

All About Oyster Sauce

Discovered by accident, this iconic condiment is every Cantonese chef's secret ingredient.

➤ BY VALERIE SIZHE LI ◀

From fiery, wok-fried Beef Chow Fun to delicate, nourishing blanched Chinese broccoli, oyster sauce elevates humble ingredients and simple cooking techniques. “The beauty [of oyster sauce] is [its] savoriness, viscosity, and sweetness. The whole thing tastes quite good out of the bottle,” said Lucas Sin, award-winning chef from Hong Kong, which borders Guangdong province where oyster sauce originated. “One condiment has the entire flavor universe.”

It's woven into the Cantonese way of life—served at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Sin likened the ubiquity of oyster sauce in Cantonese cuisine to salt and pepper in the West: “Almost everything they make has a touch of oyster sauce in it.”

An Accidental Discovery

While there are some earlier accounts of oyster sauce's existence, it is largely attributed to a happy accident in 1888 in Nanshui Town, Guangdong, China. Street vendor Lee Kum Sheung left a pot of simmering oyster soup unattended until it boiled down to a slick, dark paste. Instead of tossing out the overreduced soup, he took a taste and found it delicious. He began selling the sauce, which eventually led to the founding of the multinational food conglomerate now known as Lee Kum Kee.

Soon, the popularity of oyster sauce spilled across the border to Southeast Asian countries with prominent Chinese immigrant populations. In Thailand, Thai and immigrant Chinese chefs used oyster sauce in marinades, stir-fries, dipping sauces, and “as many ways as you can imagine,” said Chompon “Boong” Boonnak, co-owner of award-winning Thai bar Merai and restaurant Mahaniyom in Brookline, Massachusetts. Domestically produced Thai brands emerged as sweeter, less intense versions of their Chinese predecessors to accommodate the local palate, Boonnak noted (a distinction that played out in our results; more on that later).



On food labels, ingredients are listed in descending order by weight. Sauces in bottles that list oyster extract first (left) are generally more strongly flavored than sauces in those that list other ingredients first (right).

A Range of Oyster Sauce Options

Traditionally, oyster sauce is made by boiling freshly shucked oysters in a large vat of water, according to a spokesperson from Lee Kum Kee. After the initial cooking stage, the bivalves are removed, leaving the broth to continue simmering until most of the moisture has evaporated. The result is a brown, dense paste packed with briny oyster essence. This is referred to as “oyster extract” on food labeling. Some producers smoke the raw oysters over teakwood before boiling, a process that gives the sauce a hint of smokiness compared to the traditionally made version.

To enhance the flavor, manufacturers add ingredients such as monosodium glutamate (MSG), yeast extract, sugar, and salt; they may also add caramel color to enrich the appearance. Some producers use thickeners, such as modified starch or wheat flour, which lend the sauce its characteristic viscous texture and glossy look.

As a general rule, sauces with higher percentages of oyster extract taste more intense. These numbers aren't printed on labels, but there are some clues. Bottles labeled “oyster sauce” often list “oyster extract” first in their ingredient lists, which means that they contain more oyster by weight than any other ingredient. “Oyster-flavored sauces” generally list water and sugar first, indicating that less oyster extract is used.

Vegetarian sauces are labeled as “oyster-flavored” but contain no shellfish; instead, they're often made with mushroom extract. The fungi element provides deeply earthy, umami, and slightly sweet notes that are reminiscent of conventional oyster sauce.

Tasting Oyster Sauce

After talking with Cantonese and Thai chefs, we purchased and compared a wide range of oyster sauces and oyster-flavored sauces, including vegetarian and gluten-free versions. We tasted each plain, as a dip for blanched Chinese broccoli, and cooked in Stir-Fried Pea Greens.

The majority of our tasters had a preference for sauces with stronger and more concentrated flavors, which provided more depth and struck a nice

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Generally speaking, oyster sauce has a thick, viscous consistency, but the degree of viscosity varies, from the looser Wan Ja Shan Vegetarian Mushroom Oyster Sauce (left) to the dense Lee Kum Kee Vegan Oyster Flavored Sauce (right).

balance between sweet and savory. We were especially impressed with one that had particularly pronounced “briny” flavor. One taster praised one that started with the “ocean-y” savoriness of “oysters” and “transitioned into sweetness...in my mouth, like magic.”

Our Favorite Oyster Sauce

We liked everything we tasted, but some brands emerged as our favorites. Lee Kum Kee Premium Oyster Sauce was richly oceanic and savory, with a depth of flavor that not every brand offered. We were also impressed by Megachef Premium Oyster Sauce, a Thai-style oyster sauce that was slightly sweeter but still packed a ton of character.

Even though mushrooms and oysters have quite different flavor profiles, when used in small quantities in stir-fried dishes, the mushroomy vegetarian oyster sauces can work to enhance flavors. We recommend them if you

or someone you're cooking for doesn't eat shellfish, but they don't perfectly replicate the nuances of briny oysters. Dive into the chart on the opposite page for our full tasting notes.

Should oyster sauce be refrigerated, and for how long does it keep?

Unopened bottles of oyster sauce can be kept in the pantry. Once opened, however, oyster sauce should be stored in the refrigerator. It's always best to check the label for an expiration date, but oyster sauce can generally be kept in the refrigerator for six months to a year.

What We Tasted



RECOMMENDED

1 LEE KUM KEE Premium Oyster Sauce PRICE: \$6.79 for 9 oz (\$0.75 per oz) INGREDIENTS: Oyster extract (oyster, water, salt), sugar, water, monosodium glutamate as a flavor enhancer, salt, modified corn starch, wheat flour, caramel color COMMENTS: This “smooth” and “velvety” Cantonese-style sauce had the strongest “oyster” flavor and aroma, translating to a layered tasting profile of “molasses-y sweetness,” and an “intense[ly] savory quality.” We were impressed with how much oyster flavor it retained in the stir-fry, which was “vibrant” and “briny in a pleasant way” with “a hint of sweetness.”	2 MEGACHEF Premium Oyster Sauce PRICE: \$14.99 for 21.2 oz (\$0.71 per oz) INGREDIENTS: Oyster extract, purified water, sugar, cornstarch, potassium sorbate, acetic acid COMMENTS: This Thai-style oyster sauce was made with oysters that were smoked first and then boiled. We liked its “winey,” “molasses-y,” and “floral” aroma, which came through strongly and translated to tasting “fruity” and “tangy.” Its sweetness was nicely balanced with “salty” and “briny” notes. This “dark brown,” viscous oyster sauce “clung well” to the greens; our panelists liked the “nutty,” “earthy,” and “umami” flavor that also came with a “slight savory salinity.”	3 KIKKOMAN Oyster-Flavored Sauce Red Label PRICE: \$9.90 for 12.6 oz (\$0.79 per oz) INGREDIENTS: Water, sugar, salt, oyster juice concentrate (oyster, water, salt), modified corn starch, monosodium glutamate, caramel color, yeast extract, oyster extract COMMENTS: This “dark brown,” “viscous” oyster sauce was “deeply savory” and “briny” with some “sweet-salty balance” to it, but it was less intense than some other oyster sauces we tasted, likely because its first ingredient was water, not oyster. We liked this “well-balanced” sauce in the stir-fry, which had “meaty,” “tangerine sweet” notes and retained “some good savory complexity.” The sauce clung to the greens well.	4 LEE KUM KEE Vegan Oyster Flavored Sauce PRICE: \$5.89 for 18 oz (\$0.33 per oz) INGREDIENTS: Water, sugar, soy sauce (water, soybeans, salt, corn starch), salt, modified corn starch, yeast extract (yeast extract, salt, water), caramel color, dried mushrooms COMMENTS: We noticed “flocks” suspended in this “glossy” and “thick” vegan sauce. The bits likely were dried mushrooms, whose flavor was so prominent that some tasters picked out “shiitake mushroom” notes that they liked. Overall, it was “sweet” with some “winey,” “yeasty,” and “tangy” notes when we tasted it plain. In a stir-fry, “smoky sweetness” came through strongly, leading some panelists to compare it to barbecue sauce.
5 LEE KUM KEE Panda Brand Oyster Flavored Sauce PRICE: \$3.99 for 18 oz (\$0.22 per oz) INGREDIENTS: Water, sugar, salt, oyster extractives (oyster, water, salt), monosodium glutamate as a flavor enhancer, modified corn starch, wheat flour, caramel color COMMENTS: Lee Kum Kee’s Panda brand is a little milder than its premium line. We took note of this sauce’s rich color and “viscous” consistency. Our tasters deemed this oyster sauce middle of the pack and noted its “earthy” and “slightly toasty” flavors. In stir-fry, its rich, sweet flavors took precedence, reminding tasters of “mandarin peel” and “Kumamoto oysters,” a Pacific variety famous for its delicate sweetness.	6 HEALTHY BOY Gluten Free Oyster Sauce PRICE: \$5.99 for 12.3 oz (\$0.49 per oz) INGREDIENTS: Water, oyster, sugar, fructose syrup, salt, thickener: modified tapioca starch (INS1442), flavor enhancer: monosodium glutamate (INS621), natural color: caramel color (INS150c), acidity regulator: citric acid (INS330), stabilizer: xanthan gum (INS415), preservatives: sodium benzoate (INS211) COMMENTS: This thick gluten-free oyster sauce contained more water than oyster extract, which made the flavor milder than other sauces we tasted. We noted its “molasses-y,” “plum-like” sweetness and “mild brininess.” It added a “slight salinity” to the stir-fry.	7 WAN JA SHAN Vegetarian Mushroom Oyster Sauce PRICE: \$13.75 for 33.8 oz (\$0.41 per oz) INGREDIENTS: Water, sugar syrup, soybeans, wheat, salt, yeast extract, and sodium benzoate less than 1/10 of 1% as food preservative, mushroom powder COMMENTS: This “mahogany”-colored vegetarian oyster sauce pulls the savoriness of a classic oyster sauce from mushrooms. Though it lacks the distinctive brininess of a real one, this version offers an alternative means of adding umami to dishes while avoiding non-vegetarian ingredients. In stir-fry, it had the right consistency to “coat the greens” and reminded some of “smoky and sweet” “mesquite barbecue sauce.”	8 MAEKRUUA Oyster Sauce PRICE: \$6.98 for 10.1 oz (\$0.69 per oz) INGREDIENTS: Oyster extract, soy sauce (soybean, wheat flour, salt), water, sugar, salt (iodized salt), modified starch (thickener: E1414), cornstarch, glucono-delta-lactone (acidity regulator: E575), sodium benzoate (preservative: E211) COMMENTS: Straight from the bottle, this oyster sauce was noticeably looser than the rest of the lineup, and that same “thin” consistency was evident in the stir-fry. It had a “molasses” aroma and was “intensely savory and sweet” like “beef bouillon”; however, when tasted plain, it left many tasters wanting more distinctive oyster flavors. In the stir-fry, we liked the “nice umami,” but it was it was “light on oyster flavor.”

This chart is in order of our preference.