

Bringing Home Scallion Pancakes

We made batch after gummy batch of this Chinese restaurant staple until we discovered a method that produced crispy, gorgeously layered results.

≧ BY ANDREA GEARY ≦

Forget casinos and racetracks: I do my gambling at Chinese restaurants when I order scallion pancakes. Hitting the jackpot means digging into deep golden-brown flatbread wedges with crispy exteriors that break away in flaky shards to reveal paper-thin, scallion-studded layers within. But as luck more often has it, I usually end up with floppy, pallid triangles with doughy inner leaves that fuse to form a single dense, gummy layer.

I decided it was time to stop leaving good scallion pancakes to chance and develop my own recipe. A quick look at a few recipes was encouraging. Their ingredient lists included just flour, water, oil, scallions, and salt. And the way the layers were formed seemed clever and interesting: You coat the rolled-out dough with oil and sliced scallions and then fold it up and roll it out again in such a way that you produce multiple sheets of dough separated by fat. When you fry the pancakes, the water in the dough turns to steam, which is trapped between the layers and so forces them apart.

However, opinions about the proper temperature of the water in the dough, the perfect size for the pancake, and the amount of oil used for frying differed. If I wanted a scallion pancake that was a sure bet every time, I'd have to explore all the options.

Hot and Cold

Here's the procedure: Make a dough with just flour and water, separate it into pieces, let them rest for a bit to allow the gluten (the stretchy network of proteins that gives dough its structure) to relax and the starches to hydrate, and then roll each piece into a very thin round. Brush each round with oil, sprinkle it with sliced scallions, and then roll it into a cylinder. Coil the cylinder into a spiral and roll the spiral out again into a pancake. Fry the pancakes until crispy and brown and cut them into wedges to serve with a dipping sauce.

Scallion pancake dough is usually 2 parts flour



We fry the pancakes in an oiled cast-iron skillet for its steady, even heat. If you use a stainless-steel skillet, you may need to increase the heat slightly.

sticky but also more relaxed. Our science editor explained that hot water dissolves the flour's tightly packed starch molecules to a greater extent than cold water does, allowing the starch to absorb the free water that would otherwise make the dough overly sticky. It also decreases the elasticity of the gluten network, so the dough is less prone to snapping back.

Since the finished pancakes in each batch were comparable and the hot-water dough was much easier to work with, the choice was clear. I made another batch, mixing 1½ cups of flour and ¾ cup of boiling water with a wooden spoon and then kneading the dough by hand for a few minutes. I separated it into four pieces and let them rest for 30 minutes before rolling them out into thin rounds. Next I brushed each round with a mixture of vegetable oil and toasted sesame oil added for flavor, sprinkled on the scallions, and proceeded with the rolling into a cylinder, coiling, and second rolling steps, which sounds time-consuming but was actually quickly accomplished. Lastly, I heated 2 teaspoons of vegetable oil in a nonstick skillet and fried my four pancakes, replenishing the oil as needed.

to 1 part water by volume, but some recipes called for boiling water and others for cool. I tried it both ways, keeping all other variables the same. The cool-water dough proved noticeably stickier and forced me to use a lot of flour on the counter, which I knew would stick to the pancakes and burn in the pan during cooking. The cool-water dough also kept springing back when I tried to roll it out. The dough made with boiling water was not only firmer and less

These pancakes definitely had some issues. Steam built up under some of them as they fried, lifting large parts away from the skillet, so they didn't brown evenly. The exteriors were tough and chewy rather than crispy, and the inside was undercooked, verging on raw. Maybe that's why the layers were not as separate as I would have liked. And I wasn't wild about repeating the rolling, coiling, and frying steps four times.

Two Tweaks to Ensure the Best Texture

PIERCE YOUR PANCAKES

Cutting a ½-inch slit in the center of each pancake before cooking allows for the release of steam that would otherwise cause the pancake to puff. By staying flat, the pancakes brown and crisp evenly.



TAKE COVER

During the first few minutes of cooking, we cover the pan to trap steam, which helps the dough cook through from edge to edge. Then we uncover the pan for the final moments of cooking to thoroughly brown and crisp the exterior.

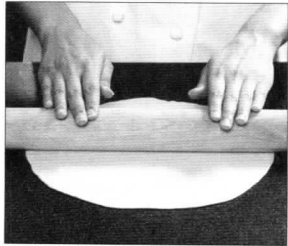


▶ See Every Step

A free video is available at CookIllustrated.com/oct16

HOW TO GET THE LAYERED LOOK

A great scallion pancake boasts multiple paper-thin layers studded with scallions. Here's how we achieve it.



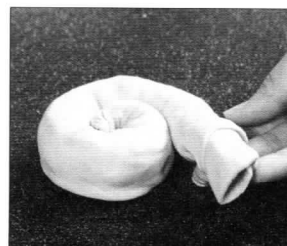
ROLL OUT dough into 12-inch round.



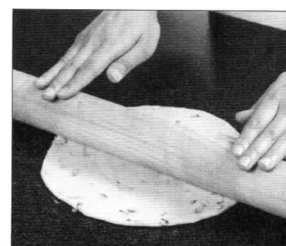
BRUSH with oil and flour; sprinkle with salt and scallions.



ROLL UP round into cylinder.



COIL cylinder, tucking end underneath, then flatten.



ROLL OUT flattened spiral into 9-inch round; cut slit.

Full Steam Ahead

Reducing the repetition was easy: I simply rolled out two larger pancakes instead of four smaller ones. I also realized that I might be able to increase the inner flakiness if I created a more distinct barrier between the folds to keep them separated, so I added a bit of flour to the oil that I brushed on the rounds. As for the exterior toughness, I suspected it might be because I had skimmed on the oil in the frying step, so I tried the other extreme: deep frying, as many restaurants do. But while the interiors were a bit more cooked through (and the oil-flour mixture did make the pancakes more layered), deep frying turned out to be more trouble than it was worth. The pancakes wouldn't stay submerged, so I had to hold them under the surface of the oil, which splashed when I tried to flip them. I went back to a skillet, but this time I added 2 tablespoons of oil per pancake—enough that I no longer needed to use a nonstick pan. Instead, I switched to a cast-iron skillet, which offered steadier, more even heat that encouraged better browning.

The other tweak I made was to cut a slit in the center of each pancake before cooking, hoping that it would allow steam to escape from underneath so the pancake would lie flush against the skillet rather than ballooning in the center. Then, after placing the pancake in the skillet, I covered it, thinking that doing so might trap some heat and cook the interior more thoroughly while the exterior browned and crisped.

After about 1½ minutes, I brushed the top of the pancake with a bit more oil, flipped it (it had indeed remained flat) and covered it again to brown the second side. After another minute or so, both sides were nicely browned but not very crispy. Covering the skillet had trapped not only heat but also steam, which made the pancakes soggy.

Another 40 seconds on each side with the skillet uncovered took care of that.

These pancakes were as crispy, as flaky, as layered, and as well cooked as the best I'd ever eaten, and they had been so easy to make that I had time to stir together a quick sauce for dipping. Now that I'm assured of hitting the jackpot every time, I know exactly where to place my bet.

SCALLION PANCAKES WITH DIPPING SAUCE

SERVES 4 TO 6

For this recipe, we prefer the steady, even heat of a cast-iron skillet. A heavy stainless-steel skillet may be used, but you may have to increase the heat slightly.

Dipping Sauce

- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 1 scallion, sliced thin
- 1 tablespoon water
- 2 teaspoons rice vinegar
- 1 teaspoon honey
- 1 teaspoon toasted sesame oil
- Pinch red pepper flakes

Pancakes

- 1½ cups (7½ ounces) plus 1 tablespoon all-purpose flour
- ¾ cup boiling water
- 7 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon toasted sesame oil
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 4 scallions, sliced thin

1. FOR THE DIPPING SAUCE: Whisk all ingredients together in small bowl; set aside.

2. FOR THE PANCAKES: Using wooden spoon, mix 1½ cups flour and boiling water in bowl to form rough dough. When cool enough to handle, transfer dough to lightly floured counter and knead until tacky (but not sticky) ball forms, about 4 minutes (dough will not be perfectly smooth). Cover loosely with plastic wrap and let rest for 30 minutes.

3. While dough is resting, stir together 1 tablespoon vegetable oil, sesame oil, and remaining 1 tablespoon flour. Set aside.

4. Place 10-inch cast-iron skillet over low heat to preheat. Divide dough in half. Cover 1 half of dough with plastic wrap and set aside. Roll remaining dough into 12-inch round on lightly floured counter. Drizzle with 1 tablespoon oil-flour mixture and use pastry brush to spread evenly over entire surface. Sprinkle with ½ teaspoon salt and half of scallions. Roll dough into cylinder. Coil cylinder into spiral, tuck end underneath, and flatten spiral with your palm. Cover with plastic and repeat with remaining dough, oil-flour mixture, salt, and scallions.

5. Roll first spiral into 9-inch round. Cut ½-inch slit in center of pancake. Cover with plastic. Roll and cut slit in second pancake. Place 2 tablespoons vegetable oil in skillet and increase heat to medium-low. Place 1 pancake in skillet (oil should sizzle). Cover and cook, shaking skillet occasionally, until pancake is slightly puffy and golden brown on underside, 1 to 1½ minutes. (If underside is not browned after 1 minute, turn heat up slightly. If it is browning too quickly, turn heat down slightly.) Drizzle 1 tablespoon vegetable oil over pancake. Use pastry brush to distribute over entire surface. Carefully flip pancake. Cover and cook, shaking skillet occasionally, until second side is golden brown, 1 to 1½ minutes. Uncover skillet and continue to cook until bottom is deep golden brown and crispy, 30 to 60 seconds longer. Flip and cook until deep golden brown and crispy, 30 to 60 seconds. Transfer to wire rack. Repeat with remaining 3 tablespoons vegetable oil and remaining pancake. Cut each pancake into 8 wedges and serve, passing dipping sauce separately.

TO MAKE AHEAD: Stack uncooked pancakes between layers of parchment paper, wrap tightly in plastic wrap, and refrigerate for up to 24 hours or freeze for up to 1 month. If frozen, thaw pancakes in single layer for 15 minutes before cooking.

Scallions: Whites versus Greens

Scallion flavor depends on which part of the stalk you're using and how you're treating it. Used raw, the white (which includes the light green part) is mildly sweet, while the green is grassy and peppery. We've found that these differences become less apparent when the two parts are cooked. However, the reverse is true of scallion texture: Whereas both parts are crisp when raw, cooked whites soften and turn tender, while the greens can become unappealingly limp and even chewy if cooked too long.

