

Basic Fried Rice

I've always thought of fried rice as the quintessential comfort food. Think of it - a bowl of steaming white rice, cooked to just the right consistency, filled with bits of meat and vegetable. What could be more perfect?

Of course, producing the above-mentioned dish is sometimes easier said than done.

Ideally, fried rice should be light, fluffy, and easy to pick up with chopsticks. For another, there is a philosophical debate over which is better - fresh cooked rice or leftovers from last night's meal. Personally, I prefer to use cold leftover rice, but I will cook a fresh pot if necessary.

The Chinese have been enjoying fried rice for centuries; that's hardly surprising when you consider that rice has been cultivated since around 4,000 BC. Yangzhou Fried Rice, a colorful dish, can be traced back to the Sui dynasty (589 - 618).

Of course, there are regional variations - a northern dish is more likely to contain ham and vegetables such as leeks and green onions, while Cantonese fried rice often features shrimp or barbecued pork. The beauty of fried rice is that it is very adaptable. Like Chow Mien, it's a great dish to make on those nights when you're cleaning out the refrigerator and want to get rid of any leftover meat or vegetables.

Here is my basic recipe for fried rice that you can adapt depending on what vegetables you have on hand:

6 tablespoons lard or cooking oil
2 eggs
1 teaspoon salt
2 scallions, chopped
½ cup fresh shrimp, shelled, deveined and diced
4 cups cold, cooked rice
½ cup cooked peas
¼ cup canned diced bamboo shoots
¼ cup diced boiled ham
½ cup diced cooked chicken
½ cup diced Chinese roast pork or left-over roast beef or veal
2 tablespoons soy sauce

Heat 2 tablespoons of lard or cooking oil in large frying pan or wok. Beat eggs with ½ teaspoon salt and scramble in oil until firm, breaking into small pieces. Remove and put aside. Heat remaining oil. Add scallion, shrimp and remaining salt. Cook until shrimp shows pink. Break up lumps of cold cooked rice and add to shrimp. Stir fry until rice is heated and grains of rice are separated. Make hole in center of rice. Add rest of ingredients except soy sauce. Stir fry until thoroughly heated and mixed. Sprinkle soy sauce over rice and mix evenly. Add salt and pepper to taste. Garnish with additional chopped scallions, if desired.