

Chinese Chicken Salad with Sesame Noodles and Rice Vinegar Cucumbers

RICE VINEGAR CUCUMBERS

2 cucumbers, peeled, seeded,
and cut into 1/4-inch-thick rounds
1/4 teaspoon salt
1 large carrot, julienned
1 clove garlic, minced
1 tablespoon peeled and grated fresh
ginger
1 tablespoon minced fresh mint
2 scallions, white parts only, minced
1/4 cup rice vinegar
2 teaspoons sugar

CHICKEN

1/4 cup Chinese rosé wine or 2 tablespoons
dry white wine plus a shot of Scotch
1/4 cup rice vinegar
1/2 cup soy sauce
2 tablespoons sugar
1 cinnamon stick
1 teaspoon grated orange zest
1/4 cup peeled and grated fresh ginger
3 pods star anise
2 teaspoons Szechuan peppercorns
2 teaspoons kosher salt
4 cups water
3 large bone-in, skin-on whole chicken breasts

TAHINI DRESSING

2 tablespoons soy sauce
1 or 2 cloves garlic
1 tablespoon peeled and grated fresh ginger
2 tablespoons sesame tahini or natural peanut butter
1/4 cup peanut oil
1 tablespoon sesame oil
1 tablespoon rice wine vinegar
2 teaspoons sugar
1/8 to 1/4 teaspoon Lee Kum Kee black bean chile sauce
1/4-teaspoon red chile flakes

CABBAGE SALAD

3 cups arugula leaves or mixed salad greens
3 to 4 cups shredded green cabbage
1 cup fresh cilantro leaves

VINAIGRETTE

1 tablespoon rice vinegar
1 1/2 teaspoons minced shallot
1 1/2 teaspoons Dijon mustard
Pinch of salt
Pinch of freshly ground black pepper
1 tablespoon sesame oil
2 tablespoons peanut oil

SESAME NOODLES

1 pound spaghetti
2 tablespoons sesame oil
2 tablespoons black soy sauce
1 teaspoon Chinese black vinegar
1 tablespoon sugar
1 1/2 teaspoons black bean paste with chile
1/4 cup minced scallions

1/4 cup Those Nuts (page 212), chopped
3 scallions, white and light green parts,
thinly sliced on the diagonal
Cilantro sprigs for garnish (optional)

To make the cucumbers, sprinkle the cucumber slices with salt, allow to sit for 20 minutes, then squeeze gently and drain.

Combine the cucumbers, carrot, garlic, ginger, mint, and scallions in a bowl. Combine the rice vinegar and sugar in a small saucepan, bring to a boil, stirring to dissolve the sugar, remove from the heat, and allow to cool.

Pour the cooled vinegar over the vegetables and allow them to marinate at room temperature, tossing occasionally, until you are ready to assemble the salad. This can be done up to 2 hours ahead of serving.

To prepare the chicken, combine the wine, vinegar, soy sauce, sugar, cinnamon, orange zest, ginger, star anise, Szechuan peppercorns, salt, and water in a large pot. Bring to a boil, lower the heat to a simmer, and add the chicken breasts. Simmer, uncovered, for 12 to 15 minutes. The breasts should be just firm to the touch, and when poked with a skewer, the juices should run clear or slightly pink, as the meat will continue cooking as it cools. Allow the chicken to cool in the poaching liquid, then skin and bone the breasts and shred the meat into bite-sized pieces. Drizzle the meat with a little of the poaching liquid, then cover and refrigerate until you're ready to assemble the salad. You can freeze the leftover poaching liquid for another use.

To make the tahini dressing, combine all the dressing ingredients in a blender or food processor and purée until smooth. Refrigerate it until you're ready to assemble the salad.

To make the cabbage salad, wash the arugula, tear the leaves into bite-sized pieces, and spin dry. Combine the cabbage, arugula, and cilantro and refrigerate until needed.

To make the vinaigrette, whisk together the rice vinegar, shallot, mustard, salt, and pepper in a small bowl, until the salt is dissolved. Gradually whisk in the oils, and continue to whisk until fully emulsified. Set the vinaigrette aside.

To prepare the noodles, cook the spaghettini in boiling salted water for about 11 minutes, until al dente. Drain and rinse under cold water until just warm. In a small bowl, combine the sesame oil, soy sauce, vinegar, sugar, black bean paste, and scallions; then toss this with the noodles. Set aside until ready to serve.

To assemble the salad, combine the cabbage salad with the rice vinegar cucumbers in a large bowl, and toss with just enough of the cabbage salad vinaigrette to coat the vegetables lightly. Place a mound of sesame noodles at either end of the serving platter, and put the cabbage salad in the middle. Top the salad with the shredded chicken, drizzle with the tahini dressing, and garnish with the almonds, scallions, and several sprigs of cilantro.

Those Nuts

2 cups raw shelled pistachios

1/2 cup confectioners' sugar

Peanut oil or vegetable oil for deep-frying

Sea salt

Ground cayenne pepper

Blanch the nuts in boiling water for 2 minutes. Drain and toss immediately with the confectioners' sugar, mixing well to coat the nuts evenly.

Pour the oil into a deep, heavy pan to a depth of 1 to 1½ inches and heat to 375°. Add the nuts in batches, and fry for 1 or 2 minutes, until crisp and golden brown.

Using a slotted spoon, transfer the nuts to a rack or fine-mesh screen to drain (don't use paper towels or the pistachios will stick!). Allow the oil to come back to temperature between batches.

Sprinkle the nuts with salt and cayenne to taste while still hot. Now, see if you can keep from eating them all up before company comes.