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MY TURN

■ **Dmae Roberts**



Making fried rice

During the height of the stay-home quarantine, many of my Facebook friends posted pictures of food they baked or cooked, so I decided to upload a photo of some fried rice I'd made that turned out particularly well. I like it when a batch turns out well. I received about 40 likes and a dozen comments. Several people wanted "the recipe." I told them I didn't actually have one, which is true. My mother taught me to cook and I've also learned tips from friends when I travelled. After thinking about it, I decided to respond to the recipe request by sharing some basic "tenets" of cooking fried rice.



I became a family cook at age 11, when my parents were working staggered shifts. I would prepare enough food for dinner for me and my brother, as well as my parents when they got home. I had a repertoire of dishes my mom taught me: stir-fry vegetables, fried noodles, fried rice, meatloaf (for my dad), pot roast, and hamburgers. And though I never really enjoyed it, I learned to cook just about anything with ingredients we had in the refrigerator.

For the post, I wrote that it's best to use day-old rice that's actually a bit drier than freshly made rice. Just-cooked rice will work, though, if it's not too mushy. For the other ingredients, I look through the refrigerator to see what vegetables are available. I prefer to have an assortment such as diced carrots, mushrooms, frozen peas, and Chinese cabbage. I like contrasting color and texture; the orange of the carrot balances out the pale yellow of the cabbage, and the green peas add more vibrancy — and also sweeten the taste.

When I'm ready to begin, I heat up a well-oiled wok at a high temperature. I cook the cabbage stems first. (If you use broccoli or cauliflower, separate the stems from the flowers, as the stems have a different cooking time.) For health reasons, I use as little vegetable oil as possible, generally a tablespoon, depending on how much I'm actually making. I start cooking the veggies and even char them a little before adding about an eighth-cup of water so they steam.

In general, I try for a 1:1 ratio of rice to veggies — again, health reasons. Once the stems start to glisten and soften, add mushrooms and the leafy part of the cabbage. Once those begin to soften, add the rice and a little water to get the ingredients more pliable while stirring them in the wok.

With a fork, I whip up two eggs into a slight froth in a bowl, along with a tablespoon of water, a drop of soy sauce, and sprinkles of black pepper and red chili flakes. In a separate pan, I sauté the eggs until they become a runny omelet, break them into large chunks, then add them to the rice and vegetables in the wok. Once everything is mixed and almost done cooking, I grate fresh ginger and add fresh black pepper and more red chili flakes into the wok before placing it into a serving bowl. Occasionally I also add a touch of sesame oil while stirring the fried rice in the bowl.

I like to top my fried rice with sliced green onions as a garnish, as well as roasted cashews and sesame seeds. I add a lot of Vietnamese chili sauce to my own serving because I prefer a little pep. My husband enjoys more heat in his and adds fresh serrano chili pepper.

In documenting my "tenets" of fried rice, it made me realize the process is actually pretty complex, which made me think perhaps I take my cooking skills for granted. I think most people who grew up as a family cook possess these skills. I must admit, it allows me to use many of the same ingredients to prepare fried noodles, rice or noodle salads, and noodle soups. My favorite is hot-and-sour ramen with veggies and a poached egg on top. Now that I have no lunch meetings, I eat ramen almost daily. It takes about 25 minutes to make and almost the same time to eat.

I've cooked from scratch nearly my whole life. What I make is usually dependent on the items available in my kitchen. No recipes — just a cookbook of ideas in my head. I've yet to receive a reply to my post detailing my fried rice cooking "principles." Maybe it seemed too arduous. You tell me.

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