

All About Hoisin Sauce

Hoisin sauce is one of the most iconic ingredients in Cantonese cooking. We delved deep into the history and usage of this ingredient. Here's what we found.

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Hoisin sauce (haixianjiang) was one of the first Chinese pantry staples to make a foray into mainstream American cooking. It's fruity, tangy, and savory with a hint of spice. Its name means "seafood sauce" in Chinese, but today's hoisin sauce doesn't contain any seafood nor is it explicitly used for cooking seafood. How did hoisin sauce become such a versatile and iconic ingredient and what should you know when you shop for it?

The History of Hoisin Sauce

It's believed hoisin sauce originated in Guangdong (also known as Canton) province, China. People from older generations in Guangdong province

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recall buying hoisin sauce from street vendors selling it in large vats at the market, says Christopher Thomas, one of the creators of Chinese Cooking Demystified, a popular YouTube channel. "These vendors likely would have purchased hoisin in bulk from artisanal producers and stored it in those containers to sell loose, as is still common with some

other products today" such as tofu and cooking wine. No recipe from those early days remains, so what constituted the original "hoisin sauce" is murky.

As early Chinese immigrants to the United States mainly came from Guangdong, "they probably brought this shelf-stable sauce with them," says Sarah Leung of The Woks of Life, a popular food blog specializing in Chinese cooking. She added that its flavor profile, which has some deeply umami richness that comes from its key ingredient fermented yellow soybean paste, "appeals to the American palate," contributing to its success in the U.S. market.

As hoisin sauce expanded beyond the culinary boundary of its country of origin, it has become ubiquitous. You can spot it as a condiment with Vietnamese phở and in restaurants around the world. Because hoisin was one of the first Chinese sauces to become widely available in America, it has stood in for other ingredients over the years. Beijing roasted duck, for example, is traditionally served with tianmianjiang, a sweet and slightly tangy sauce from northern China. This harder-to-procure sauce shares a similar flavor with hoisin, so restaurants often subbed it in instead.

Hoisin sauce is sometimes referred to as "Chinese barbecue sauce." It shines when used alone or with other ingredients in a marinade or glaze. Just a dollop can add tang and umami to a quick stir-fry and classics such as General Tso's Chicken. Hoisin sauce is also the backbone of time-honored favorites such as Cantonese roasted duck, char siu, and Chinese barbecue spareribs. We use it for quick, flavorful pork tenderloin or flank steak. In all of these dishes, it provides depth of flavor and a luscious, glossy appearance.

The Wide Range of Hoisin Sauce

There are many options to choose from. We purchased nine from major manufacturers and small-batch producers alike, including three gluten-free options. First, we tasted them plain and then as a dipping sauce for cheung fun. Finally, we used each to make char siu, marinating and glazing pork butts in a hoisin-based sauce.

Ingredients vary from brand to brand but we found the key components to be sugar, some form of acid (such as vinegar), and fermented soybean paste (a key ingredient responsible for imparting the deeply umami-rich savoriness). Other common



Hoisin sauce can be linked to "triumphant sauce," an ingredient favored by the Hakka Chinese people in Guangdong for preparing fish. The Chinese word for triumphant ("hoi syun") sounds similar to the word for seafood ("hoi sin"), and the name "hoisin sauce" caught on and stuck.

ingredients we noted: salt, five-spice powder, garlic, and sesame. Some brands even add chili peppers for a spicy kick. Most contain cornstarch or potato starch, which gives hoisin its jammy consistency.

All of the sauces were deeply savory and sweet but had very different underlying flavors. Some were tangy. Others were garlicky or nutty and even smoky. They differed in color and texture, too. Some were dark brown, thick, and goopy while others were caramel-colored, thin, and silky.

When using hoisin in a marinade and a glaze, we noticed their varied capabilities at adding a glossy look to the dish. The ones we most liked gave the char siu a beautiful, lacquered sheen; some others had a more muted, gray-brown color, which made the dish a tad less appealing (though still delicious). Nevertheless, tasters sang praises of most of the sauces.

We liked most of the hoisin sauces we tasted but identified four that we think are especially worth seeking out. Two of our favorites are widely sold at supermarkets, one is from a small producer, and one is gluten-free. Below, we've provided detailed descriptions of the top four hoisin sauces and everything else we tried. Read on to find the best one for your kitchen.

For the complete tasting results, go to AmericasTestKitchen.com/APR24.

How does hoisin sauce differ from oyster sauce?

Hoisin and oyster sauce are fundamentally different. Hoisin is made primarily from sugar and fermented beans whereas oyster sauce is made primarily from oysters or oyster extract. Depending on the brands, hoisin sauce can be grainy in texture and dark brown in appearance (right), while oyster sauce is more lustrous and a lighter shade of brown (left). Hoisin is typically thicker than oyster sauce.



OUR HOISIN SAUCE LINEUP



SUPERMARKET STANDOUT

KIKKOMAN Hoisin Sauce

PRICE: \$8.68 for a 9.4-ounce jar (\$0.92 per oz)

COMMENTS: This “bright and tangy” sauce struck “the right balance of sweet and savory” and reminded some tasters of “roasted fruit.” It was “thick” and “the slightest bit grainy” when sampled plain but whisked easily into a marinade and glaze. We could taste “five spice” on the char siu and loved that it was “pleasantly sweet but not cloying.” The meat was “perfectly caramelized.”

SUPERMARKET STANDOUT

GUANGWEI YUAN Hoisin Sauce

PRICE: \$12 for 9 oz (\$1.33 per oz)

COMMENTS: This extra-nuanced sauce had some interesting ingredients, including tomato and red yeast rice. The former gave the sauce “fruity” notes that reminded a few tasters of plums, and the latter made char siu a touch more red and vibrant. It also had “peanut-y” flavors. Tasters liked this slightly spicy hoisin in char siu, which had an “appealing fruity and salty flavor” with a glaze that was “sticky and sweet in a good way without being cloying.” It stirred up nostalgia for some tasters, who called it “deeply savory” and “nuanced.”

MAIL-ORDER FAVORITE

KOON CHUN Hoisin Sauce

PRICE: \$6.99 for 15 oz (\$0.47 per oz)

COMMENTS: This dark-brown and thick sauce won praises for striking a “nice balance of sweet, salt, and fermented funkiness.” Tasters liked the “plum-y” and “super concentrated stone fruits” flavors; they noted some lingering “lightly charred” smokiness too, which set it apart from other sauces we tried. It was “really thick” and “more of a paste than a sauce,” and some remarked on its “slightly grainy” texture when served as a dipping sauce. However,

it fared well in a sauce and marinade for char siu, as tasters liked how it was “deeply savory” and “full-flavored.”

BEST GLUTEN-FREE OPTION

LEE KUM KEE Gluten-Free Hoisin Sauce

PRICE: \$10.99 for 9.45 oz (\$1.16 per oz)

COMMENTS: This gluten-free hoisin sauce had more flavor and better texture than the other gluten-free products in the lineup. We especially liked its nuanced “garlicky” and “earthy” flavors, nice balance of sweet, salty flavors but was not “cloyingly sweet.” The char siu had a “glossy texture” and the flavor was “plum-y” and “spicy,” with prominent “ginger” and “star anise.”

LEE KUM KEE Hoisin Sauce

PRICE: \$3.19 for 8.5 oz (\$0.38 per oz)

COMMENTS: Tasters noted the “silky” texture and “fruity,” “salty” flavors, which prompted comparisons to a “salty caramel sauce” with “citrusy” flavors. The hoisin gave the char siu a “sticky and burnished” look, which our tasters liked. However, some noted that it was a bit “one-dimensional,” lacking “complexity.”

TÂN TÂN Vietnamese Hoisin Sauce

PRICE: \$8.00 for 12.75 oz (\$0.63 per oz)

COMMENTS: Made in Oregon, this small-batch hoisin is produced by a Vietnamese restaurant right outside of Portland. Our tasters were delighted by the sauce’s “glossy” and slick appearance. Char siu was “sticky and lacquered,” with “wonderful glaze and char.” The “fruity sweet” and “smoky” flavors of the pork drew praise. We also identified unique notes of cinnamon and a “slightly medicinal” flavor.

WOK MEI Gluten Free Hoisin Sauce

PRICE: \$7.99 for 8 oz (\$1.00 per oz)

COMMENTS: Our tasters detected “nutty and roasted-tasting” flavors, which progressed into “tart,” “almost

citrusy” territory. The glaze was “thin” and tasters noted a “sour aftertaste.” However, the char siu won some fans, as it had a “wonderful balance of molasses-y sweet and boldly savory” flavor. The notes of “dark roasted fruit” reminded tasters of “tamarind” and “plum.”

MILU Hoisin Sauce

PRICE: \$14.00 for 9.26 oz (\$1.51 per oz)

COMMENTS: Right out of the jar, the sauce was the color of milk chocolate with a “watery” and “thin” texture. It tasted “tart” and “very peanut-y,” like a “sweet and sour peanut sauce.” The char siu looked “paler” and “slightly less luscious and rich” than the others. The flavor was “balanced,” with the dominant flavor being “earthy and roasted.” Some thought the hoisin glaze was “missing some complexity.”

SAN-J Hoisin, Gluten-Free

PRICE: \$4.99 for 10 oz (\$0.50 per oz)

COMMENTS: Tasters detected hints of “licorice” and “tamarind” in this “very thin” sauce. Some tasters described it as “molasses forward.” It reminded tasters of “five spice water” but was also “floral and peach-y sweet.” The flavor of the char siu was “light and sweet,” and tasters were disappointed that it was “not pleasantly bold like the others.” Overall, it was “difficult to discern against the meat” and the flavor “disappears on the meat, leaving a faint impression of sweetness.”

Is hoisin sauce gluten-free?

Many hoisin sauces contain soy sauce and soybean pastes that contain wheat. If you prefer to use gluten-free hoisin, we found that Lee Kum Kee Gluten-Free Hoisin Sauce is a great choice. It had a thick and viscous texture and tasted pleasantly plum-y with a hint of spice. It was a touch thinner and smoother than the company’s traditional version.