

Four Seas Crispy Chicken from Mister Ji's in Chinatown

I always thought my grandfather Yeh Yeh disapproved of me cooking. But the week after I signed the lease to take over the Four Seas space, he gave me a clipping from the San Francisco Chronicle that he had carefully saved in a filing cabinet for fifteen years. It was the recipe for Four Seas Whole Crispy Skin Chicken (金牌炸子雞) by Chef Jing Yu Tan, which called for salting, blanching, and then at least a day of basting with maltose (a wheat-and-soy-based syrup) and red rice vinegar to get a crackly, golden skin. Before that moment, it hadn't totally registered that all those papers in Yeh Yeh's cabinet, all those books stacked around his recliner, were recipes and cookbooks. How had I missed the entire Time Life series of Flavors of the World on his bookshelf? Turns out, Yeh Yeh understood me. I've made some modifications to Chef Tan's recipe. Instead of a fryer chicken, I prefer a small choice or Cornish game hen. I baste with a brown rice syrup blend, which has more savory, caramel undertones than maltose alone, and sweet potato vinegar, which has a nice sweet sourness. We dry-brine the chickens for two days, then serve with a side of crisp watercress and lemon, or with chips (shrimp as pictured opposite or fermented mustard green as in this recipe), because Yeh Yeh loved them.

Active Time — 50 minutes

Plan Ahead — You'll need time to make Wok Salt or Shrimp Salt and Fermented Mustard Greens. Start 3 days before with trimming and dry-brining the chickens and making the vegetable-chip base. Then 2 days out, blanch and marinate the chickens and steam and dehydrate the vegetable chips.

Makes 4 to 8 servings

Special Equipment — Food processor, steamer, dehydrator, deep-fry thermometer, Microplane

Two 2-to 2½-lb / 900g to 1.1kg small chickens or Cornish game hens
3 tsp kosher salt
1½ Tbsp sweet potato vinegar or red wine vinegar
1 tsp brown rice syrup
1 tsp fresh lemon juice
¼ cup / 60ml water

Vegetable Chips

¾ cup / 115g drained Fermented Mustard Greens (page 41), coarsely chopped, plus 2 Tbsp liquid
⅓ cup plus ¼ cup / 95g small, white tapioca pearls

2 qt / 1.9L neutral oil
½ garlic clove
1 large handful red or green watercress
½ tsp sherry vinegar
½ tsp melted chicken fat
Kosher salt
Lemon wedges for serving
Wok Salt or Shrimp Salt (see page 37)

Fit a wire rack over a baking sheet.

Trim the wing tips from each chicken. Using poultry shears, cut along both sides of the backbone and remove it. (Save the wing tips and backbones for chicken stock, see page 34.) Cut each chicken into two pieces down through the breastbone (we have a huge pot and a dedicated deep fryer, so we leave it whole as pictured). Season the chicken all over with 2 tsp of the salt. **1** Place skin-side up on the prepared rack and refrigerate for at least 8 hours or up to overnight.

Bring a large pot of heavily salted water (it should remind you of seawater) to a boil over high heat.

Meanwhile, in a small bowl, whisk together the vinegar, brown rice syrup, lemon juice, ¼ cup / 60ml water, and remaining 1 tsp salt until the salt and syrup are dissolved. Set this marinade aside.

Place half the chicken in the boiling water **2** and blanch just until the skin turns white, about 10 seconds. Remove from the water **3** and pat very dry with paper towels. Place, skin-side up, back on the wire rack. Repeat with the remaining chicken. Brush the skin with the marinade, **4** then transfer the chicken and the remaining marinade to the refrigerator and chill, uncovered, for 2 days. Brush the skin with more marinade twice a day.

To make the chips: In a food processor fitted with the blade attachment, combine the mustard greens and liquid and process until finely chopped, like pickle relish, scraping down the sides of the bowl as needed. Add the tapioca and process until well combined (the tapioca will stay whole), about 45 seconds.

Scrape the mixture out onto the center of a 16-inch-long sheet of parchment paper. Cover with a sheet of plastic wrap. Use a rolling pin to roll the mixture into an even rectangular layer no thicker than a tapioca pearl. Slide onto a baking sheet and refrigerate overnight so the tapioca pearls can hydrate.

Prepare a steamer in a wok or a large, lidded pot following the instructions on page 167, and bring the water to a boil over medium-high heat.

Remove the plastic wrap from the baking sheet. Using kitchen shears, cut the sheet of chips and parchment in half or into thirds so that it will fit into your steamer. Trim off any excess parchment paper so that the paper extends past the chips by about ½ inch, and so it does not cover the steamer bottom entirely. Steam one sheet at a time until the tapioca pearls are clear, 20 to 25 minutes. Add water to the pot between batches, as needed.

If you have a dehydrator, use it set to 135°F. Otherwise, preheat the oven to 150°F and place the sheets of chips, still on parchment, on a wire roasting rack.

Dehydrate or bake for 1 hour, then remove the parchment paper. The chips should feel wet and rubbery at this point. Continue dehydrating or baking until the sheets are completely dried and brittle and snap easily, 4 to 6 hours total depending on your dehydrator or oven. Let cool, then snap into roughly 2-inch pieces; they can and will be irregular in shape. (At this point, you can transfer to an airtight container and store at room temperature for up to 3 months.)

Fit a wire rack over a baking sheet. Line a second baking sheet with a double layer of paper towels.

Fill the wok or a Dutch oven with the neutral oil and secure a deep-fry thermometer on the side. Set over medium-high heat and warm the oil to 350°F, being careful to maintain this temperature as you fry. In two batches, carefully place the chicken in the oil and fry, flipping occasionally, until the skin is dark golden brown and the chicken is cooked through, about 10 minutes. Transfer, skin-side up, to the prepared rack and let rest for 5 minutes. Optional bonus move before resting—heat the oil to 400°F, then ladle the oil over the bird to make the skin extra golden and crisp. **5**

Meanwhile, reheat the oil to 375°F. Add a handful of the vegetable chips and fry. At first, they will sink to the bottom; when they start to float, stir so that they don't stick together. They are ready when they puff and float to the top, about 30 seconds. Transfer to the prepared baking sheet and repeat with the remaining chips.

Using a Microplane, grate the garlic into a medium bowl. Add the watercress, vinegar, and chicken fat; season with salt; and toss to combine.

Cut each chicken half into four pieces: drumstick, thigh, and two breast pieces. **6–7** Arrange on a platter, season with kosher salt, **8** and top with the dressed watercress and vegetable chips. Serve with the lemon wedges and some wok salt or shrimp salt for dipping.

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