

Peking Duck at Home

Wrap up slivers of crisp duck for a showy appetizer

BY CLARK FRASIER

Filling the pancake is part of the fun. Brush the sweet and tangy sauce on a Mandarin pancake with a scallion, and then layer on succulent duck, crispy duck skin, and crunchy vegetables.



How do you celebrate Thanksgiving in Beijing if you can't find a turkey? This was a tough question to answer for me and some fellow students who were studying in China during the early 1980s. Even if we'd found a turkey, our dormitory camp stoves were woefully inadequate for cooking such a large bird. So instead we opted for the local equivalent—Peking duck. Perfectly roasted and golden-glazed, served with tender Mandarin pancakes, a tangy sauce, and crunchy vegetable garnishes, the duck was quite worthy of our Thanksgiving celebration.

I tried to visit all the famous duck restaurants while I lived in Beijing. The novelty of a young Anglo speaking Mandarin Chinese was frequently enough to get me into the kitchens and drying rooms where I could ask questions about how the ducks were prepared. Later, when I opened Arrows Restaurant in Maine, my partner Mark Gaier and I were determined to use the rich culinary tradition of China—in particular to feature my favorite dish, Peking duck. Drawing on my experiences in the kitchens of Beijing and on the recipes of Chinese friends, we created this recipe. We usually serve the duck as an appetizer for a special party.

Although Peking duck has a reputation for complexity, there are really just a few simple steps, spread over a 24-hour period. Since the crispy skin is what makes the dish so memorable, you must allow enough time for the duck to air-dry thoroughly. The only part that takes much time at all is making the Mandarin pancakes. The pancakes, sauce, and garnishes can be prepared ahead of time, and even the duck reheats nicely, so you can get everything ready before your guests arrive.

DRYING THE DUCK FOR A CRISPY SKIN

The people of Beijing (formerly written Peking) pride themselves on the quality of their duck. To make the best Peking duck, you want to start with the best duck you can find. See if your butcher can get you a fresh one that weights four to five pounds. If you just can't find anything but a frozen duck, defrost it very slowly overnight in your refrigerator. Though freezing changes the texture of meats, duck freezes better

than most meats because of its high fat content. Remove any innards that come packaged in the duck, wash the duck under cold running water, and dry it thoroughly with a towel.

Loosening the skin—The next step is to separate the skin from the fatty tissue directly underneath it so that the skin crisps well when it cooks. To do this, you could make tiny cuts and run your fingers under the skin. An easier and more authentic method is to use a bicycle pump. Not many chefs think of a bicycle pump as an integral part of their cooking equipment, but at Arrows it was one of the first purchases we made. Attach a clean pin (the kind used to inflate balls) to the pump and insert the pin just under the duck's skin. As you pump, the skin will inflate and separate from the bird (see photo at right) and then deflate again. Don't be afraid to make several punctures in the legs and along the breast, but don't bother pumping up the underside of the bird (this part will be sitting in water while the duck cooks). It always makes for good conversation when you tell your guests that you needed a bicycle pump to make what they're eating.

Hanging to dry—After the fun of blowing up the duck, the next important stage is drying. The duck must hang for at least four hours for the skin to dry out; overnight is even better. I tie up the duck with a piece of butcher's twine. The easiest way I've found to attach the twine to the bird is to cut a small slit near the tail end of the duck, fold the twine in half to form a loop, and run

the loop through the slit. I then feed the cut ends through the loop and pull the twine until it's taut (see photo at right).

The question then is where to hang the thing. You'll want a place that's cool and dry. If the weather is cool (below 40°F), try hanging the duck from a beam or a hook in your garage or basement. Put a tray under the duck to catch any fluid, and if you have an electric fan, set it up in front of the duck on low speed. If you can't find a cool place to hang it, make room in the back of your refrigerator and prop the duck up so that air can circulate around it.

Dipping in glaze and drying again—Just before the duck is finished drying, get the glaze ready. Peel the ginger and slice it into broad strips. There's no

PEKING DUCK

Serves six as an appetizer.

1 duck, 4 to 5 pounds

GLAZE:

1½-inch piece of ginger

12 scallions

3 cups water

3 tablespoons honey

2 tablespoons Chinese rice wine

1 tablespoon rice vinegar

3 tablespoons cornstarch dissolved in ½ cup water

PANCAKES:

4 cups all-purpose flour

1½ cups boiling water

⅓ cup Chinese sesame oil

SAUCE:

2 teaspoons Chinese sesame oil

½ cup hoisin sauce

4 teaspoons sugar

¼ cup water

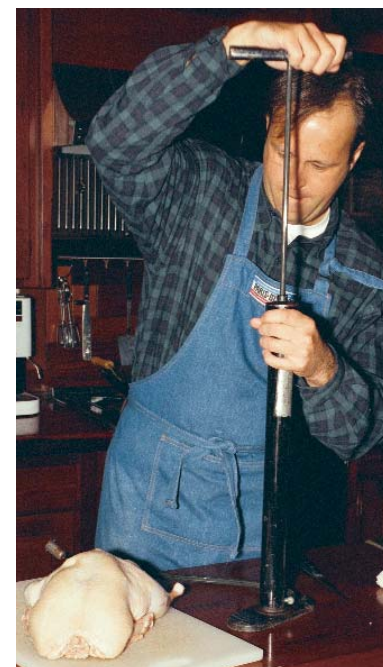
GARNISH:

12 scallions (white parts reserved from glaze)

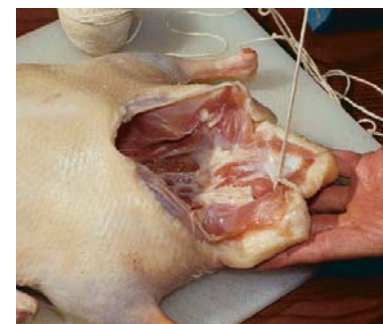
1 cucumber

1 red bell pepper

1 yellow bell pepper



Pump it up. Separating the duck skin from the flesh with a bicycle pump makes the skin even crispier when it cooks. The author learned this technique in China.



String up the duck securely to dry for several hours. Cut a small slit about 1½ inches from the edge of the tail skin and run a loop of string through. Pull the ends of the string through the loop, and hang the duck by the string.



Shiny glaze adds flavor, too. After drying overnight, the duck is dipped in a cornstarch-thickened glaze that's flavored with ginger and scallions.

Thin pancakes are easy to roll if you let the dough rest first. Shape the "relaxed" dough into balls and then pat each ball into a flat disk before rolling out.



need to make perfect-looking pieces because they're just there for flavor. Chop the green leaves off the scallions about 5 inches from the white end. (Reserve the white parts; they'll be used later to make scallion brushes.) In a wok or a large, deep sauté pan, combine the ginger and the green leaves of the scallions with the water, honey, rice wine, and rice vinegar. Bring the mixture to a boil. Stir the cornstarch into a half cup of cold water and pour it into the wok. Stir the glaze as it returns to a boil and heat until it becomes thick enough to coat a spoon.

Holding the duck by the string, lower it into the boiling glaze. Slide and roll the duck around in the pan until it is completely coated with the glaze (see

top photo at left). Lift the duck out, let any excess glaze drip off, and dip the duck again. Take the duck out again and, when it stops dripping, return it to its hanging spot and let it dry for at least two more hours.

Roasting the duck—Now that you've pumped the duck, hung it, dipped it, and hung it again, you're ready to roast it. Heat the oven to 350°. Put the duck, breast side up, in a roasting pan and pour an inch of water into the pan. The water keeps the duck moist while it cooks. Roast the duck for 2½ to 3 hours at 350°. Turn the pan around halfway through cooking to help the skin brown evenly. The duck is done when the skin is a molasses color, you can move the leg easily, and the meat gives slightly to your touch.

MAKING THIN AND CHEWY MANDARIN PANCAKES

While the duck is drying the second time (or when it's in the oven), you'll want to tackle the pancakes. Put the flour in a large bowl and gradually add the boiling water, mixing well with a wooden spoon until you have a ball of dough that comes away from the sides of the bowl. When the dough is cool enough to handle, dump it out on a lightly floured counter and knead it by hand until it's smooth, pliable, and elastic, about 10 minutes. You can also knead it in a stationary mixer with a dough hook. Let the dough rest for 15 minutes under a towel so it will "relax" and be easier to roll out. Then cut the dough into four pieces and roll each quarter into a thick "snake" on a lightly floured surface. Cut each snake into 6 pieces to give you 24 small pieces of dough. Roll each piece into a smooth ball with your hands, pat the ball into a flat disk, and then use a rolling pin to roll each disk into a 5-inch-diameter round about 1/16 inch thick (see photo at left). Use just enough flour on the pin and the counter to keep the dough from sticking.

Short cooking keeps them pliable—Cooking the pancakes is really the only tricky part—if you cook them too long they'll turn crispy and hard and you'll end up with Mandarin nachos instead, but too short will give you floury-tasting pancakes. Experiment first by cooking a couple to find the right amount of time on your stove before you cook all of them. Let them rest for a few minutes then check them—they should still be flexible enough to roll up. If they're stiff, don't cook the rest as long.

Cook the pancakes on a nonstick griddle or sauté pan over medium-high heat. When the pan is hot, brush it with sesame oil and put in two or three pancakes, however many will fit without overlapping. Cook the pancakes briefly, peeking under with a spatula to check their progress. When the bottoms have turned light brown, flip the pancakes and cook them even more briefly on the second side. As you

The crackly skin is the best part

The crispy, caramelized skin is the payoff for taking the time to dry the duck thoroughly. I like to cut the bird into manageable sections, pull the skin off, and then cut the skin into thin strips. Don't forget about the tender, juicy meat. Once you've removed the skin, carve off the meat and shred it or slice it into thin strips.



1. Start with the legs. Cut the skin and meat between a leg and the breast. Then slice through the joint connecting the thigh to the body, removing the leg and thigh in one piece.



2. Peel the skin off the leg and slice it into thin strips. Repeat with the other leg.



3. Remove the breast skin in one piece. Starting at the tail end, slide your thumbs under the skin to separate it from the breast meat.



4. Cut the skin into two long pieces.



5. Slice each piece of skin into strips.

take them off the griddle, brush them lightly with more sesame oil and stack them. Brush more oil on the griddle after every couple of batches. When you've cooked the whole batch and they're cool, wrap them in aluminum foil and set them aside. To reheat before serving, just pop the wrapped pancakes into a 375° oven for about 4 minutes.

PREPARING THE GARNISHES

The scallion brushes are easy to make. With a sharp paring knife, cut off the tiny roots at the white bulb end. Then make several 1-inch-deep cuts in a cross pattern in the white end. Put the scallions in ice water and set them aside. The brushes will curl as the scallions soak up water.

Next, slice the cucumber into thin rounds. I like to first score the cucumber lengthwise with a channel knife to make decorative grooves before slicing them. If you don't have one of these gadgets, you may want to invest in one—they're only a couple of dollars at any kitchen store and they're lots of fun.

At the restaurant, we use strips of red and yellow bell pepper for color in presenting our Peking duck. This isn't traditional, but I think the taste goes quite well and it looks great. To make the strips, peel the skin off the peppers with a vegetable peeler. Using a chef's knife, cut off the ends of the peppers and slice through one part of the pepper to open it up flat. Holding the knife parallel to the cutting board, slice off the white ribbing inside the peppers. Then cut the flesh into 1/8-inch julienne.

Make the sauce by combining all the ingredients in a bowl, stirring well to dissolve the sugar. The hoisin sauce is the dominant flavor, so choose one that tastes good. Koon Chun is the brand I like, and

it's available in many Asian markets. When you have added the other ingredients to the hoisin, the sauce should be the consistency of a thin ketchup. Some chefs boil this mixture to dissolve the sugar, but I find that this isn't necessary.

PRESENTING THE DUCK INDIVIDUALLY OR FAMILY STYLE

Let the roasted duck rest until it's cool enough to handle, and then pull off the skin and carve the duck (see the photos on p. 49). Cut both the skin and the meat into 1/4-inch strips. You can serve the duck at once, or allow it to cool and then reheat it briefly in the oven with the pancakes when your guests are ready to eat.

At Arrows, we usually serve Peking duck as a first course—one duck will serve six people as an appetizer. We like to make individual servings by first arranging the cucumbers and bell peppers around the outside of a plate (see photo below). We then pour a pool of sauce in the center of the plate, arrange the meat and skin on the sauce, and put a scallion brush at the top and a folded pancake at the bottom. This makes a spectacular presentation.

You can also set the duck and its garnishes out on serving platters and let your guests assemble the pancakes themselves, which is a great way to start a party. No matter how you decide to serve your duck, you'll find—as I did one Thanksgiving Day in China—that Peking duck is a glorious dish.

After travelling extensively through Asia and Europe and cooking professionally in California, Clark Frasier opened his own restaurant, Arrows, in Ogunquit, Maine, with Mark Gaier. ♦

Peking duck for one.
To make a beautiful individual serving, the author first circles the plate with thin cucumber rounds, then makes a crosshatch pattern from strips of red and yellow bell peppers. The sauce is spooned into a circular puddle in the center of the plate, and topped first with duck meat and then the crispy skin. A folded pancake and a scallion brush placed on opposite sides finish the plate. More pancakes are served on the side.

