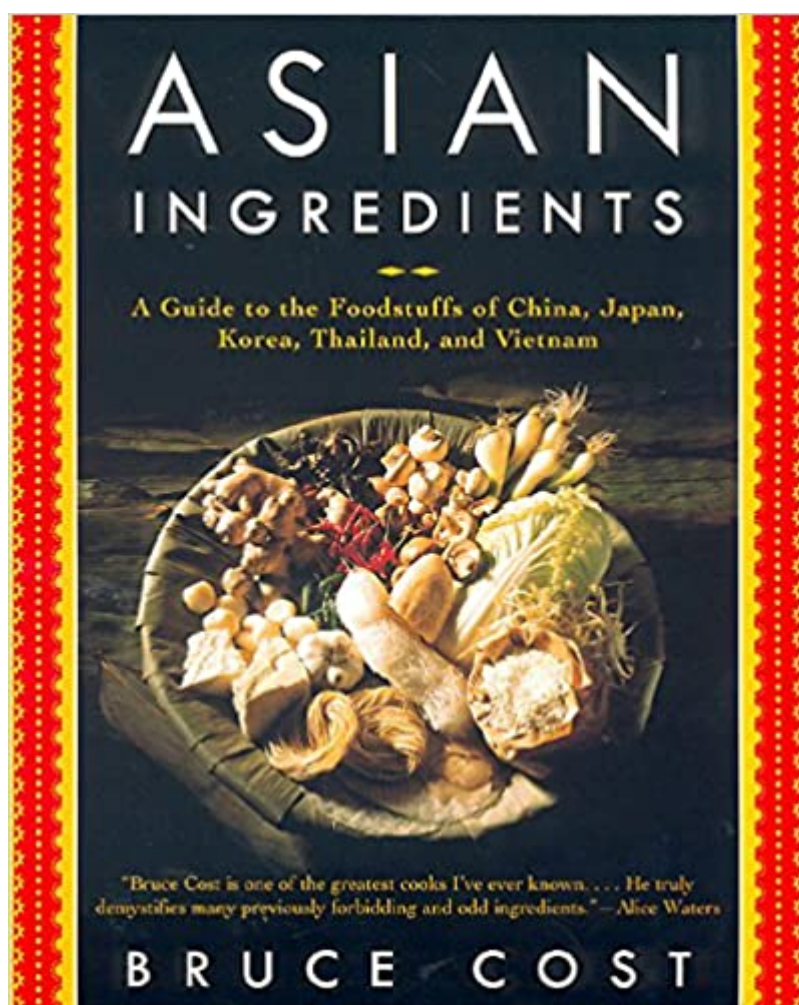


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# Asian Ingredients: A Guide To The Foodstuffs Of China, Japan, Korea, Thailand And Vietnam



## Synopsis

First published in 1988, Bruce Cost's Asian Ingredients was immediately hailed as one of the most comprehensive and fascinating books on Asian foodstuffs ever written. Now fully revised and updated, Asian Ingredients offers a wealth of information on identifying and using the often unfamiliar ingredients in traditional bottled condiments. This book's clear black-and-white photographs make it easy to identify ingredients in your local supermarkets or Asian grocery, while Cost's carefully researched notes explain how to select, store, and cook with these wonderful foods. Cost also includes more than 130 simple recipes for sumptuous Asian specialties. Cooks can create the dramatic flavors of China, Japan, and southeast Asia in their own kitchens with this indispensable resource.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Bruce Cost is one of the greatest cooks I've ever known . . . He truly demystifies many previously forbidding and odd ingredients."-- Alice Waters""Asian Ingredients is by far the most comprehensive guide to essential ingredients for Asian cooking ever published in English. It unfolds the many mysteries of precisely what you are tossing into your wok or skillet . . . the recipes are excellent."-- Craig Claiborne"For a long time, I have valued Bruce Cost as a cook. And his recipes, of course, are terrific. But even if you never set foot in the kitchen, you'll probably want this book. For if you have ever eaten in a Chinese, Japanese, Thai, or Korean restaurant and wondered what was on your plate, this book has the answers. I honestly can't imagine that any curious eaters will want to

be without it."-- Ruth Reichl, Editor in Chief, "Gourmet" This book is about a fascination with foodstuffs. It can be your guide through an immense and profound realm of Asian cuisine."-- From the Foreword by Alice Waters

Bruce Cost is widely recognized as one of the nation's leading experts on Asian cooking. An award-winning restaurateur and chef, acclaimed cooking teacher, and former food columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle, Cost is now a culinary partner in Big Bowl Restaurants, the Chicago-based chain renowned for its innovative pan-Asian food. He is the author of two other books, *Ginger East to West* and *Big Bowl Noodles and Rice*, a new collection of recipes from the restaurant.

*Asian Ingredients* is a cookbook in reverse. The familiar formula dictates that a little of the cookbook is dedicated to some cultural background tidbits and a glossary; the rest is devoted to recipes. Cost, as his title indicates, offers us a major tour of the foodstuffs with just a sprinkling of recipes throughout. And that is exactly why the book appealed to me. Here you get the best bookish knowledge mixed with personal experience as he gives ingredients not just names, but cultural context, almost bringing them to life as if historical characters. Soy sauce, he tells us in the introduction, "evolved from ancient methods of fermenting and preserving meat and game." The Chinese value fresh water fish above salt water because the latter are considered to be already partly preserved (less fresh) - salted by the water they swim in. Amongst gems like these are plenty of practical advice for both the market and kitchen. But while the book includes a Region of Use listing for each ingredient, the geographical origin of each recipe is unfortunately left a mystery. The book is also crying out for a separate recipe index. You would not buy this book for the recipes alone but I tried four or five and whenever I wore my reading glasses and did not try to cut corners, I ended up with some really good food. Simple Roast Chicken with Sichuan Pepper (I was drawn to the word Simple), for example got the thumbs up from my friend Linda. The photographs being black and white are not always as illuminating as they should be, and there may be a few questionable facts. For instance, we learn that Dong gwa (gua) is Cantonese for Winter Melon. Not mentioned is the fact that this pronunciation is virtually identical in Mandarin. All in all I would call this an excellent reference.

Being an Asian-American born in the US, sometimes we need something to understand Asian cooking and foodstuffs ourselves! I consider Bruce Cost the ultimate Asian food expert considering

he's not Asian! Everything is explained in an easy to understand manner and is authentic as any Asian food reference. His Big Bowl cookbook is also excellent.

`Asian Ingredients' by Bruce Cost is one of those books like Patience Gray's `Honey from a Weed' and Claudia Roden's `New Book of Middle Eastern Food' which gets cited as THE authority on its subject by culinary heavyweights such as Ruth Reichl and Alice Waters. So, in my quest for the perfect culinary library, I really need to read and review this book. I am very happy to say that the reputation of this book is not overdone. It is one of the finest books on culinary ingredients I have seen on either Oriental or Occidental cuisines. The author states from the outset that his objective was not to give us an encyclopedic work. What we get is much closer to some of the finer books on Mediterranean cuisine such as Nancy Harmon Jenkins' `The Essential Mediterranean'. In many ways, Cost's book is far more practical, albeit less analytical than Jenkins' work. Cost deals with the fairly homogeneous food world of Japan, Korea, China, Viet Nam, and Thailand. He mentions India as an influence on Thai cuisine, but does not deal directly with Indian cuisine, as it is substantially different from the cuisine of China and the rest of the Far East. The book also does not deal with the cuisine of the Philippines or Indonesia, as the cuisines of these two nations are heavily influenced by European colonization beginning in the 16th century. One of the best things about Cost's book is that it is organized in such a way to make it a pleasure to read for background information. While I have never sat down to read the Larousse Gastronomique for pleasure, I read Cost's book from cover to cover with great pleasure, skipping a very few subjects on which I was very familiar. Cost's book is divided into the following seven (7) major chapters: Fresh Ingredients including Herbs and Seasonings, Vegetables and Fungi, Meat, Poultry and Eggs, Fish Preserved and Processed Ingredients including Dried Ingredients, Cured Ingredients, and Soy and Coconut Condiments and Sauces including Soy based condiments, Fish based sauces, Chili based sauces, Vinegar and spirits, and Flavored oils Spices, Sugars, Nuts, and Seeds, including Spices, Sugar, Nuts and Seeds Rice Noodles and Wrappers Flours and Thickeners Cooking Fats and Oils One of the most dramatic lessons to be learned from this book is the fact that like the Mediterranean respect for dried and preserved ingredients such as salted cod, dried pasta, and dry beans, Asian dried ingredients such as seaweed, vegetables, fish, and mushrooms are highly regarded ingredients in their own right. They are not `second best'. By drying and concentrating their flavors, they bring something to the party that is simply beyond their fresh precursors. Another fairly dramatic discovery is the fact that while so many of the spices prized by Europe and so greatly desired by Renaissance Europe were grown just next door to China and Japan, these spices such as black pepper, nutmeg,

cloves, and cinnamon (cassias) really did not and still do not play a big part in East Asian cuisine, except for Thailand, which is influenced by the curries and other spices of India. Northern China and Japan almost totally reject the use of the 'cookie spices' except for ginger, which is used heavily throughout the region covered by the book. It is interesting to see both the harmony and the dissonance created when one lays Mediterranean and Far Eastern cuisine side by side. Some of the biggest parallels are the importance of garlic, pork, mushrooms, cilantro, and New World (capsicum) chilis. Some differences are in the relative importance of drying versus salt curing. As Nancy Harmon Jenkins points out, salt is much more important in the Mediterranean cuisines simply because the Mediterranean is saltier than the oceans, so it is a lot easier to acquire than on the Pacific Rim. There are some salt cured pork products, with hams very similar to Smithfield hams, but nowhere near as much of the Charcuterie / salume culture of Western Europe. The greatest differences between the two areas lies in the use of milk. There is simply no milk culture in East Asia from cows, goats, sheep, or buffalo. The Chinese and Japanese feel the same towards Europe's more aromatic cheeses as westerners may feel about fermented fish sauce, birds nests (dried bird saliva), and seaweed. Where the European uses animals' milk, the Asian uses milk refined from soy or coconut. An important part of this book, more important than similar samples in most other books of this type, is the recipes, especially for things such as fish and chicken stocks, which are far simpler than comparable French stocks. They are not just simpler; there is a whole rationale in the Chinese cuisine against including vegetables in chicken stock recipes. Two of the most useful aspects of this book are the recommendations on how to best use Asian markets and which commercial preparations are of a high quality. I had some reservations regarding a local Chinese run farmer's market with a fish counter until I read Cost's description of Asians' regard for freshness in fish. The 'Iron Chef' episodes where virtually all seafood ingredients are presented live is not for the sake of show business. These people are SERIOUS about their fresh fish! Note that while this book was originally written and published in 1988, the new paperback edition was revised in 2000, so the numerous comments about which prepared brand name ingredients are the best should be fairly current. This book is so good you will be remiss if you buy any other book on East Asian ingredients without first reading this new edition. Other books may offer better coverage of selected aspects of this subject, but this book is certainly the gold standard against which other books should be measured! Very highly recommended, especially if you like to read about food as well as eat it.

This excellent, informative book deserves to have been reprinted (how could such a fine book have

gone out of print?), but beware of the "fully revised and expanded" claim. I already owned the out-of-print hardcover and bought the new paperback edition to check out the updated information. I've looked pretty closely, and the only new copy I can find is very incidental (i.e., changing the locations of farms from exotic locations to the US as more domestic farmers are now growing Asian produce). No new recipes, either, although some new titles (to throw unsuspecting readers off the scent?). If you don't have this book, and you are an Asian food aficionado, do add it to your collection. However, I am very irritated at the publisher's suggestion that this is a new edition (it's a good old-fashioned reprint, and that's all) and at the previous reviewers who didn't find it necessary to warn other buyers of this important fact. I would rate it much lower for readers like me who own the original, but newcomers to this classic will find no quarrel.

For Christmas i got a cast iron wok... which was really exciting. However, I don't cook a with Asian flavors, though i wanted to learn. So i ordered this book to get an idea of what flavors other than soy sauce and sesame oil there were. I was pleased to discover that this book goes into extensive detail about so MANY ingredients it kinda makes your head spin with possibilities. So I would recommend this to anyone who wants to start out learning Asia's copious amount of yummy tasting ingredients.

Good book, very informative.

great

YUMMY!!

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