

Ooodles of Asian Noodles

The world of Asian noodles is substantial. Asian noodles are available in many styles, forms, colors with different flavors and textures. They are most commonly shaped into long, thin strands that are round or flat. The shapes will vary in thickness and texture. Noodles are found in these three states: fresh, dried, or fried. Asian noodles are generally grouped into three types: wheat noodles, rice noodles, and glass or cellophane noodles. Let's learn more about these three main types.

Wheat Noodles

Wheat is the most commonly used ingredient in Chinese noodles and many other Asian countries. Many wheat noodles are usually made from just wheat flour, salt, and water, while others have few ingredients in them like egg, lye, tapioca, arrowroot, bean, etc., to add to the flavor.

Lo mein and chow mein are the most common types of Chinese wheat noodles; they are made from wheat flour and egg, and shaped like spaghetti, but slightly thicker, with a width of approximately 1/4 of an inch. Lo mein and chow mein can both be purchased in either fresh or dried forms. If you are unable to find these noodles, you may be able to substitute spaghetti, vermicelli, or angel hair pasta.

Whether or not the lo mein or chow mein noodles are fresh or dried, they will need to be parboiled briefly (follow the package instructions). Parboiling allows them to puff up slightly and achieve their desired "bite." When the parboiling is complete, the noodles can be cooked with stir-fried meat and vegetables, usually with a sauce. The noodles themselves can be stir-fried for additional crispiness. More authentic chow mein noodles are fried to crispness, while lo mein noodles are boiled to softness.

Ramen Noodles

Another popular variety of egg noodles hails from Japan in the form of the ramen noodle. Ramen noodles are treated with an alkaline solution called kansui, which causes them to take on a springy texture and gives them their distinctive yellow color. Ramen noodles are thinner than lo mein and chow mein. Ramen noodles are traditionally served in a broth flavored with salt, soy sauce, miso, or pork. Vegetables, meat, and other toppings are also commonly added to the ramen noodles. Due to how thin ramen noodles are, they easily soften when left in broth, and it is important not to overcook them.

Most of us are familiar with the common, inexpensive instant ramen, which has been pre-cooked and fried to make it shelf-stable. Authentic ramen is fresh and can be found in Asian groceries.

Udon Noodles

Udon noodles are another Japanese favorite. They are the thickest Asian noodles and can be characterized as fat and chewy. Fresh udon noodles are known to have the best texture, but can also be purchased dried or frozen.

Rice Noodles

Rice noodles are wheat-free and gluten-free and make a large category of Asian noodles. Rice noodles are made from rice starch and are available in all lengths and widths. They boast a firm, springy texture, and they are known for absorbing flavor from the broths or sauces.

While fresh rice noodles are available, the number of varieties of dried rice noodles far outnumber the fresh kind. Rice noodles are featured in soups, stir-fries, and dried rice noodles. They cook extremely fast; fresh rice noodles need only a minute or two to cook, and some dried versions need only to rehydrate, not boil, before further cooking. Be sure to have the rest of your meal ready before you start cooking your rice noodles because they will stick together if they have to sit for too long.

Rice noodles are usually flat, but there can be a large variation between the widths of different rice noodles, but most will be around 1/4-inch. Pad Thai is a classic stir-fried noodle dish made with 1/4-inch rice noodles in Thailand. Thinner, finer varieties of rice noodles are sometimes called rice sticks or even rice thread. Vietnamese pho (fuh) is another popular noodle soup that's made with rice sticks or rice thread.

Glass Noodles

Glass noodles, also called cellophane noodles or bean thread noodles, are the third general category of noodles made from any other sort of starch other than wheat or rice. Mung bean noodles are quite common, as are noodles made from tapioca starch and sweet potato starch.

These noodles are usually much thinner, almost threadlike, and are called glass or cellophane noodles because after they're boiled, they take on a glassy, nearly transparent appearance. Their texture is generally very springy, and they are often served in stir-fries. Deep-frying these noodles makes them crispy.

Asian noodles can add interesting textures and flavors to your meals. Many types of Asian noodles are gluten-free and are good alternatives to eating wheat pasta for people diagnosed with celiac disease or other gluten sensitivities. Be sure to always read labels, especially on soba noodles, which may contain wheat.

How will you be using the noodles?

- For a cold noodle salad, make a batch of soba, somen, rice sticks, rice vermicelli, lo mein, or mung bean threads.
- If you're making soup, use soba, udon, ramen, won ton noodles, or shirataki.
- Stir-fries are great with lo mein, chow mein, vermicelli, shirataki, or jap che.
- Pick chow mein or mung bean threads if you need deep-fried, crunchy noodles to complete your dish.

Use this information as a guide for your next Asian noodle cooking experience.