

THERE IS NO FU LIKE A TOFU - SOME SOY PRODUCTS UNDER FIRE

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I have been around soy products since the late 1960s and early 1970s. You couldn't find tofu back then, so we made it ourselves, which is quite a time-consuming process. Ever done it? Anyway, those tasty little fried or baked cubes of tofu are now suspect.

Today tofu and other soy products are everywhere, and I mean everywhere. Like corn, you probably don't even know how pervasive soy byproducts are in our food supply at this time. However, in recent years the folks who know food (people I respect) seem to be reevaluating some of the venerable soybean products, at least the non-fermented kind.

Soy, particularly uncultured (non-fermented) soy products like tofu, soy milk, soy nuts, soy protein, eatable (Edamame) beans, etc. is no longer considered the miracle food it once was. On the other hand, what are called "cultured" or fermented soy products like miso, soy yogurt, natto, Tamari (soy sauce), and tempeh are still considered very 'healthy' for us.

In past centuries the Japanese consumed more fermented soy products than cultured or unfermented by far, but in modern times that has changed. The unfermented soy products like tofu are now prevalent and are being questioned. Non-cultured soy products like tofu are said to interfere with protein digestion, and their soy phytoestrogens are said to be a factor in various cancers. It is also said that these unfermented soy products increase the body's requirement for vitamin D and B12, and so on. There is quite a list at this point and I don't have room here to quote them all. Anyway, I am not expert enough to know the truth of it one way or the other. But we all would do well to at least be aware there is a question being asked here. Also most soy beans have now been genetically modified, and sourcing or verifying heritage beans is getting increasingly more difficult.

The fermented (cultured) soy products are said to be good for us because they have better nutritional components and don't contain phytates or digestion inhibitors. Too often by the time these things are sorted out by the scientists, we have been eating them half our lives. My hunch now (and has always been) is that fermented soy products are the way to go, and that the non-fermented products like soy milk and tofu we can do without.

As mentioned earlier, soy products (like the ubiquitous corn) are now everywhere in processed foods, especially in "fast foods." In fact, reading food labels is no longer a guarantee that you will avoid soy byproducts. Many supplements and vitamins are derived from soy oil (Vitamin E) or can be found in canned tuna, sauces, soups, breads, meats (injected into chickens), and even chocolate. It is in tofu 'hot dogs' hidden in names like "textured vegetable protein," "hydrolyzed vegetable protein," and lecithin. And searching out organic soy beans does not solve the problem. It is the unfermented bean itself, not how it is grown that is problematical. Soy has also been found to be one of the foods (like wheat, etc.) that are likely to cause allergic reactions in some people, and so on. Keep in mind that all foods are medicine of one type or another, bringing health to some and acting like poison for others.

Therefore, we might consider finding alternatives to the non-fermented soy products we use. For example, soy products are sometimes recommended for women undergoing menopause for their isoflavones or plant estrogens, but you can get the same estrogens from flax seeds and

lima beans. You get the idea.

The bottom line for me is that unfermented soy products like soy milk and tofu are hard to digest, since they require considerably friendly intestinal flora to be present, which in modern diets may or may not be there. In fermented soy bean products, those flora are not only there, but have already done most of the work for us.

I am no expert in this, but like most of you, have to wait around for the scientists to sort it out, which usually takes years. For my myself, I eat very little to no tofu or uncultured soy products at this time, but I do continue to eat tempeh, miso, and Tamari soy sauce – all fermented soybean products. Your thoughts?

Note: Tamari or Shoyu Soy Sauce – Don't Confuse Them

Tamari and Shoyu soy sauce are two different products, and to my mind not at all similar other than they are derived from soybeans. I love tamari and I avoid Shoyu or typical soy sauce at all costs. Both are made by fermenting soybeans. Tamari is thicker, darker, less-salty, has a fine aroma, and is much richer in taste, while soy sauce is very salty, sharper, lighter in color, and has a very different taste.

Tamari originally was a Japanese product made from mostly soybeans, while most soy sauces "Shoyu" originated in China and are a combination of soy beans and 40-60% wheat. There is a Chinese version of soy sauce that is darker and thicker, but this is obtained only by the addition of molasses.

While both tamari and soy sauce may contain wheat, there are wheat-free versions of tamari that are available. Tamari from Eden Foods is aged for two years in cedar casks and retains the age-old flavor that makes it so popular. San-J also makes a good tamari. Tamari is and has been an indispensable part of my diet for over forty years.

The take away here is that if you have never tasted excellent Tamari on rice, you have missed something. Shoyu and other types of soy sauces in no way compare to good tamari and I will go out of my way never to eat them.

HOW TO COOK TEMPEH THAT TASTES GOOD

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My old friend Imo Abraham requested this. Tempeh is cultured or fermented soy beans, basically soybeans that have been partially broken down or digested for us by introducing friendly probiotic bacteria and letting them culture. We live in the small town of Big Rapids, and we can buy organic tempeh in 8 oz. packages at our local Meijer store. How amazing! But you have to know how to cook tempeh if you want it to taste good. Here is how I cook it.

I usually cook tempeh a pound at a time, which means using two eight-ounce packages. Our tempeh comes in little flat bars. I take two bars, lay them side by side on a cutting board so that I can cut both with one stroke and then proceed to slice the bars into 1/8-inch slices, so that each cut slice is something like 3/4-inch by 3-inch by 1/8 inch.

So, when you are done slicing, you have the two bars still laid out on the board, but cut. Next,

we have to marinate the cut slices, and this is not an all-night or couple hour marinade. I do it right on the spot and then cook it, so let's not even say that I marinate it.

Next, I take a large 11" sauté pan with a lid and place it on the burner. Into the pan I pour a reasonable amount of sesame oil, more than a tiny amount because you have to kind of fry up the tempeh slices. I tend to pour a little olive oil on top of the sesame oil, because I like the flavor of olive oil a lot. That's just me.

Anyway, next, using a spatula, lift the rows of sliced tempeh, a row at a time and gently place them in the pan on top of the oil. Now for the "marinade." Use whatever flavors you like. But here is what I use:

Red Oil (sesame oil infused with hot chilies)
Umeboshi Vinegar
Brown Rice Vinegar
Tamari (shoyu sauce)

I dribble each of these condiments across the sliced bar of tempeh, allowing the liquids to flow down into the cracks between slices. I don't let it sit, but immediately begin cooking because I am always in a hurry, but you could (and I have) let it sit overnight in the pan. It tastes about the same, either way.

Turn the flame up high and start frying up that tempeh. Make sure you have enough oil in the pan to let the oil cause the tempeh to turn brown. Use your spatula to separate the slices, and turn the whole bunch over several times. You have to be right there watching it. Do this until you have gotten some signs of browning. And this next step is important, if not key.

Take about 1/3 (or slightly more) of a cup of water and throw it into the hot pan and immediately cover it. What this does is cause steam to arise that distributes the various marinades into all the pores and cracks of the sliced tempeh. Let this steam for a few minutes.

Then take the top off and dry the tempeh out until it is frying again. Next, throw some more water in and cover, allowing the steam to once again get into the tempeh. You want to distribute the marinades into the each slice. Steaming it twice works best.

After a few minutes, take the top off and continue frying, this time to dry the tempeh out and crisp it up. When it is all nice and brown, turn the burner off and you are ready to serve it.

We eat it with rice, on rice, with vegetables, in vegetables, as well as use it to make tempeh Reuben sandwiches. We also just eat it piece by piece. It tastes so good that often it is all eaten before we can store it in the refrigerator.

Try it and see if you like it.