

# CHINA TOWN KITCHEN

**From Noodles to Nuoc Cham**  
Delicious Dishes from Southeast Asian Ingredients

**LIZZIE MABBOTT**

"I love her recipes;  
they're vibrant and inventive."

GIZZI ERSKINE





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# HOW TO USE THIS EBOOK

Select one of the chapters from the main contents list and you will be taken to a list of all the recipes covered in that chapter.

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Look out for linked text (which is underlined and/or in a different colour) throughout the ebook that you can select to help you navigate between related recipes.

# INT ROD UCTION ION

Of half Chinese and half English parentage, I grew up in Hong Kong. It's a smelly, noisy and hectic city; the name translates rather romantically as 'fragrant harbour' - really, it is anything but. Most people who visit are completely overwhelmed by it. My childhood memories are tinged with the smell of food cooking street-side, mingled with traffic fumes and garbage. Add to this heady mix the whiff of petrol from the sampans and ferries gathering in said harbour, and they blend together to make an unforgettable atmosphere. In summer, the temperatures reach a high of 35°C (95°F) with humidity only known in sub-tropical countries; when visiting recently, as my hair turned into a bird's nest, I wondered how I coped. I imagine I was less concerned about how I looked back then.

Growing up, some of my peers lived a more sterile life in townhouses in exclusive areas, their parents being ex-pats sent by their employers with expense accounts to pay the sky-high rents. When visiting, I was fascinated by the stairs they actually had in their houses. We were the opposite; my father moved to Hong Kong in the early '80s on a whim and my mother was a local. We lived just about everywhere on Hong Kong Island - from a relaxed, beachside apartment in the touristy Stanley area, to high-rise housing estates in Aberdeen and most memorably the grimy confines of Causeway Bay. My daily trip to school involved negotiating the dank, dark corridors of our apartment block, lit by flickering fluorescent lights, and then waiting at the bus stop early in the morning while butchers ferried carcasses down the streets, wearing them like a grotesque piggyback.

Although Hong Kong was a bustling place, it was safe on the streets and from a young age I was given absolute freedom of it. Outdoors in the stifling heat just off the busy roads, men and young students alike would sit on plastic chairs slurping up noodles, steam rising to their faces. Vendors sold fish balls on sticks, the charcoal enticing you in, finishing them with a lick of curry sauce and a shake of chilli powder while you impatiently waited for them to be cool enough to eat. We would spend weekends getting on the ferry to Lamma Island to gorge on seafood, and I would pretend to be the hand of God as I gleefully picked out a doomed fish from the tank to be freshly dispatched for our lunch. My favourite dish was clams freshly stir-fried with black beans, garlic and chilli. I'd suck the flesh out of one half of the shells, sauce dribbling down my face and staining my T-shirt. Like most Chinese kids, we were brought up to be ultimate eaters, and not much made us squeamish.

Roadside shacks with corrugated-iron roofs, dark and noisy within, served French toast piled high on melamine plates - bread dipped in egg and deep-fried, a jug of golden syrup to pour over it at the table. At lunchtimes, businessmen would fling their ties over their shoulders while ladies folded napkins on to their laps to come away pristine and ready to go back to work. Strong tea made with sweet

evaporated milk and then poured at a height to make a frothy top was how I learned to love caffeine.

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Strip-lit cafés served junky instant noodles in salty broth, perhaps topped with a slice of fried SPAM, or a fried egg nestling on top. I still love SPAM, as you might come to realize. The best chicken you could eat came from places like this, fried with a drizzle of soy sauce and a slick of ginger and spring onion oil. It was for everyone – the poor, the wealthy. Everyone in Hong Kong had a passion for food. This wasn't just food you'd eat as a guilty pleasure; it was part of Hong Kong culture.





Sundays were spent in cavernous, brightly lit restaurants for the family dim sum brunch. Back then, my grandfather would arrive first, far earlier than everyone else, to nab the best table. He'd read the paper, sip tea and snack on a few spring rolls while our family gathered in dribs and drabs, noisily greeting each other and settling into their seats. Trolleys full of steamers wheeled past, their drivers calling out their contents. I would poke my head inquisitively in their direction and the ladies pushing them would cock a lid so that I could steal a glimpse of inside. I'd gaze wide-eyed, nose wrinkled as elder aunties would choose a braised chicken's foot from the steamer for their bowl, only to suck all the skin off the bones and then delicately but deliberately spit all the bones out on to the tablecloth, chopsticks sometimes guiding the way. It was a real art, honed by many years of practice and one I haven't yet mastered but perhaps something to look forward to in later life. The lazy Susan piled high with dishes constantly revolved and I soon learned not to spin it before my time; a sharp rap on the knuckles with a chopstick was all it took.

My grandmother lived with us for many of my formative years. She'd get us out of bed in the morning with a devastating wrench of the duvet cover, tell us off when my sister and I fought and take us for secret snacks at McDonald's. If ever we expressed a particular fondness for an after-school snack, that was it; it would be ours every day until we pleaded for something new. Often we'd go to the wet markets with her. The people manning the stalls were all familiar friends and they'd coo over my sister and ruffle my hair, teasing me for looking like a boy with my boy haircut (thanks Mum). My grandmother would wander from stall to stall, selecting the fresh vegetables and picking up still-wriggling fish to inspect their freshness. A finger pointed at a particular chicken pacing nervously in a cage would mean the end for it; she always instructed me to look away when it was dealt with, and I disobeyed only once. The chicken soup that evening was difficult to swallow.

In the kitchen, though, we were often shooed away. Hong Kong kitchens are never spacious - there were always pots and pans bubbling away, a wok sizzling, a rice cooker steaming. We were relegated to the living room to be amused by the television. I learned no culinary skills from my grandmother, much to my dismay, but what was imparted to me was the joy of eating.

I moved to the UK when I was 13 and I soon realized that the food I grew up with was unobtainable in rural Suffolk. My poor mother was left to fend for herself in a foreign country with two children while my father tied up all the paperwork back in Hong Kong, and not being much of a cook herself and rather homesick too, we ate a lot of Chinese takeaway. We were aghast by the nuclear-orange sweet and sour chicken, and repulsed by the sickly-sweet crispy chilli beef, but at least some of the noodle dishes were passable and others that were served with rice. I threw myself

into British life. Those dishes now hold a special place in my heart.

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By the time I left home at 18 and moved to London, I really did miss the meals of my childhood. Nostalgic flashbacks would come unbidden. On some winter days, I wouldn't be able to get the thought of tender, melting beef brisket slow-braised with star anise and cinnamon out of my head. Other times I actively craved that sunshine-yellow egg custard tart; I'd positively drool over the memory of still-warm flaky pastry, the just-set custard dissolving in my mouth. It was unbearable.

So I began researching recipes for those dishes I missed, from comforting homestyle cooking to fancier restaurant dishes. This took me to the heart of Chinatown, and tentatively I studied labels on jars, bought odd-looking ingredients on a whim and had to look up how on earth I'd use them once I got home. It was an experimental and lengthy process, but I fell in love with the Asian supermarkets. Not only did they provide me with access to delicious food, each trip was a trip down memory lane – I could pick up particular brands and squeal 'I remember this!'

I started my blog, Hollow Legs, in March 2008 so that I'd be able to document the recipes I was discovering. The name came from a nickname my parents gave me for my insatiable appetite (commonly known as greediness). I trawled forums, blogs, recipe sites and the like to get an idea of the recipes I was after so that I could experiment with them all, borrowing ideas from some and embellishing others with my own touches – often, more chilli was added to spicy dishes, more vinegar to sour. My taste buds seem to love those flavours the most. Slowly but surely I learned to cook. It was very much trial and error – a LOT of error, aided by some cursing – but the Internet is a wonderful thing. YouTube videos showed me various cooking techniques, while other blogs with step-by-step instructions or pictures helped me out with the rest. The Asians are a keen bunch, not only loving their food but having an incredible desire to share their recipes.

Over time, I grew more adventurous; I branched out into other cuisines such as Korean, Japanese and Thai. Though I admire Western cookery and I am seriously fiendish for pasta, it never quite took me as much as Asian food did, and still does. Asian food fascinates me; bright, perky, in-your-face flavours dominate the Asian cuisines, and they take no prisoners. Several trips to Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore cemented this fascination, while the Asian supermarkets, be it in Chinatown or online, enabled me to make the recipes I loved the most at home in the UK.

This book is a guide to the Asian supermarket and the treasures you can find within. The supermarkets themselves are often described as intimidating, daunting or confusing. They're usually big spaces, packed with packets, jars, tins and spices in

varying degrees of comprehensibility. My hope is that in sharing the main attributes of common ingredients via the recipes here, the intimidation will lessen and you will gain confidence in Asian food, as I did.

This isn't supposed to be an educational tome, tangled in the authenticity of cuisines. There are some classic recipes remade to my take in here, but you'll also find that I've downright rejected authenticity in a couple of the recipes to make way for what tastes good – that's what it's all about, isn't it? It's what I hope to be a fun, accessible book that showcases ingredients used often in Asian cookery. Each chapter has a list and summary of things you might find in each aisle – a sort of index, so that after a quick glance for reference you can find what you're looking for more easily or which category something belongs in.

I can't say that after cooking from this book that you will become an expert in Asia cuisine (is anyone, really?), but that isn't really my intention either. What I hope for is that you'll feel the excitement I get when I walk into an Asian supermarket; a sense of flavoursome possibility, and a feeling of adventure in experimenting with everything inside them.

# BASIC EQUIPMENT

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## WOK & LID

The humble wok is probably the most important piece of equipment in the Asian kitchen. Don't bother with the expensive fancy nonstick coated types; all you need a flat-bottomed stainless steel one that you can buy from most Asian supermarkets, some cooking oil and a bit of time to make it nonstick.

Firstly, open all the doors and windows of your kitchen, as this can get a little smoky. Use a brush or a sponge with plenty of soapy water and give the wok a good scrub, to remove the machine oil residue. Dry the wok and then place it on the hob over the highest heat. Move the wok around so that the heat reaches the sides all over – you will see it will start changing colour. Add 3–4 tablespoons of vegetable oil to the wok and swirl it around carefully, using a piece of kitchen paper to reach the more difficult places. Continue heating like this for another minute or two, then take off the heat and wipe any residual oil out. Leave to cool for 10 minutes, then place back on the heat with another tablespoon of oil and repeat the process until you have a uniform brown/black patina developing.

Don't stir-fry any starches, such as rice or noodles, until you have used the wok a few more times and have really developed that patina further. After you have used your wok, clean it with water – no soap or detergent – and a soft brush, then place back on the heat to dry it, wipe it round with a little cooking oil and leave to cool. This prevents it from rusting. You soon get into the habit.

## DOLSOT

A dolsot is a traditional Korean granite stone bowl, used for dishes such as bibimbab (rice topped with ingredients, followed by a raw egg that cooks in the residual heat of the bowl – most prized for the crispy rice that forms at the bottom of the bowl). When heated on the stove or in the oven, the granite retains the heat well, and so cooks the dish more effectively. The dolsot should be heated gradually to avoid cracking the bowl.

## CHINESE CLAY POTS

These usually come in various sizes with a lid. They should be soaked overnight in a sink full of water before their first use, and like the dolsot, should be heated gradually after being soaked in cold water for 15 minutes first. The Chinese believe that cooking in clay pots give the dish a distinct flavour and keeps the nutrients within. Claypots are mainly used for one pot dishes, such as Bo Kho or Braised

## **RICE COOKER**

You don't have to have one of these, but it's worth it if you are going to be cooking a lot of Asian food. It frees up hob space, you don't have to worry about anything bubbling over and it keeps rice warm for as long as you like.

## **STEAMER**

Either a metal steamer insert for a saucepan or a bamboo steamer are ideal. A metal steamer insert for the wok is also great for steaming larger ingredients.

## **CLEAVER**

A simple chopping cleaver from the Asian supermarket is great for when you need to chop through meat or poultry bones or carcasses. Otherwise, a chef's knife has served me well.

## **COOKING CHOPSTICKS**

These are particularly good for moving delicate ingredients around, far more so than tongs.

## **METAL SPATULA**

As well as cooking chopsticks, a metal spatula is handy for moving food around at high heat.

## **CHOPPING BOARD**

A large, sturdy wooden chopping board is a good idea; Asian cooking often involves a lot of chopping of different items, and for efficiency I like to have all my ingredients for cooking lined up and ready to go.

## **PESTLE & MORTAR**

A sturdy pestle and mortar is very handy for Asian food. They are useful to make garlic or ginger pastes, or dressings. Look for a high-sided granite one; they're best for keeping ingredients in one place, so you can go to town with the pestling. You can use a mini chopper, but many say a curry paste made by hand is far superior.

# BASIC INGREDIENTS

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Loading up with supplies for an Asian kitchen storecupboard can be a bit daunting, but once you have got these items in store, it means that for each individual recipe you will only need to pick up fresh ingredients and a flavouring or two.

## LIGHT SOY SAUCE

This is the most commonly used seasoning in Japanese and Chinese dishes, its primary function being to add salt to dishes. It's worth buying the best quality you can, as it's used so often and there is a real difference in quality. I favour Pearl River Bridge Premium Deluxe. Tamari is a gluten-free alternative for coeliacs.

## DARK SOY SAUCE

This soy sauce is used sparingly, often for a hint of colour and a caramel-like depth of flavour, so you can start off with a smaller bottle.

## OYSTER SAUCE

Thick, glossy and slightly sweet, oyster sauce is frequently used to give sauces body, or to season vegetables. When choosing which brand to buy, look for the highest percentage of oyster extract in the ingredients.

## FISH SAUCE

Mostly used in Thai, Cambodian, Laotian, Filipino and Vietnamese food, fish sauce is an amber-coloured liquid that is fermented with salt. It is often used to cook with, but is also used in dressings and dipping sauces. The quality of different fish sauce brands varies; I prefer Three Crabs for a more subtle and smooth flavour.

## CHINKIANG BLACK VINEGAR

Used mostly in Southern Chinese dishes, Chinkiang black vinegar has a smoky flavour with a hint of sweetness. It's usually added to a dish at the end of cooking to preserve its delicacy, and is also used for dipping sauces and marinades.

## RICE VINEGAR

Clear and white, rice vinegar is much stronger and more acidic than black vinegar, though still more mellow than Western counterparts.

## RICE WINES

Shaoxing rice wine is used the most in this book, but it's also worth picking up some

cooking sake if you come across it, for Japanese dishes.

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## SESAME OIL

Toasted sesame oil is frequently used to flavour a dish, rather than to cook things in. The anomaly is when it comes to Korean food, where sesame oil is often used to cook with but usually untoasted for a milder flavour. If you don't want to buy both, go for toasted and mix it with a little vegetable oil when preparing Korean dishes.

## CHILLI OIL

Make your own by heating chilli flakes in vegetable or groundnut oil. You can also grind together dried chillies, salt and garlic with a pestle and mortar, then slowly cook the mix in vegetable oil until red hued and infused. Alternatively, there are lots of great chilli oils you can buy ready made. I like jars with sediment in, for extra kick and I always check the label for ones without MSG ([monosodium glutamate](#)) or E numbers.

## FRAGRANT JASMINE RICE

You can use basmati, you can use brown, but white fragrant jasmine rice is the most commonly used rice in Asian cookery. If you're serious about Asian food, I'd urge you to get a [rice cooker](#). But otherwise, follow the [cooking method](#).

## GINGER, GARLIC & SPRING ONIONS

I am never without these three ingredients, often considered to be the holy trinity of Chinese cooking, and garlic is used liberally throughout Asia. So it's worth keeping these items on hand at all times.

## WHITE PEPPER

You can buy whole white peppercorns, but the ground stuff is pungent too and much easier to handle.

## COOKING OIL

A lot of my recipes start off with 'Heat the oil in a wok'. My oil of choice is vegetable or sunflower oil; olive oil, though healthier, is too flavoursome for Asian cooking, and peanut or groundnut oil, which many traditional cooks use, goes rancid comparatively quickly.

## CORNFLOUR & POTATO STARCH

These are used a lot in marinades and to thicken sauces. While most of the time the



two are interchangeable, potato starch crisps up better for deep-fried food.

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## **DRIED SHIITAKE MUSHROOMS**

These are often added to dishes or used as a flavouring. Always buy them whole and look for those with a white fissured flower pattern on the cap; these are more expensive, but better quality. To use, soak in water overnight for the best flavour, but if you're in a rush, you can soak them in boiling water for 30 minutes without too much detriment. Always discard the stem before using, and you can strain the mushroom water to use as a stock.



**CHAPTER**

**SAUCES & CONDIMENTS**

# **SAUCES & CONDIMENTS**

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**Dak Doritang**

**Doenjang Jjigae**

**Chinese Spag Bol**

**Deep-Fried Whole Fish in Chilli Bean Sauce**

**Beef in Black Bean Sauce**

**Japanese Spinach and Cucumber Salad**

**Chinese Fried Chicken**

**Stir-Fried Squid with Celery in Shrimp Sauce**

**Caramel Pork Belly**

**Smacked Cucumber Salad**

**Grilled Aubergines with Nuoc Cham**

**Nuoc Cham**

**Hoi Sin & Ginger Pork Ribs**

**Stuffed Sambal Mackerel**

**Sambal Belacan**

**Thai Shrimp Paste Rice**

**Miso-Braised Pork Belly**

**Seared Salmon & Miso Mayo Sandwich**

**Miso Mayo**

**Miso-Buttered Corn on The Cob**

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Many Asian sauces and condiments head for one objective; Japanese miso paste, Sichuan chilli bean paste and Korean doenjang and gochujang are all made by fermenting soya beans in order to build a base layer of that fifth taste that accompanies the other four of sweet, salty, bitter and sour – umami. The best way to describe it is deeply savoury; yes, it's salty, but it's more than that. It's what makes your dish go from tasting good to tasting excellent. MSG (monosodium glutamate), which is now a dirty word, is chemically manufactured umami, but this chemical compound is naturally occurring in foods like tomatoes, mushrooms and Parmesan cheese. Anchovies have a high level of umami too, which goes a little way to understanding the liberal uses of fish sauce, shrimp sauce and prawn paste in many cuisines. It is, in the simplest sense, deliciousness.

In an ideal world, we would be able to make everything we eat completely from scratch, without E numbers and preservatives, but in Asian cooking life is just too short to ferment your own soya beans and make your own soy sauce. All the following sauces and condiments are available in Asian supermarkets. Some brands are of higher quality than others, and when I'm shopping for them I tend to check the labels, as some have more E numbers than others.

I'm sure there are many soya bean-based condiments, but the following are the ones that I've found to be most commonly available in my Asian supermarket snoopings, and those I use the most.

## **GOCHUJANG**

This is Korean chilli paste, made by fermenting soya beans with chilli, salt and glutinous (sticky) rice in the sun. Often sold in a red plastic tub, the paste is smooth, vividly red and tacky. As far as chilli heat goes, it's fairly mild and quite sweet. It's used to flavour soups and stews, added to dressings and also makes a mean coating for crisp fried chicken, affectionately coined KFC (Korean fried chicken).

## **DOENJANG**

Literally meaning 'thick paste' in Korean, rich brown doenjang is fermented soya beans without the chilli and is often sold in a coarser-textured form than gochujang though it's just as sticky. It has a slightly yeasty, nutty aroma to it and a deep savoury edge, and is normally mixed with other pastes to make a dip, or dissolved into stews.

## **CHILLI BEAN PASTE**

Called doubanjiang, this paste is the basis of many Sichuanese dishes, and is very spicy. It has a looser, rougher texture than its Korean counterpart, and does not have the latter's sweetness. It is sometimes made with broad beans as well as soya beans.

## **YELLOW BEAN PASTE**

Contrary to its name, this is a smooth, dark brown sauce, salty and slightly sweet in flavour, used in Chinese cookery, most commonly in noodle and stir-fried dishes.

## **FERMENTED BLACK BEANS**

You can buy salted, fermented black beans whole, usually with ginger, or already ground up and mashed into a sauce. I prefer the whole beans, as they last forever in the cupboard and you can be more versatile with them – some dishes don't require them to be pulverized into a paste. Again, these are made by fermenting and salting black soya beans. They're incredibly salty, so it's best to give them a bit of a rinse before you use them to get rid of the excess salt and to plump them up a bit. Black beans are used as a flavouring: add them to stir-fried vegetables and meat, mash them with some water to make a sauce or scatter a few over fish before you steam it.

## **HOI SIN SAUCE**

Known as the barbecue sauce of the Chinese world, hoi sin is sweet and ubiquitous, and slightly trashy due to its misattribution as plum sauce for roast duck and pancakes (though I find it works perfectly well with it). It's dark to almost black, sticky, thick and, you've guessed it, made with soya beans. It also contains sesame, garlic, salt, vinegar and sometimes chilli to flavour it.

## **MISO**

The backbone of Japanese cuisine, miso comes in many guises; some varieties are made with fermented rice, others with fermented barley, but most types commercially available in the West are made from soya beans. Miso comes in various grades, from white (shiro), the mildest and sweetest miso, to red (aka), which is saltier and more intense, as well as in various forms depending on the Japanese region of origin. You are unlikely to have much choice other than colour, unless you are in a serious Japanese food shop, so the rule of thumb is that red is much stronger and saltier than white, therefore use it sparingly. Miso can be used to make dressings, soups and sauces; try not to bring it to the boil, as all the health benefits are ruined by excessive heat.

# SHRIMP PASTES

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There are many different variants of shrimp or prawn paste, ranging from solid blocks and pastes with molasses-like textures to very liquid and runny. Confusingly, they are almost all called shrimp (or prawn) paste.

## BELACAN

Otherwise known as shrimp paste, belacan is sold as a dark brown, solid block. It's made with fermented ground shrimps and salt, and is most commonly used in Thai, Malaysian, Laotian, Cambodian, Vietnamese and Filipino cuisines. Essential in many curries and sauces, it's usually cooked before consumption. It smells horrid when you give it a sniff out of the packet (a recurring theme, you may find), but once it's cooked it transforms into a mouth-watering flavour – umami in action.

## HAE KO

Also called petis udang, this shrimp paste is thick and gloopy like treacle. It's made with sugar for a sweeter consistency, and is mainly served as a condiment in Malaysian cooking with dishes such as popiah rolls and assam laksa.

## FINE SHRIMP SAUCE

Also known as fine prawn paste and called mam tom in Vietnamese, this is smooth with a greyish-purple colour, a very liquid paste and is probably the smelliest of them all. It's mixed with chilli, garlic and lime to make a Vietnamese dipping sauce for seafood, and also for marinating meat.

## FISH SAUCE

Fish sauce is integral to a number of Asian cuisines, such as Thai, Cambodian and Vietnamese. Made by fermenting fish with salt, it is used as a seasoning both in cooking, as dressings and as dipping sauces. It too contains that essential fifth flavour of umami. Some can be harsher and more pungent than others, so when using fish sauce, use the quantities given as a guide only and taste as you go along.

## SESAME PASTE

Not made with soya beans or fish! Sesame paste comes in two forms: light, which you may be more familiar with as tahini, and a dark, rich brown, which is roasted sesame paste. Both have their uses, but I prefer the latter for a more complex flavour. It's mostly used in salad dressings, or for tossing with noodles.

# DAK DORITANG

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The glorious thing about many Korean stews is that the method generally consists of 'chop, dump in pot and cook'. Perfect for lazy cooks, like me on a weeknight. Or weekend. Given the short cooking time for this, it has a surprisingly deep flavour. Be sure to use chicken thighs, as the darker meat is far more flavoursome than the breast meat.



4 large bone-in chicken thighs – get your butcher to chop each into 2 for you, or get your cleaver out  
6 new potatoes, sliced in half so that they are bite-sized  
2 white onions, each chopped into 6  
2 carrots, peeled and roughly chopped  
handful of green beans – or any greenery you have, really  
4 spring onions, diagonally sliced, to garnish

For the sauce:

2 tbsp [gochujang](#)  
3 tbsp coarse Korean chilli powder (this is not blow-your-face-off stuff but gives it the red colour, so if you use a different chilli powder be careful with quantities)  
5 garlic cloves, very finely chopped  
5cm (2in) piece of fresh root ginger, peeled and very finely chopped  
3 tbsp light soy sauce  
1 tbsp white sugar  
1 tbsp Shaoxing rice wine  
2 tbsp tomato ketchup (yes, really)  
4 tbsp water

Bring a saucepan of water to the boil and drop the chicken pieces in. Simmer for 20 minutes. Drain and rinse the pan and the chicken thoroughly.

Meanwhile, combine all the sauce ingredients in a bowl, add the chicken and toss well.



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