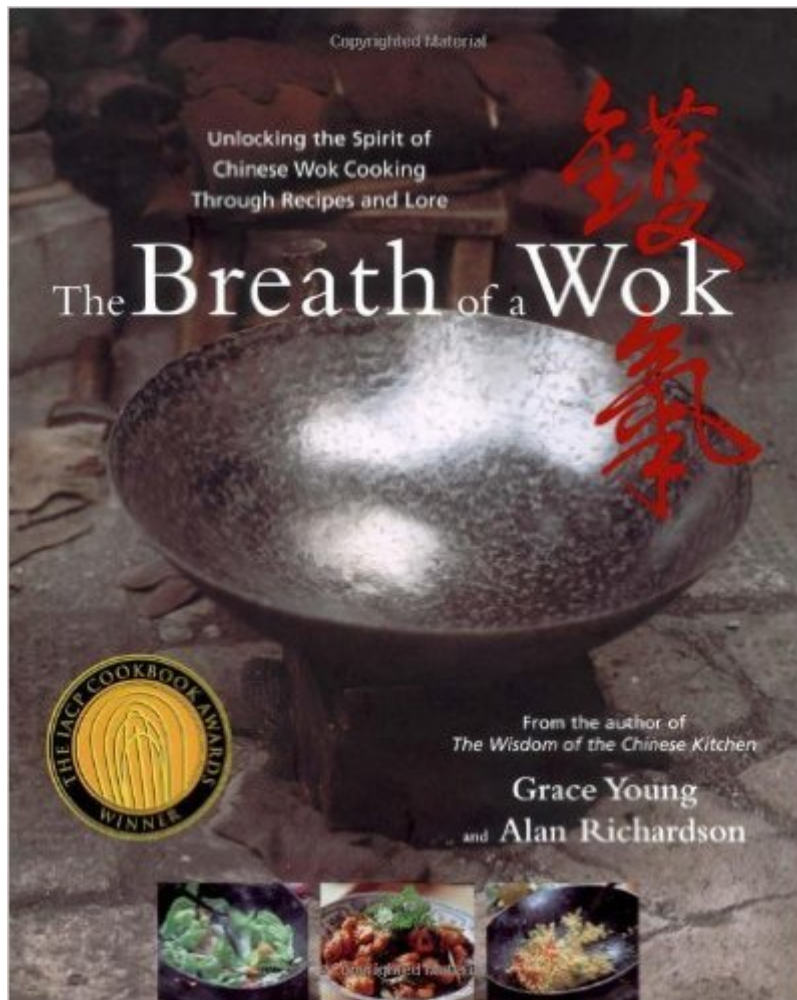


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# The Breath Of A Wok



## Synopsis

When Grace Young was a child, her father instilled in her a lasting appreciation of wok hay, the highly prized but elusive taste that food achieves when properly stir-fried in a wok. As an adult, Young aspired to create that taste in her own kitchen. Grace Young's quest to master wok cooking led her throughout the United States, Hong Kong, and mainland China. Along with award-winning photographer Alan Richardson, Young sought the advice of home cooks, professional chefs, and esteemed culinary teachers like Cecilia Chiang, Florence Lin, and Ken Hom. Their instructions, stories, and recipes, gathered in this richly designed and illustrated volume, offer not only expert lessons in the art of wok cooking, but also capture a beautiful and timeless way of life. With its emphasis on cooking with all the senses, *The Breath of a Wok* brings the techniques and flavors of old-world wok cooking into today's kitchen, enabling anyone to stir-fry with wok hay. IACP award-winner Young details the fundamentals of selecting, seasoning, and caring for a wok, as well as the range of the wok's uses; this surprisingly inexpensive utensil serves as the ultimate multipurpose kitchen tool. The 125 recipes are a testament to the versatility of the wok, with stir-fried, smoked, pan-fried, braised, boiled, poached, steamed, and deep-fried dishes that include not only the classics of wok cooking, like Kung Pao Chicken and Moo Shoo Pork, but also unusual dishes like Sizzling Pepper and Salt Shrimp, Three Teacup Chicken, and Scallion and Ginger Lo Mein. Young's elegant prose and Richardson's extraordinary photographs create a unique and unforgettable picture of artisan wok makers in mainland China, street markets in Hong Kong, and a "wok-a-thon" in which Young's family of aunties, uncles, and cousins cooks together in a lively exchange of recipes and stories. A visit with author Amy Tan also becomes a family event when Tan and her sisters prepare New Year's dumplings. Additionally, there are menus for family-style meals and for Chinese New Year festivities, an illustrated glossary, and a source guide to purchasing ingredients, woks, and accessories. Written with the intimacy of a memoir and the immediacy of a travelogue, this recipe-rich volume is a celebration of cultural and culinary delights.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

...this might just be it. This book was clearly a labor of love for Grace. It was written with the home cook in mind. From reading this book, along with her earlier volume, "Wisdom of the Chinese Kitchen," it is clear that Grace's family and mine have a lot in common--namely a love and reverence for traditional, home-style Chinese cooking. The recipes are clear, simple, and easy to follow. I love the fact that so many of them are gleaned from her aunties and uncles--just as they are in my family. And it's so much fun reading about the history and production of the wok--I'll never look at the 30-year old specimen handed down to me from my mom the same way again!! I have a good collection of Chinese cookbooks, including volumes by Barbara Tropp, Ken Hom, Yan Kit, and my own family (I come from a family of restaurateurs and chefs), and over the years gleaned pearls of wisdom from each, but like I said, if I had to choose only one, "Breath" might just be it. But please, don't ask me to actually do it...

I have taken this book out of the library so many times that I finally broke down and bought the book. I am an avid stir-fry cook and this book has some great wok stir-fry recipes, but it has so much more. It is a comprehensive guide to wok history, culture, maintenance and cooking techniques--and demonstrates how a wok can be used for so much more than stir-fry. The recipes are great and pretty foolproof. I also own *The Chinese Kitchen*, by Eileen Yin-Fei Lo. I like that book and use it often, but especially on busy weeknights, I appreciate that the recipes in *Breath of a Wok* generally call for far fewer ingredients and taste just as good.

We've all likely experienced the sizzle and vapors coming off wok prepared food, and that's one essential of proper wok cooking. Here renowned Chinese cookbook authority Young gives us the insight into the wok in Chinese lore and life, its seasoning and its history of developing recipes. What I found captivating was the history and exploration she takes us through of actual construction of woks, the hammering and shaping blacksmith approach and different ways of seasoning. There is some chapters which are so unique, e.g. The Master Lesson in smoking from an experienced wok

expert with then three recipes. This is delightful approach which continues with other experts offering techniques and recipes, e.g. Susanna Foo's Mango Chicken, a succulent dish with marinated vodkaed chicken and richen broth with asparagus, mango and candied walnuts. Yum!The steamed portion really interests me, especially prep of dumplings, such as "Shrimp Dumplings Spring Moon".The book is delightfully completed with an "Essentials" section replete with menus, glossary (usually with photos) metric equivalencies, sources.One will want to spend much time savoring in all the wonders and info in this jam-packed inspiration about wok cooking and history. It will aid all who have or desire to enter this rich historical cuisine. The color photography and writing are superb and add to its richness and captivating presentation. A masterpiece!

I purchased this book with high hopes - I'd read the glowing reviews on , plunked down my hard earned money, and shortly after it arrived I dove in head first.As did the author of "American Pie" (who travelled extensively in a search for sublime pizza), the authoress of this book traveled to culinary destinations in San Francisco, New York, Hong Kong, and Mainland China, in search of Wok stores, wok makers, and elite Chinese chefs - in search of wok lore, and recipes.The authoress then provides the reader with a helpful overview of the 3 basic types of wok (twin loop-handle Cantonese, northern-style with one handle, and the ubiquitous western-style flat-bottom wok), the best materials to buy them in (cast iron, or hand-hammered high-carbon steel), the various ways they're commonly seasoned, and how to maintain and care for them. Then she moves on to her recipe section.Strengths ? In no particular order:a) FRONT: The first 56 pages of this book, covering wok manufacture, selection, seasoning, and care, are very helpful and interesting. That was the material I actually purchased the book for.b) RECIPES: Some of the recipes included appear well crafted and very tasty - I'm actually looking forward to trying several.c) HEADNOTES: To me, a recipe is a participatory story, followed by a meal ... it's an act of communion with both the author, the more distant sources of the recipe, and with life itself. Depending on your introspectiveness and philosophical outlook, cooking can be a very deep experience. Accordingly, I'm always grateful when authors go to the trouble to include head notes for their recipes. I \*want\* to hear about a recipe's origins, and commentary on what makes it special, memorable or unique to the author, and I really miss that sort of thing when authors don't bother to include it. In this case, the author generally does an above average job.d) REAR: The section in the rear, listing some companies that specialize in wok equipment, custom stoves, wok burners, and even culinary training, are helpful, although they're apt to become quickly dated. This book actually has a pretty decent index in the back - in the body of the book, she commits the sin of prefixing her recipe names with the names of

the people they came from in, and she also fails to provide a list of recipes, but the index in the back is fairly complete, and she wisely reverses the ordering of named recipes (moving the name to the end, and leaving the key ingredient up front). The font used for the index is too small, but I've seen worse.

**Weaknesses ?** Unfortunately, I have quite a few:

- 1) **RECIPES:** There's only 125 recipes in here, which is pretty threadbare for a book retailing for (as of this writing) \$35 USD. Some look very good, but more than a few look decidedly mediocre.\* For example (and I know it's bad form to criticize someone's mother's recipe, so please forgive me in advance): "Mama's Fuzzy Melon with Dried Scallops". I'm sure it tastes wonderful, and the dish looks appetizing (if sized a bit small) - but the recipe contains some decidedly impractical steps. Few people are likely to spend 20 minutes simmering a one (1) oz piece of Smithfield ham, and then spend another 20 minutes steaming the blasted thing, before mincing it as the garnish. I'm sorry, but I am NOT going to futz around for 40 minutes on a 1 oz piece of ham that I could demolish with a single bite. Isn't going to happen. If I were to make that recipe, I'd more than likely replace the ham with some minced Chinese sausage or smoked bacon, either of which require oh, maybe a few brief moments of sautéing before being simmered with the rest of the dish.\* Another example is "Chef Danny Chan's Steamed Salmon with Lemon" (p.202). I don't know what planet the author lives on, but here on Earth, I'd be hard pressed to call adding lemon to steamed salmon as "innovative". People don't buy cookbooks to learn such unimaginative fare. The author doesn't even bother to specify whether the fillet is skinless and de-pinned or not ...but given the weak level (or rather, complete lack of) butchery skills elsewhere in this book, it's a safe bet that the fillet called for is indeed boneless and skinless ... which is a shame, because classic Chinese coastal cuisine includes things like steamed fish heads and fish-head stew. Proud though the author claims to be of her Chinese heritage, my impression of her (limited though it is to this book alone) is that she's not a very adventurous eater ... no bones, no organ meats, heck I'm not even convinced she knows how to break down a whole chicken at all.)
- 2) **WASTE:** Peasant cuisine, particularly Asian cuisine, is notorious in its adherence to frugality - nothing gets wasted. Heads, feet, and innards all get routinely used/eaten, no bones escape unsimmered, and people even fuel their home hearths with saved rice stalks ... and stack food in tall towers of steamer baskets to conserve fuel, etc. The author overviews all this, while waxing poetic, and at length ... and then, inexplicably, she includes some absurdly wasteful (and obviously non-authentic) recipes without batting an eye. For example: her recipe for chicken broth (p.195) calls for boiling a whole unchopped 4 lb chicken in water for an hour with a few slices of ginger ... and then she throws out the entire chicken and lists the yield as only 2 quarts of broth. Huh ?! I'm sorry, but that recipe is more than a little incompetent. Now, a recipe calling instead for 4 lbs of

chicken bones & wing tips would be cheaper, less wasteful, yield better tasting results, and several times the amount of stock. Another inexplicably wasteful recipe that stuck out in my mind was one on p.210 that calls for using 3 cups of oil to fry 8 spring rolls ... and then the oil is promptly discarded, without any mention or discussion about filtering, storing and reusing (or recycling). In fact, all of her fried recipes end the same way - with discarding copious amounts of oil after a single use.

3) SUPERSTITIOUS & VACUOUS CLAIMS: Some of the author's culinary tips are, at times, a bit superstitious ... and at other times, incorrect.\* Rice Rinse Water: She tells her readers to save their rice rinsing water because it has "special powers for cleaning one's wok". Sorry, but it's almost certain that that particular custom is a blindly parroted leftover from earlier pre-indoor-plumbing times when people had to laboriously cart their household water from streams, rivers or the local communal well ... they probably (and wisely) wanted to save themselves the extra trip by reusing water that wasn't too dirty. It has no special magical cleansing properties. Now, theoretically, doing something like that *might* eventually improve the patina of one's wok slightly, but I truly doubt it's worth the trouble.\* The author asserts, on pg 211, that woks are better at deep frying than a true deep fryer. Uhm, no. Deep fryers generally have a larger capacity, and (assuming equal heating capacity) much better heat recovery because of the volume of oil (and the thickness of the cast iron, if done stove-top). The author crows about how woks use less oil ... well guess what, less oil means less heat recovery. Low heat recovery means the oil cools quickly when you drop in the food, and food absorbs much more oil at lower temperatures ... resulting in oily food. Woks are, by definition, highly responsive to heat changes ... which is diametrically the opposite of what you want for frying, where heat retention and even heat distribution, is KING. So, no offense to the author, but woks are decidedly below average at frying - the only exception to that are large commercial woks with lots of oil and lots of firepower (as well as ample skill riding the heat) ... and those are not practical for home use. As long as I'm on the subject, the author seems to have a weak grasp of frying temperatures. She calls for 325F for frying spring rolls ... she doesn't bother telling the readers what some of the other classic frying temperatures are, like 350 for fries, or 380 for flash-fried calamari, etc. If you fry either of those at the 325 the author seems to indicate for everything, you'll get a greasy mess.\* In addition to frying, the author waxes poetic, and at length, about how woks are ideally suited to virtually every type of cooking: smoking, pan-frying, braising, boiling, poaching, steaming, stir-frying. etc. Sorry to break the news, but woks are NOT ideal several of those tasks. It's ideal for stir frying, and (if you have a strong heat source and proper steamer inserts) it's excellent for steaming ... but woks are decidedly average (at best) in most of the other areas. A wok cannot match a BBQ for smoking, nor can it match a heavy cast iron pan for pan frying, nor can it

match a Dutch oven for braising (I'd like to see the author attempt a "Yankee pot" roast in a wok ... that would be amusing). Make no mistake - with adequate skill, a wok is a wonderful all-purpose all-in-one pan, but the thing to remember is that while it can do many things, it only does a few of them exceedingly well ... and skill can only compensate for that to a point.\* Dont even get me started on the knee-jerk silliness of seasoning a wok with chinese chives. She goes on about that for pages and pages. I don't buy it.4) Photo/Recipe Mismatch: A recurring pet peeve of mine, with many cookbooks, is that the recipe photos frequently don't accurately reflect the recipes they're supposed to illustrate.\* For example: "Uncle Lang's Three Teacup Chicken (p.183)" - the photo shows a beautifully fried whole small head-on chicken. Unfortunately, the authoress' version of the recipe lamely calls for using split breasts (boring !) or whole legs instead. It really irritates me when authors aim low and/or underestimate their readers like that. I wanted to make the version in the photo, and shame on the authoress for not attempting the same.\* Another example is "Ray Lee's Cantonese Steamed Chicken" (p.202) - the photo shows perfectly braised chopped parts in a rich sauce (au jus ?) and garnished with scallion and onion ... it positively gleams with oil in the photo (since the dish in the photo is not steaming, it must be vegetable oil rather than the rendered fat of the chicken, because chicken fat solidifies at room temperature). The authoress' recipe lamely calls for using whole legs instead - they're marinated with all the other ingredients, and then steamed whole, and there's no mention of either a sauce, a garnish nor drizzling with oil.5) Insufficient procedural photos: In my not so humble opinion, any cook book that includes dumplings should include some procedural photos on how to make them for the benefit of the reader. Personally, I already know how to make dumplings, so this is really a nit on behalf of the readership at large.6) Gaps in the subject matter: This book is too short - the author could have covered the material in significantly greater depth and breadth than she did. Examples of some gaps she failed to cover:\* Wok Hearths: I'm pleased that the author went out of her way in the opening chapters to show passing glimpses of authentic Chinese hearth stoves, but I was disappointed that there's no photographic or descriptive information on the hearths themselves ... how they're typically laid out, how they're constructed, how they're stoked and used and cleaned, how ventilated, how protected from the weather, etc.\* Vegetable Oil: It boggles my mind that an author who focuses so directly on woks, and wok cooking, would give virtually no coverage to the varieties of cooking oils available, and their different qualities and quirks of use. The author largely ignores the entire topic, and just lists "vegetable oil" in all her recipes. If I were inclined to speculate, she probably omitted the material because she's clueless herself ... she could only write about what she knew and understood herself at the time. I was (and am) disappointed.\* Wok Accessories: She makes

frequent mention of putting heat-proof dishes and oval platters atop 1 inch high steamer racks in her woks, but she never shows the reader any photos of the same. She shows pictures of classic bamboo steamers, but not the racks and dishes most of her steamed recipes call for. That's an example of author laziness, and inattentive editing. I'll stop there. Bottom line: Despite its many shortcomings, I can still recommend this book ... but only for people who are very into their cookware, and who are specifically looking for an introduction to woks - how to select them, how to season them, and how to get started with using them. If you already own a good wok, and know the basics of wok cooking, save your money, because there are plenty of books out there that cover wok cooking with greater depth and skill. Personally, I'd like to see this book re-released in a greatly expanded and better edited edition at some point - the authoress had a great idea, but fell short of my expectations.

After reading this book I think that the stuff we get in most Asian restaurants is really just the prefab grocery store stuff they sell at Asian markets. So now I have been left asking a lot of questions. So I purchased a cast iron wok from China like the books suggests and have come up with wonderful results. I followed the seasoning techniques and now have a wok that is better than any I could purchase. One has to remember anyone can assemble the ingredients for a dish and measure to perfect portions. It's really the technique that makes the dish. This is probably the first Chinese cookbook to do so. From that point you can really understand the cuisine start to create real Chinese Cuisine.

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