

EATING TO LIVE SERIES

HOW TO COOK AND ENJOY TEMPEH

By Michael Erlewine

Soy products are globally ubiquitous. They are everywhere and in everything. And something like 95% of soy products are GMO. I won't even mention the horrible fake-meat soy products that exist. Ugh. Years ago, my family and I ate tofu. Back in the 1970s, we even made our own tofu, because you could not buy it anywhere, except maybe in specialized oriental stores where it was not clear how it was made or what was in it. And, trust me, making tofu is a lot of work.

In recent years it has come to light that while tofu has some health benefits (high in fiber and protein), it is (at least commercially produced tofu) highly processed and contains "anti-nutrient" compounds that over time (or in large amounts) are not healthy and can even inhibit our body's ability to absorb nutrients. Unfermented soy (like tofu) is high in phytic acid, which can prevent the absorption of magnesium, iron, zinc, copper, and calcium. It is also a trypsin-inhibitor, which makes it difficult to digest proteins. Unfermented soy products contain goitrogens, compounds that can interfere with the body's ability to regulate its processes.

And lastly, unfermented soy has phytoestrogens, which are natural compounds that can imitate estrogen in the body, which can affect fertility and sexual development, not to mention (for males) erectile dysfunction, low sperm count, and growth of male breast tissue. I know, this sounds terrible, but check out the research. It's there. In addition, the over-processing of tofu, can introduce contaminants, including MSG and aluminum, both neurotoxins. However, there IS a healthy soy alternative to regular tofu use, and that is tempeh.

TEMPEH

In my eating habits, there is a phrase that I subscribe to and that is "Whole Grain or No Grain," and this goes for beans too. Unlike tofu, tempeh is made from cooked whole soy beans, which are naturally fermented for a number of days, using a mold called *Rhizopus oligosporus*. Tempeh is rich in nutrients, high in vitamin B2, and has more protein and fiber than tofu, not to mention manganese, phosphorus, magnesium, and copper that can be absorbed. And, since it is the "whole bean," it is not generally processed very much, especially if you can find an organic variety with no additives. There is an organic brand

called “LightLife” that is even available in the very small town we live in. How great is that?

The fermentation process in Tempeh helps to break down the phytates and antinutrients in soy, which makes it more digestible and not harmful to the body, as well as introducing bioactive peptides. It is important to find organic, not overly processed, forms of tempeh. Any soy product, including tempeh, should be eaten in moderation, due to its estrogenic properties.

HOW TO COOK TEMPEH SO THAT IT TASTES GOOD

Since I offer the praises of tempeh, I should show you how to cook it. Now, Tempeh tends to get a bad rap, but it is really high-quality protein in a digestible form as many fermented foods are. The problem is how to cook it so that it does not taste, well, “not-so-good.” Tofu (which is a processed food) used to be the king of protein, but in recent years more and more of us old-timers are finding that it is not so digestible and there are other drawbacks which I mentioned above. You can Google the web for that. We use little to no tofu anymore and never encounter it except at restaurants..

As mentioned, back in the early 1970s, there

was no tofu for sale in grocery stores, so we had to make our own, which we did. Making tofu is a time-consuming and a somewhat messy/difficult process. I remember well. Those were the years that we also had wooden kegs of miso, tamari, and umeboshi plums in the basement. Anyway, back to tempeh.

Tempeh, like miso, is a fermented soybean product and like miso, tempeh is very much more digestible than either the whole cooked soy beans or the processed tofu (which we avoid). And tempeh, unlike miso, IS NOT SALTY, which for folks like me is absolutely important. Unfortunately, you have to know how to cook tempeh to keep your guests from trying to escape from the dinner table. It can taste, well, different, and sometimes pretty bad. Here is how we cook tempeh and love it. We eat it every day or so as a main source of protein .

COOKING TEMPEH

I usually cook two of those 8-ounce store-bought long rectangular packages of LightLife organic Tempeh at once. No use making just a wee bit of tempeh, because if you make it right, it all gets eaten up, usually before the leftovers hit the fridge.

First, I carefully slice the tempeh bars into short slices, so that each slice is perhaps 1/8th of an inch thick, by 3/4 inch high and 3 inches long. As mentioned I cut up two or more packages this way and place the slices (still tight against each other) in a large stainless steel covered pan. I lay down a little olive oil or toasted sesame oil on the bottom of the large stainless-steel pan, at least in the area where I place the tempeh.

Then I briefly (seldom longer) marinate the tofu by pouring (sparingly) on the packed together vertical slices some or all of the following ingredients: Tamari (soy sauce), Umeboshi Plum Vinegar, Mirin (rice wine), Brown rice Vinegar, red oil (sesame oil with hot pepper), and sometimes roasted-dark sesame oil.

I don't always use all of the above, just whatever we have on hand or what strikes my fancy. And I don't soak the tempeh with any of them, but kind of sprinkle each of them on in splotches. *By the time I sprinkle several of the above condiments, I have usually gotten something on all parts of the tempeh, and it is soaking in between the slices. At this point you can let it sit, flip the tempeh over to let the condiments flow the other way, or whatever. I

tend not to wait too long and I find little gained by waiting and I will tell you why below.

I cook the tempeh in a wide flat sauté pan and start by heating up a small (but not insignificant) amount of toasted sesame or olive oil (or both) into which I place the tempeh and proceed to braise the slices, turning them over every which way. I try for some visible signs of browning on the tempeh before taking my next and most secret step.

Into the now hot and braised tempeh I pour about a half a cup (or more) of hot water and immediately put the cover of the sauté pan on tight. What this does is raise a cloud of steam in the pan and the steam gets all through the tempeh, but most of all it liquefies all the condiments causing them to be evenly spread over all the tempeh slices making each slice very flavorful and without the sometimes shock of 'tempeh with no flavor'.

I let this steaming happen for a few minutes, perhaps turning over the tempeh once or mixing it around, and then I take the cover off and go back to braising. Basically at this point I want to boil off the water I just added, dry out the tempeh, and proceed to further browning (and almost scorching) the stuff.

Next, and this is important, I do the water thing all over again, tossing in a half cup of hot water or so and covering the pan once more, waiting a few minutes, removing the cover, and browning up the tempeh. In this final browning process I tend to push the browning to the limit. I dry those suckers out and braise them. And that's it.

Combine the tempeh with some cooked vegetables and brown rice and you have one delicious dinner.

I have documented the entire process with 16 photos in the following, so I suggest you look at the pictures, each of which has a description. If you don't love this delicious way of serving tempeh I will be surprised. It is organic and a very healthy source of protein. I show how to cook it in squares for something like a tempeh Ruben and also in thin slices for mixing with rice and veggies. Try it out and let me know how you like it. Here is the link:



1

Use two packages of organic tempeh, which have no added ingredients. This is organic tempeh by LightLife, an 8 oz. package. We cook two packages at a time, not just one. It gets eaten quickly.



2

I will present two ways to cook tempeh here, one sliced thin to use with rice or stir fry and one in tempeh slabs that can be used for Tempeh Reubens, etc. First, the thin-sliced tempeh.



3

Using a long knife, I slice the bar of tempeh very finely as you can see here. Place these sliced slabs (two of them) in a dish or the pan to fry them in and then marinate them.



3b

Either method, it is important to marinate the tempeh with condiments. We use, left to right Edn's Ume Plum Vinegar, Mirin, Red Oil, Brown Rice Vinigar, and Tamari. I also mix in some toasted sesame oil with olive oil in the pan. With the tempeh sliced and still tightly together, sprinkle on generously various condiments.



4

Place the tempeh in the pan, and move it around to get the flat side of the tempeh to get browned. In this photo, there is no marinade, but should be. And we braise it until it gets a little scorched. I put a tiny amount of cayenne pepper in the oil to give the tempeh a little heat and better taste.



5

Then, I throw a half cup of hot water into the pan and quickly put the top on the pan. Essentially, at this point we are steaming the tempeh. Steam until the water dries up, but don't burn it. Scorching is fine!



6

I then take the top off the pan to let the remaining water boil off.... and I do the water process a **SECOND** time, half-cup, pan-top on, steam, and boil off the excess and then brown it a **LOT**, perhaps adding a little more oil to make the browning easier.



7

Here is what it looks like when it is done. No, it will not win a beauty contest, but it tastes great with rice or noodles, and in sandwiches or just eaten by itself.



8

The second method is to cut the tempeh bar into three equal sections and then slice each of the three sections IN HALF WIDTH-WISE (which is tricky), so you end up with six small (thin) slabs of tempeh.



9

Then, marinate the slabs with various condiments, as shown in the next frame. You can marinate for a little or long time. I often turn the slabs over so that the condiments soak to all sides. I no longer use a glass dish, but marinate the tempeh in the final cooking pan and not for long.



10

Here are what I use. Note the Eden logo (which I designed back in the 1960s when Eden was first starting). I also (astrologically) picked the day they first opened, which must have been a little auspicious, since they are still here and doing well.



11

Throw in some water, put the top on the pan, and STEAM the tempeh as in the other method. Turn the slabs over until they have been browned.



12

Place the marinated slabs in a pan with some oil and scorch them.



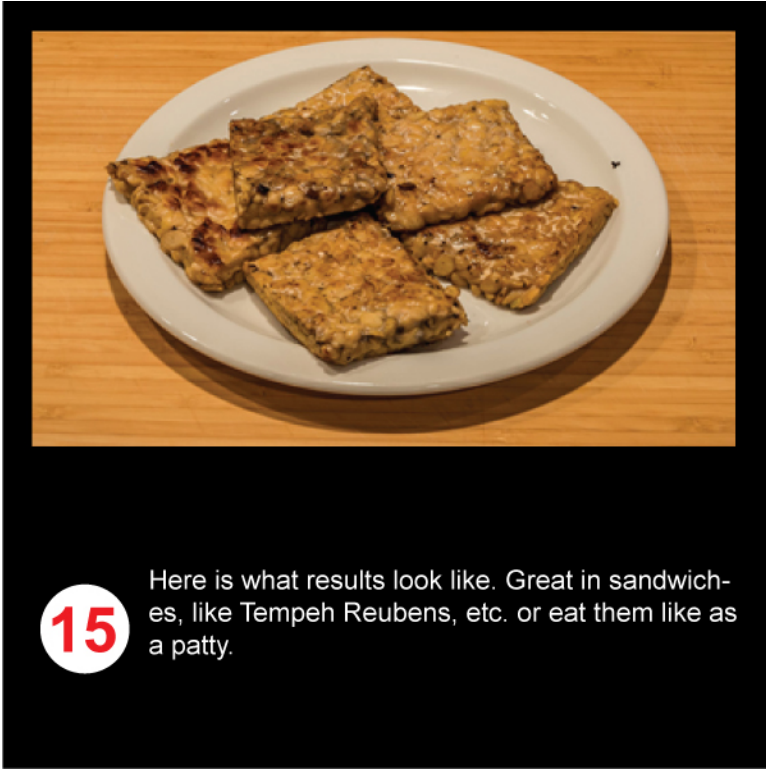
13

Steam with lid on, and then dry it out as before, throw about a half cup hot water into the pan and quickly close the cover. Let them steam for 10 minutes or so, until the water is gone. Watch it closely.



14

Then boil off the excess water and brown the tempeh. Repeat this whole steaming process twice, so you have done it two times. Brown off the pieces until they are crispy, as shown here.



15

Here is what results look like. Great in sandwiches, like Tempeh Reubens, etc. or eat them like as a patty.

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