

21 March 1974

MEMO

To: HW (aka John Wayne "Shoot first, inquire later" Weisberg)

Re: Electric wok

Initial reaction: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAagh!

Comforting thoughts following compassionate reflection:

All is NOT lost. This device of the foreign devils nok doubt will prove to have its uses, so if you've already unpacked it and can't return it, hang on to it and learn how to use it. We can't help you. Here is why:

We've never seen one in use, know no one who has one, and can only guess how it will behave. Meanwhile, we have heard only the most derisive remarks about electric woks from those supposed to know what they're talking about.

The first thing needed in Chinese cooking is the ability to raise and lower heat quickly. For this reason cooking with gas is the ideal and I should have told you long ago that unless you have gas you'll be in trouble, heat control-wise. We understand some people cook Chinese food on electric stoves, but we don't understand how they do it.

The next thing needed is the ability to turn the choppe d-up food over constantly in the pan to make sure that it's cooked evenly through and through and not burned or scorched in the pprocess. This is why the wok has a round bottom, and why the shovel has a rounded front edge to fit the round bottom. To a considerable extent you probably can achieve the same effect on a flat bottom with a flat turner or spatula, but it will not be as easy or as automatic.

Your remark about hunting for a "soft" spatula, or turner, ~~whik~~ suggests that your flat-bottomed wok, a crime against nature in itself, may also be lined with teflon. As I have said often, we live in decadent times. However, the teflon, if any, will soon burn off and you'll wind up with a wok which, while heated by a probably difficult-to-control element and cursed with a flat bottom, still will be made of honest steel. Let's hope its heating element is much easier to control than I fear. It well could be. If there's not too much ceramic in the element's base, which would hold the heat and make it slow to cool down the wok, it may very well turn out to be a flexible and very useful utensil.

Finally, as for the flat bottom, I should say that it no doubt will make for faster heating, and there may even be other reasons for it, although I know of none. The only precedent ~~for~~ I've heard of is a flat-bottomed thing the Japanese use for deep-frying prawns covered with a batter. The Chinese would regard anything but a ~~flat~~ round bottom, however, as an on-ramp to the capitalist road or something equally revolting.

However the Chinese are not all that fussy, and when called upon to do so can cook their food in ordinary flat-bottomed frying pans without the least trouble. It's just that the round bottom is ideal and hasn't changed in 5,000 years.

To face reality, if you really go into Chinese food, one wok will not be enough, because its special attribute is freshness and few Chinese meals are produced by only one person because everything ideally should be ready at the same time, like at the last minute before the diners sit down. So if you become genuinely interested, you'll need a second wok (you, dear Duke, will be playing second shovel) and thus will have a chance to get the real thing next time. I'm sure your Mr. Miao could get you one for a fraction of what you'd pay at Woodward's or Hecht's, and he probably would welcome the chance to present you with something so special for him and his field and which you could not easily find for yourself. A proper shovel, too.

Let me say again that Mrs. Chao's cookbook stays as closely as possible to readily available materials anywhere in this country. It is true that some ingredients are expensive, but most are not, and since relatively little meat is used the result is that Chinese food is far less expensive than most as a rule.

For the two of us, our dinner usually consists of two dishes -- two different fresh vegetables with a total of four ounces of pork. Chicken does equally well in many cases. Beef is sometimes used, but not usually.

Example: Tonight we had two dishes as usual, three large stalks of celery stir-fried with two ounces of pork, ~~stir-fried~~ and one green pepper plus one onion stir-fried with another two ounces of pork. Besides that we had about one cup of dry rice, which boils into enough for two people. Can you reproduce a meal that cheaply? We were stuffed. Mme. Chao can tell you how to cook both dishes.

Incidentally, the term stir-fry is a misnomer. What actually happens is a constant turning over and over of the food in the pan. Stir-fry is merely the nearest English word to the meaning of the Chinese word "ch'ao."

We sent you a recipe for the marinade with the book. The next thing to tell you is how to deal with the meat. Pork loin or shoulder is most often used (the streaks of fat enhance the flavor if not too big) and what we do is to cut it up into four-ounce hunks and then freeze it in four-ounce packages. This is only partly thawed before it is sliced or cut into small shreds, as the case may be, depending on what the dish calls for. Ask Mme. Chao. It slices much more easily when only partly thawed.

Vegetables: generally, Mme. Chao tells you how to cut up each variety, the right size, etc. Follow her. When in doubt, ask Mme. Chao.

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As noted, we use celery, peppers and onions, /green beans, spinach (superb this way), broccoli, zucchini. Eggplant is good but is inclined to collapse. In addition we can get here two different kinds of Chinese cabbage which are most useful, and if you can get them at all they may not be in season much of the time in your part of the country. But be sure and look, because Chinese cabbage is becoming more and more common, especially in communities like Washington where there is a sizable Chinese population.

No doubt I have omitted several commonly available vegetables, but those noted above are the ones we find most dependable. You'll find you use a lot of young onions or scallions, jazzing up such dishes as Chinese cabbage or zucchini stir-fried with pork shreds or slices. Young onions naturally are thrown in at the last minute and only half cooked to exploit their flavor. Dried mushrooms also are very useful, go a long way in spite of being expensive and keep forever. Mr. Miao can steer you.

There are simple egg dishes in Mrs. Chao that are extremely tasty, and eventually you'll want to explore the wonders of ch'ao fan (fried rice) and noodles. The dry Chinese noodles are acceptable, but if you can get fresh noodles (Mr. Miao ?) it naturally works out much better. But that's for later. I've said more than enough already to confuse you.

Harold Weisberg and His Electric Wok. Hm.

Best, and if we can help, we'll be delighted.

jdw