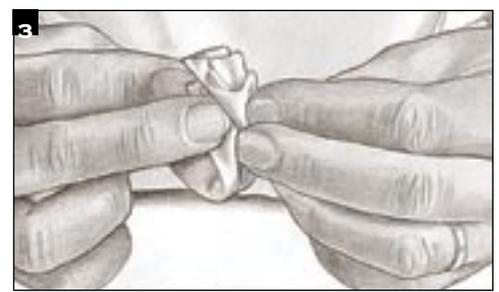
PURSE-SHAPED WONTONS



1. Hold a square wonton wrapper in the cup of your hand. Take one rounded teaspoon of filling, and place the spoon slightly off-center on the wrapper.

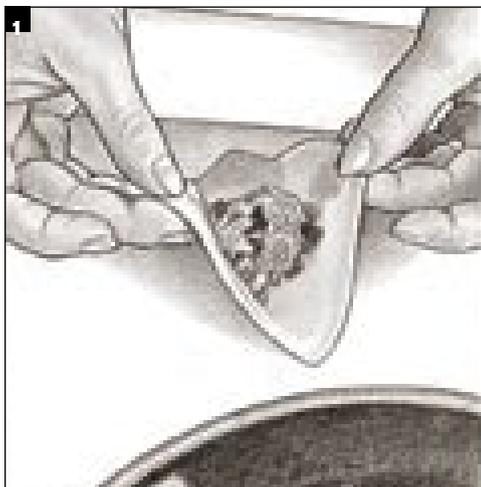


2. With your thumb, fold one side of the wonton wrapper over the filled spoon.

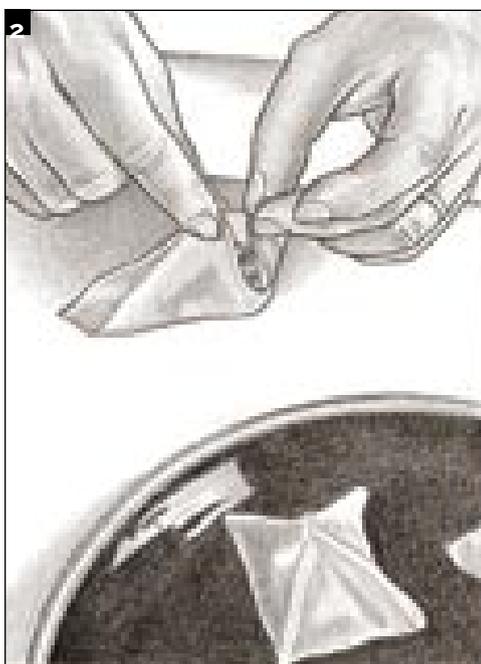


3. Trap the filling inside the wrapper between your thumb and index finger, gently remove the spoon, and seal the wonton by pinching the wrapper together. Proceed with boiling, steaming, or deep-frying.

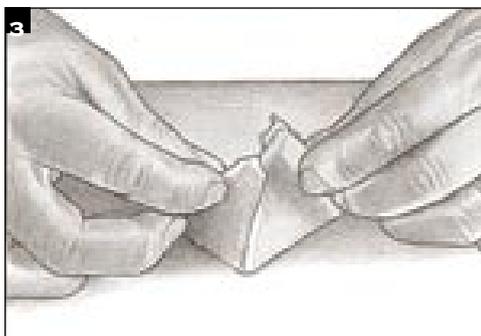
PYRAMIDS



1. Place two level teaspoons of filling in the center of a square wonton wrapper.

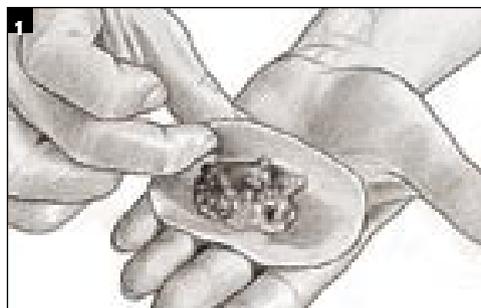


2. Moisten the edges lightly with water. Bring up two opposite corners of the wrapper and join over the filling.

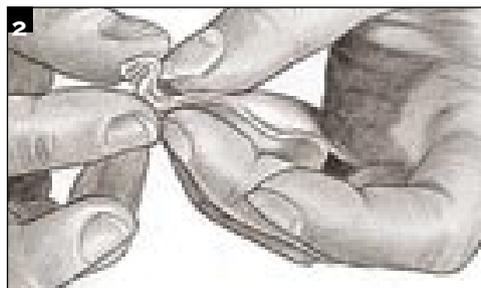


3. Bring up the two other corners and pinch all four together in a point to make a pyramid-shaped parcel. Pinch the seams firmly together to seal. Proceed with pan-frying or steaming.

PLEATED POTSTICKERS



1. Place one teaspoon of filling in the center of a round wrapper. Moisten the edge with water. Holding the filled circle in one hand, pinch the dough shut at one point on one side with the thumb and index finger of your other hand.



2. Still using that thumb and index finger, continue to pinch the dough to form pleats along the back edge, pressing the pleats against the front edge to seal the dumpling.



3. Pinch the dumpling shut to completely enclose the filling. Proceed with pan-frying or steaming. (Do not steam if made with gyoza wrappers.)

MANDU OR PEL'MENI

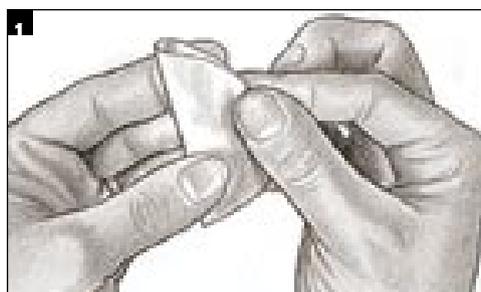


1. For the *mandu*, place one heaping teaspoon of filling in the center of a round wrapper. Fold the wrapper over the filling to form a half-moon shape. Seal edge. Proceed with boiling.



2. For the *pel'meni*, follow step 1, moistening the two corners of the half-moon shaped dough. Bring the corners together, overlapping them a bit. Pinch to seal. Proceed with boiling, deep-frying, or steaming. (Do not steam if made with gyoza wrappers.)

RUFFLED POTSTICKERS



1. Place one rounded teaspoon of filling in the center of a round wrapper. Moisten the edge with water. Fold the wrapper in half, then use your index finger and thumb to pinch the edges together and seal.



2. Lightly press the filling on the counter to form a flat base. Gather the pinched edges together to form ruffles on the top. Proceed with pan-frying or steaming. (Do not steam if made with gyoza wrappers.)