

Make these toothsome noodles with shreds of tender chicken

Much like a Chinese finger trap that lures by appearing to be a toy, sesame noodles are not what they seem. You may think of them as merely a humble bowl of cold noodles, but don't be fooled—just one bite and you're hooked on these toothsome noodles with shreds of tender chicken, all tossed with the fresh sesame sauce. The real problem is, good versions of this dish can be hard to find. The cold noodles have a habit of turning gummy, the chicken often dries out, and the sauce is notorious for turning bland and pasty. We wanted a recipe that could not only quell a serious craving but could do it fast.

Though drawn to the softer texture of fresh Asian-style noodles, we conceded that dried spaghetti could serve as a second-string substitute. The trouble with both types of noodle, however, was that after being cooked and chilled, they gelled into a rubbery skein. After trying a number of ways to avoid this, we found it necessary to rinse the noodles under cold tap water directly after cooking. This not only cooled the hot noodles immediately but also washed away much of their sticky starch. To further forestall any clumping, we tossed the rinsed noodles with a little oil.

Boneless, skinless chicken breasts are quick to cook and easy to shred; the real question is how to cook them. The microwave seemed easy in theory, but we found the rate of cooking difficult to monitor—30 seconds meant the difference between underdone and overdone. Many recipes suggested poaching the chicken in water or broth, but this chicken had a washed-out flavor. Nor was roasting the answer; it caused the outer meat to dry out before the interior was fully cooked. Cooking under both gas and electric broilers, however, worked perfectly. The chicken cooked through in minutes, retaining much of its moisture and flavor.

To be authentic, the sesame sauce should be made with an Asian sesame paste (not to be confused with Middle Eastern tahini), but

most recipes substitute peanut butter because it's easier to find. Somewhat surprisingly, tasters preferred chunky peanut butter over smooth, describing its flavor as fresh and more peanutty. We had been making the sauce in a blender and realized that the chunky bits of peanuts were being freshly ground into the sauce, producing a cleaner, stronger flavor. We found the flavors of both fresh garlic and ginger necessary, along with soy sauce, rice vinegar, hot sauce, and brown sugar. We then stumbled on the obvious way to keep the sauce from being too thick or pasty: Thin it out with water.

Although the sauce was tasting pretty good, tasters still complained that there was not enough sesame flavor. Tossing the rinsed pasta with toasted sesame oil helped a bit, as did garnishing the noodles with toasted sesame seeds. But tasters were still not satisfied; they wanted more. Finally, we tried adding some of the toasted sesame seeds to the sauce. Blended into the sauce along with the chunky peanut butter, the sesame seeds added the final kick of authentic sesame flavor we were all hankering for.

SESAME NOODLES WITH CHICKEN

Ingredients

Servings: 4

Start to finish: 1 hour

5 tablespoons soy sauce
1/4 cup chunky peanut butter
1/4 cup sesame seeds, toasted
2 tablespoons rice vinegar
2 tablespoons packed light brown sugar
1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
2 garlic cloves, minced
1 teaspoon hot sauce
1/2 cup hot water

4 (6-ounce) boneless, skinless chicken breasts, trimmed
Salt and pepper
1 pound fresh Chinese noodles
2 tablespoons toasted sesame oil
4 scallions, sliced thin on bias
1 carrot, peeled and grated

Preparation

Puree soy sauce, peanut butter, 3 tablespoons sesame seeds, vinegar, sugar, ginger, garlic, and hot sauce in blender until smooth, about 30 seconds. With machine running, add hot water, 1 tablespoon at a time, until sauce has consistency of heavy cream (you may not need entire amount of water).

Adjust oven rack 6 inches from broiler element and heat broiler. Spray broiler pan top with vegetable oil spray. Pat chicken dry with paper towels, season with salt and pepper, and lay on prepared pan. Broil chicken until lightly browned and registers 160 F, 10 to 15 minutes, flipping chicken over halfway through broiling time. Transfer chicken to cutting board, let cool slightly, then shred into bite-size pieces. Meanwhile, bring 4 quarts water to boil in large pot. Add noodles and 1 tablespoon salt and cook, stirring often, until tender. Drain noodles, rinse with cold water, and drain again, leaving noodles slightly wet. Transfer to large bowl and toss with oil. Add shredded chicken, scallions, carrot, and sauce and toss to combine. Sprinkle with remaining 1 tablespoon sesame seeds and serve.

Nutrition information per serving:

700 calories; 194 calories from fat; 22 g fat (3 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 101 mg cholesterol; 2205 mg sodium; 79 g carbohydrate; 6 g fiber; 12 g sugar; 45 g protein.



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