



# The Breath of a Wok

*Grace Young , Alan Richardson*

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When Grace Young was a child, her father instilled in her a lasting appreciation of *wok hay*, the highly prized but elusive taste that food achieves when properly stir-fried in a wok. As an adult, Young aspired to create that taste in her own kitchen.

Grace Young's quest to master wok cooking led her throughout the United States, Hong Kong, and mainland China. Along with award-winning photographer Alan Richardson, Young sought the advice of home cooks, professional chefs, and esteemed culinary teachers like Cecilia Chiang, Florence Lin, and Ken Hom. Their instructions, stories, and recipes, gathered in this richly designed and illustrated volume, offer not only expert lessons in the art of wok cooking, but also capture a beautiful and timeless way of life.

With its emphasis on cooking with all the senses, *The Breath of a Wok* brings the techniques and flavors of old-world wok cooking into today's kitchen, enabling anyone to stir-fry with *wok hay*. IACP award-winner Young details the fundamentals of selecting, seasoning, and caring for a wok, as well as the range of the wok's uses; this surprisingly inexpensive utensil serves as the ultimate multipurpose kitchen tool. The 125 recipes are a testament to the versatility of the wok, with stir-fried, smoked, pan-fried, braised, boiled, poached, steamed, and deep-fried dishes that include not only the classics of wok cooking, like Kung Pao Chicken and Moo Shoo Pork, but also unusual dishes like Sizzling Pepper and Salt Shrimp, Three Teacup Chicken, and Scallion and Ginger Lo Mein. Young's elegant prose and Richardson's extraordinary photographs create a unique and unforgettable picture of artisan wok makers in mainland China, street markets in Hong Kong, and a "wok-a-thon" in which Young's family of aunties, uncles, and cousins cooks together in a lively exchange of recipes and stories. A visit with author Amy Tan also becomes a family event when Tan and her sisters prepare New Year's dumplings. Additionally, there are menus for family-style meals and for Chinese New Year festivities, an illustrated glossary, and a source guide to purchasing ingredients, woks, and accessories.

Written with the intimacy of a memoir and the immediacy of a travelogue, this recipe-rich volume is a celebration of cultural and culinary delights.

## The Breath of a Wok Details

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## Rocklee says

I hope I will be brave enough to try a few of these recipes. "brave" because I don't cook, not because I wouldn't like the food.

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## Cindy says

excellent info on buying and properly using a wok, great resource, recipes.

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## Denise Spicer says

Although the author's interest in cooking with woks began at an early age, she didn't start using one until she was in college. In this book she explores the history and customs of people who have used woks and, of course, includes lots of recipes. Her discussion (chapters) include how woks are made, how and where to buy woks, how to season and use a wok. She includes a chapter on wok "warriors" and through the book discusses differences between home and restaurant use of woks. Lots of interesting details and descriptions. Covers smoking, pan-frying, braising, boiling/ poaching, steaming, deep-frying, and of course, stir frying. Includes her encounters with famous chefs and authors

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## Allison says

Wok Cookbook. It has beautiful pictures, I might read it as a picture book, even without the recipes. Great beginning section, all about the history of the wok, chinese cooking, how to get your new wok ready for use. Good thing I read that too, so when I tried to season my new wok, and it started smoking off the factory coating, and started that little fire on the burner, and the smoke detector went off, I was prepared, because the book warned me that I should keep my windows open. It did not, however, explain that while the little fire was happening, and the smoke detector was blairing, that my exhaust fan would suddenly go haywire and make the most hideously loud sound ever, and not turn off, and be broken for all times, adding to the wok seasoning moment. The author also does some cooking with Amy Tan (the author) and some other notable Wok cooking people, and they share stories, and tips and recipes. The recipes don't seem too hard. Not many vegetarian recipes, but it's not a vegetarian book, so that's expected.

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## Carol says

While shopping for a wok scrubber, the manager of the Sur la Table in Pike Place Market suggested this book -much more than a cookbook - and I am loving it. The recipes look like ones I would make again and again.

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**Jason Nomura says**

Awesome book on wok cooking. Techniques and recipes are interesting and a great read.

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**Jacob says**

As a recipe book, this is a pretty good place to get started with your stir-fries. As a series of personal essays and photographs aiming to capture an aspect of the Chinese and Chinese-American experience, it is a wonderful read. As a guide to purchasing and caring for a wok, it is indispensable. It is probably the most important book on my shelf for reference purposes, and it jumpstarted my forays into cooking over the last 8 months.

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**Beth says**

Great story, great recipes, amazing photographs, and really great tips on woks. One of my very favorite food books.

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**Risa says**

Although I didn't use any of the recipes in this book, I found amazing wisdom in how to cook Chinese/Japanese recipes much better. My recipes now come out close to the way they taste in restaurants. We're loving our exploration

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**Darren says**

If you enjoy Chinese food this book might be for you - even if you never plan to try and cook it for yourself.

In a nutshell you get a wonderful book prepared with love, care and feeling by the authors that takes you behind the lore and mystique of Chinese food and starts with the first key ingredient - a good wok!

Page after page of family memories related to the wok, culture and folklore, traditional methods of production and just "why" a wok is needed compared to a skillet or pan start the book off. A more comprehensive history and overview you could not ask for and it is a pleasurable read that imparts much information.

Did you know, for example, that the earliest woks date from the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) and that the wok was so highly praised that smaller pottery versions were even buried with many people to take them to the afterlife!

Important advice about choosing the right wok for your circumstances (for a modern western home) is provided and then it is back to the serious, honourable matters of "opening" the wok, that is to say the all-important preparation of the wok prior to use. It is vital to state that this book does not skimp on the information and whilst some might find it repetitive and long-winded and consider skipping large sections you are advised not to do so as what might be seen as repetition is, in fact, careful consideration of matters. Read, digest and you will be rewarded. In many cases no one opinion is given, but a range of different counterpoints and viewpoints that have been handed down through family generations and often never written down are duly presented.

Much information is also given about the care of the wok and practical importance of it. No throwing it in the dishwasher or attacking it with scouring products. For many cooks the wok and the chopper are their key work tools, so you want to keep them in good order at all times.

It is a good way through the book before one even gets to look at cooking with your wok, such is the love being provided to this "humble pan." Once one gets to the cooking stages it is noticeable that any recipes are almost an afterthought in favour of good, practical advice about the best way to cook a specific ingredient and, perhaps more importantly, why such a thing is considered and recommended over something else.

The recipes, however, are no last minute addition and one feels that equal care has been lavished on them to ensure that they do fit the overall style and approach of the book. The recipes are relatively easy to follow but this does not set out to be a beginner's book. Even if you produce the food as described in a recipe, this is only part of the battle as a good artist might be able to paint a dog, but the style and appearance of the dog can make a world of difference.

Throughout the book there are many wonderful full colour photographs that help round out the text and providing in place visual stimulation. They would not be out of place in a travel guide as they do make you want to be there. If a book could reproduce the sights and smells (that would come from the picture) one could imagine that this book would equally do them justice.

The book ends with a overview of "essentials" such as a complete glossary of terms and a very compressive in-depth index. All in all this is a complete book. It might not have as many recipes as some other books but it does have the love and feeling and hopefully this can be transferred to the reader to enable them to do more than just make Chinese food. Hopefully through time, even if they don't have a drop of Chinese heritage in their body they will be able to slowly develop "the feeling and the way".

The Breath of a Wok: Unlocking the Spirit of Wok Cooking Through Recipes and Lore, written by Grace Young & Alan Richardson and published by Simon & Schuster. ISBN 0-7432-3827-3, 240 pages. Typical price: GBP20.

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**Burt says**

This is a fascinating book, not only because of recipes and such that are in it, but they actually get into what makes for a good wok and the history and culture that has sprung up around this versatile cooking tool. The insight that they go into concerning modern-day Chinese stall cooks and the underground night eateries in China offer an interesting perspective on Chinese culture through its cooking.

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### **Cheri says**

So my secret is out. I read cookbooks. Lots of them, and this is a winner. A great reference book in the kitchen, I actually forgot that this one was a cookbook the story was that good. A fascinating look into Chinese culture and cooking...

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### **Sally says**

Informative, passionately written, beautiful pictures, classic recipes.

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### **Jordan says**

The photos in the author's other cookbook, *Stirfrying to the Sky's Edge* were MUCH better. But this book was good too. There was more information about different kinds of woks and how they are made. And there seemed to be a better variety of recipes. Looking forward to trying some!

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### **Emily says**

Ms. Young and Mr. Richardson travel through China chronicling the storied history of the wok, from small villages in rural China where villagers cook communal meals in enormous woks four feet in diameter, to the streets of Hong Kong where unregistered dai pai dong (food vendors) magically appear after dusk, only to disappear in the early hours of the morning.. They interview renowned Chinese chefs like Florence Lin and Susanna Foo and visit the Chinese Cuisine Training Institute in Hong Kong. They watch woks being hammered by the village blacksmith in Gao Tian, Guangxi province, and by a pair of brothers who own a small business in a residential neighborhood in Shanghai. They peek into the ferociously busy kitchens of famous restaurants in San Francisco and quiet, humble kitchens in the homes of friends and neighbors both in China and the United States. Ms. Young mines her older relatives' memories for recipes and techniques from their youth and gathers them together for a “wok-a-thon” to share that knowledge with the younger generations of the family. The authors include personal stories, colorful photographs and mouth-watering recipes from each of the stops in their journey.

The book is eminently practical, too. Every question you could ever have thought to ask is covered. How do you select a good wok? What's the best way to season a new wok? When to add certain types of food, what oil is best, different techniques for various types of meat or vegetables – it's all in *The Breath of a Wok*. Having only ever used my wok to stir-fry, I had no idea it was so versatile! You can steam, pan-fry, deep-fry, poach, braise, boil and smoke with a wok, and this book provides simple to follow recipes for each of these methods. Of course, all the reading in the world will not help you become a master chef without lots of

hands-on practice, but with *The Breath of a Wok* as a reference, I'm freshly motivated to explore the many facets of this indispensable tool of the Asian kitchen.

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