

Bulbous herb is indispensable



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An important aromatic in any stir-fry, garlic has been used in Chinese cuisines for thousands of years, lending its signature stimulus to countless dishes

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It is an ancient herb, an allium native to Central Asia, and it has been used in Chinese cooking for thousands of years. In fact, any Chinese chef would be severely handicapped if he did not have garlic in his *mise en place*.

Garlic bulbs, garlic shoots and garlic flowers are all generously used in the cuisines of China, as an indispensable seasoning, a seasonal vegetable, and preserves, pickles and relishes.

In Yunnan, a southwestern province, there is a unique species of garlic that does not split into cloves but grows as a single bulb, the famous *dutousuan*, or “single-head garlic”.

It is milder but beloved by Yunnan chefs because of its slightly sweet flavor after cooking. It is used in vast quantities in the local cuisine and is an important ingredient when cooking mushrooms, for which Yunnan is equally famous.

Garlic normally grows as whole bulbs, with the size of the cloves varying according to cultivars. They are generally divided into hard-neck and soft-neck varieties.

Chinese garlic, which accounts for 80 percent of the world's total production, is of the large-cloved, hard-neck variety. It simply means

they have more robust scapes (green shoots), which grow erect and do not flop over easily.

An example of soft-neck garlic will be the tiny, tightly packed cloves of those native to Thailand. These take patience to peel, and the cloves are often used whole in the spicy dishes of Thailand.

Garlic is relatively easy to grow from individual cloves and, because it has anti-bacterial properties, is generally pest-free. It is, however, susceptible to fungus attacks.

In northern China, the garlic is planted after the autumn harvests. The soil is turned and the cloves are buried about 5 centimeters deep, to protect the garlic from the coming winter frosts. By spring, the shoots poke out from the soil, and just a little later in the year, bulbs will mature, ready for harvest.

Garlic is easily planted at home, as long as you have a good deep pot of friable soil. Choose nice fat cloves and place them so they are spaced 4 to 5 cm apart. It will give you a pot of decorative edible greenery for your kitchen.

The culinary uses of garlic are legion. Let's just look at garlic in the Chinese kitchen.

It is an important aromatic in any stir-fry, and minced garlic is added to oil so the fat is thoroughly infused with its fragrance. Any vegetable or meat added to the pan is then fla-

vored with its pungency.

Finely cut garlic is also deep-fried to a lovely golden brown and used as a garnish for steamed fish, stewed pork, fried rice or noodles, and any other dish that needs the stimulus of crunch and flavor.

In country kitchens in northern China, raw garlic is pounded to a mush and used as a dressing for blanched green vegetables. Lettuce stalks, wild amaranth, longevity spinach, beans and raw radish julienne all benefit from a few spoonfuls of mashed garlic and a sprinkle of salt.

It is potent stuff, however, so the uninitiated should proceed with caution.



Scallop topped with golden deep-fried garlic.

Also in the north, where sturdy dumplings are staples, cooks are fond of pickling whole garlic in brown vinegar and sugar. These *tangsuan* are prepared in spring, using the purple-tinged new season's bulbs that are still soft and tender, and whose skins have not yet turned papery.

After a week or so, the bulbs will be well-seasoned and ready to eat. They are fished out of the pickling crock whole and served during a dumpling feast.

The garlic bulbs are peeled and the cloves eaten whole, in between mouthfuls of dumplings. They are sweet, crunchy with just a little bite left and are believed to aid digestion of the heavy dough. In the south of China, garlic is also widely used in cooking, but the cloves tend to be more gently braised or slow-cooked to bring out the natural sweetness, avoiding its overwhelming raw pungency.

Garlic is used to create some signature sauces. It is finely chopped with chili peppers and green onions for a fiery red sauce that covers steamed seafood and meat.

It is minced and added to salted black beans for another classic Cantonese sauce that smothers soft-boned pork ribs, or is added to a stir-fry of bitter melons.

Whole garlic cloves are sauteed

Golden deep-fried garlic garnish

This is a very useful garnish that will give the finishing touch to any vegetable or meat dish, or even as a topping for a bowl of noodles. Keep the deep-fried garlic in an air-tight container and use the garlic-infused oil for stir-fries.

- 500g garlic, peeled
- 500 ml vegetable oil

Cut off the hard ends of the clove before thinly slicing, and then dicing, the garlic. Do not mince the garlic or use a blender. The garlic needs to cleanly retain its shape.

Soak the garlic in cold water. This gets rid of some of the juices that will make the garlic clump together when deep-frying.

Drain the garlic and spread it out on paper towels to thoroughly dry — another important step if you do not want the garlic to splatter in the oil.

Heat up the oil to about 150 to 160 C and add the garlic. Keep stirring to help it stay free and not clump together. Keep stirring until the garlic just starts to change color, then watch carefully so you get a light golden brown.

Remove the garlic immediately. It will continue browning with the residual heat. If you wait too long, it will turn black and bitter.

Cool and store the garlic. Keep the oil in a separate crock and use for stir-frying.

to a spotted golden brown in a classic soy-based stew of trotters and bean curd. By the time the dish is cooked, the garlic will have melted to nothing, having sacrificed itself to the aromatic gravy.

Whole garlic cloves are also quickly deep-fried to caramelize and then added to Chinese amaranth blanched in chicken stock. The vegetables become fragrant and melt in the mouth, and the garlic cloves are tasty amber nuggets hidden in the green.

Whole steamed fish are covered with garlic in a two-step process. Chopped garlic with a few red chili peppers is generously spread over a freshly dressed fish. This is steamed until just done, and then golden fried garlic is spooned over the whole fish.

The result is a purely tactile dance in the mouth. The sweet, flaky fish is flavored with the cooked white garlic tinged with red, while the crispy, crunchy fried garlic adds more fragrance and texture.

The health benefits of garlic are well known, but for the Chinese, who regard all food as medicine, it is the garlic's culinary possibilities that have made it an enduring favorite.