My father taught me early in life that there is nothing quite as delicious as the rich, concentrated flavors of a Cantonese stir-fry, in which morsels of meat are cooked just quickly enough to ensure their juicy succulence and vegetables are rendered crisp and refreshing. It is a far cry from the oily, overcooked, heavily sauced renditions to which most Americans are accustomed.

In Hong Kong and Guangzhou the stir-fry is a culinary art form. Nowhere else in the world are stir-fries scrutinized by both professional chefs and ordinary people with identical criteria: does the stir-fry possess the prized, sublime taste of wok hay? Discerning Cantonese consider a stir-fry without wok hay to be like bad wine, dead and flat.

I think of wok hay as the breath of a wok—when a wok breathes energy into a stir-fry, giving foods a unique concentrated flavor and aroma. Of course, the Cantonese definition of wok hay varies from cook to cook. Many chefs will immediately talk about controlling the fo hao, fire power, for only the correct intense heat combined with a short cooking time elicits the heung mei, the fragrant aroma that characterizes wok hay. Chinese cooking authority Ken Hom adds that “a well-seasoned carbon-steel wok is also essential for creating wok hay—the blacker the pan the more intense the wok hay flavor.”

Some cooks define wok hay as the “taste of the wok.” Others describe it in near poetic terms. My friend Vivien Cheung says, “Wok hay is both elusive and real.” She speculates that it has to do with the design of the wok. “I imagine the wok to be like a volcano. Stir-frying on high heat incorporates hot air and motion, releasing a prized essence into the food. In a skillet that essence is all dissipated.” Hong Kong heritage researcher Nevin Lim thinks wok hay is a harmony of taste. “When the Cantonese stir-fry garlic and spinach, they use the garlic to remove the raw taste of spinach. With good wok hay you will not taste the harsh flavor of garlic. Instead the two ingredients combine to create a harmony of taste,” says Lim.

In Hong Kong, where people tend to be very superstitious, wok hay is so coveted that “when a customer is served a stir-fry void of wok hay, it is often interpreted as an ominous sign,” says Chief Instructor Chef Ronald Shao of the Chinese Cuisine Training Institute in Hong Kong. No investments or wagers should be made on such an inauspicious day. My own family is no exception in their reverence for wok hay. My eighty-nine-year-old father has celebrated his birthday with dinner at Lichee Garden restaurant in San Francisco for over twenty years because of his admiration for Chef Siu Chah Lung’s stir-fries. Baba relishes the intensity of wok hay in every stir-fry—for him it is an auspicious symbol of vitality and life. According to Chef Siu, “Wok hay makes the food powerful and strong.”

The concept of wok hay is so ingrained in my own knowledge of food that I assumed the term was known by all Chinese. But wok hay is a strictly Cantonese expression. The cooking vessel that the Cantonese call a wok is, in fact, called guo in Mandarin. Neither the word nor the characters are the same. I showed the wok hay characters to countless people during my travels throughout China. The wok character refers to the pan; the hay character (known as chi or qi in Mandarin) means “energy” or “breath.” Culinary professionals were often familiar with the expression, but the average non-Cantonese person had no idea how to read the wok character, and those who could often looked at me in bafflement, wondering what wok energy or breath could possibly mean. I even searched for wok hay in a Chinese dictionary, but because it is so particular to the Cantonese dialect, it was not there.

“In China, only the Cantonese stress the importance of wok hay in a stir-fry,” says legendary Chinese food expert Florence Lin. “The Cantonese superiority at stir-frying is well known.” Lin, a native of Ningbo, near Shanghai, explains that, when cooks of her region stir-fry, it is often done slowly...
in a medium-hot wok to accentuate texture instead of wok hay. It was Lin who first explained to me that Cantonese weather — hot and humid throughout the year — prompted the Cantonese style of stir-frying. “In the summer months when temperatures can climb to well over a hundred degrees Fahrenheit, no one wants to stand in front of a stove longer than necessary.” She points out that in northern China, where there is a cold season, one finds more brises and slow-cooking stews. In the old days in Guangzhou, without refrigeration a stew could easily spoil from the afternoon until evening.

In addition, Lin explains, because Guangzhou’s growing season was longer, chefs had a richer selection of fresh produce, and proximity to the water provided a wealth of seafood. Cantonese chefs discovered that their style of stir-frying imparted a distinct wok flavor or wok hay while retaining the integrity of the ingredients.

Walking through the open-air markets of Guangzhou, I am always astounded by the quality of local produce. Fruits and vegetables have the sheen and fragrance found only in just-harvested crops. I watch a fishmonger net a swimming rock cod from a tank and place it on his cutting board, where he calmly fillets the live fish for a waiting customer. When ingredients are stir-fried at their peak flavor and texture, they deliver a true experience of wok hay.

Even though my stove at home cannot produce the fierce heat of a restaurant stove, I have nevertheless found ways to achieve wok hay. For example, I seek the freshest possible seasonal vegetables, such as Chinese broccoli in the winter or asparagus in the spring. I know if the produce is not at its peak ripeness, my stir-fry will have neither depth of flavor nor wok hay.

Standing at the stove, I reach for my well-seasoned flat-bottomed carbon-steel wok, which sits closer to the flame. I cut my ingredients into uniform, small sizes to ensure even cooking. I begin to heat the wok.

Many chefs taught me that wok hay is achieved only by adding cold oil to a hot wok. Heating the wok to the point of faint smoking before adding oil prevents food from sticking to the pan. If the wok is hot, the cold oil will dance or ripple on the surface. “The cold oil functions to cool down the wok slightly and thus makes food more tender,” says Chef Poon Chi Cheung of the Spring Moon restaurant in Hong Kong. According to Chef Poon, if the oil is heated in a cold wok, wok hay will not be achieved; ingredients will stick and burn, while remaining raw inside.

When I stir-fry, I judge the heat by placing the palm of my hand about 2 inches above the wok’s surface until I feel a warmth similar to that of a hot radiator. At this point the wok also gives off a wisp of smoke, and a bead of water will evaporate within 1 to 2 seconds of contact. I swirl in the oil while rotating the wok to spread the oil across the bottom. When the wok is hot enough, the aromatics I add will sizzle. “We cook by sound,” says Chef Ming Tsai. “If the wok is hot enough you will have a sizzling sound at all times.”

Once the stir-frying begins, my challenge is to protect the wok’s heat from dropping too drastically and sacrificing the wok hay. When a wok is not scorching hot, food cannot be seared and a stir-fry becomes watery. A wet or soggy ingredient can also lower the heat in the wok to a degree that makes the quick searing action of the stir-fry impossible to achieve. I always wash greens and then dry them thoroughly in a salad spinner. I remember my mother washing her vegetables early in the morning so that they could drain in the open air until dry to the touch.

Although I admire restaurant chefs’ expertise, some of their techniques do not make sense for the home cook. For example, restaurant chefs frequently oil-blanch ingredients for a stir-fry. This means that the ingredients are deep-fried for a few seconds before they are used in a stir-fry. At home oil blanching is unnecessary and impractical. Without it, stir-fries taste even lighter and fresher than those cooked in restaurants.

When Chinese chefs stir-fry, they use a cooking technique called pao, which requires jerking the wok in a small circular motion to toss the food, ensuring that everything cooks evenly. This, too, is impractical at home because it cools down the wok. I like to alternate between jerking the wok back and forth on the burner and using a metal spatula to keep the ingredients in constant motion.

On a home range, too much food in the wok reduces the temperature, changing any quick stir-fry into a slow braise. I never stir-fry more than 12 ounces of meat or a pound of chicken in a 14-inch wok. Any more than this and meat turns foamy gray within seconds, releasing its juices, crowding the wok, and making it impossible to sear. I also spread the meat around the wok to prevent any pieces from clumping together and losing contact with the wok’s hot surface. I resist the temptation to touch the meat for 20 seconds to 1 minute. This is critical because it allows the meat to sear, intensifying the flavors so distinctive to wok hay.
hay. After that I stir-fry the meat with a spatula 10 to 15 seconds, spread it again in the wok, allow it to sear for 30 seconds, and then stir-fry it again.

I stir-fry no more than 3 to 4 cups of vegetables at a time; with larger quantities vegetables on the bottom scorch while those on the top remain uncooked, again forcing the wok’s temperature to drop. Vegetables can be briskly stirred with a spatula the moment they are added to a wok. With good wok hay vegetables have a crisp texture the Cantonese call song, highly valued in Chinese cooking.

A stir-fry’s wok hay must be relished the moment it is cooked, before the elusive vital essence dissipates (similar, in a way, to a soufflé). I always serve my stir-fries immediately. A classic Cantonese stir-fry confers a special eating experience, and like my father and countless Chinese, I covet a stir-fry that possesses the rarified taste of wok hay, cherishing the sublime pleasure such a culinary wonder offers.

Tips for Stir-Frying with Wok Hay

• The best wok for a residential Western-style stove is a 14-inch flat-bottomed carbon-steel wok. If using a wok with metal handles, be sure to use pot holders when touching the handles.

• Make sure the ingredients are thoroughly prepped and uniformly sliced to ensure even cooking.

• Make sure vegetables are dry, to prevent stir-fries from becoming soggy. Allow vegetables to air-dry in a colander for several hours, or use a salad spinner to remove excess water.

• Measure and group all ingredients in order of their use in the recipe beside the stove for easy access.

• The wok must be hot before the oil is added. A carbon-steel or Chinese-made cast-iron wok must be heated on high heat until a faint wisp of smoke rises from the pan. Another test is to flick a bead of water into the pan; if it vaporizes within a second or two, the pan is hot enough.

• When using a powerful stove, I heat the wok until a faint wisp of smoke rises. I quickly turn off the heat, swirl in the oil, and then return the heat to high. This prevents the oil from smoking.

• Add the oil by swirling it into the wok down the sides, and then rotate the pan, allowing the oil to spread across the bottom.

• Whether stir-frying meat or poultry, spread the ingredients evenly in the wok. Cook undisturbed 20 seconds to 1 minute, allowing the meat to sear. Then stir-fry the meat with a spatula 10 to 15 seconds, spread the meat again in the wok and let it sear for 30 seconds more, and then continue stir-frying.

• Do not stir-fry more than 12 ounces of meat, 16 ounces (1 pound) of chicken, or 4 cups of vegetables in a 14-inch wok. Too many ingredients in a wok lowers the wok’s temperature, causing ingredients to steam rather than stir-fry.

• Alternate between jerking the wok back and forth on the burner and using a metal spatula to keep the ingredients in constant motion.

• Swirl sauce mixtures or any liquids into the wok down the sides to prevent the temperature of the wok from dropping.