**Restaurant Tofu**

My son’s first taste of tofu was at a restaurant. He didn’t know what tofu was, or that it was coming. Having never caught wind of tofu’s bad reputation among non-Asians, he took a bite of its sauce-drenched, crispy fried goodness with an open mind. He chewed through its golden barrier and into its moist, pillowy interior. Grunting his approval, he kept eating. That, ideally, is how you meet and greet tofu.

Most tofu virgins know it’s out there. They’ve heard the stories of what this personality-free substance doesn’t taste like. Unless their first bite is at a restaurant, their fears are likely confirmed. Statistically speaking, non-Asians do a poor job cooking tofu, my dad included.

He called tofu “bean curd,” like you did back in the 1970s. Before serving me the bean curd, dad explained that it was something I would be eating in place of meat which I had recently sworn off for ethical reasons.

Dad was a good cook, and while bean curd was not his strong suit, he made a well-researched attempt. I was seven years old, and I vividly remember its chalky, flaccid, absent presence.
His intentions were pure, but dad could not have devised a more effective way to change my mind about vegetarianism.

If dad had known then what I know now about freezing tofu, I might still be a vegetarian. But at least in my lifetime I have been able to finish what he started. I’m not referring to the fact that I have become one of those weirdos who likes raw, unseasoned tofu, but the fact that I now know how to cook it like the pros.

This time of year, with so many new veggies in season, stir-fries are in play, and some proper tofu can make any stir fry seem royal. But tofu’s default state is lame and flavorless, characteristics that will carry through to the finished product unless you take measures. Namely, put your brick of firm tofu in the freezer for a few days. That’s mostly it, actually. That, and some cornstarch and sauce, and you’re set.

It isn’t law that you put golden cubes of crispy, meaty, succulent tofu into every stir-fry. It is, however, something of a tradition for a reason. Adding tofu doesn’t mean skipping meat, depending on your inclinations. Tofu is great with every type of animal protein, from chicken to eggs to bacon to seafood.

There is a lot going on in a stir-fry, and it’s easy to overlook the tofu, which would be a mistake. Just ask generations of disappointed tofu tasters. Or ask my son, who isn’t afraid to call out half-assed bean curd, but you should see him light up for “restaurant tofu.”

Restaurant tofu has a resilient, fleshy quality, a tasty brown skin that holds onto sauce, and a springy, moist interior. Tofu is mostly water, and when you freeze it that water expands, rupturing channels through the tofu as it tries to push its way out. Those channels out will soon act as portals to allow in a certain sauce we call “restaurant sauce.” You can guess the kinds of restaurants we frequent.

When thawed, you gently squeeze out as much excess water as you can. I drink the tofu water, savoring its mellow, comforting flavor.  What’s left is an empty sponge you could practically scrub yourself with in the shower. And like a sponge, this thawed brick of potential can absorb things. Like restaurant sauce, or your favorite marinade. Those cubes soak up the sauce like thirsty sailors.

I dust the saucy cubes with cornstarch and deep-fry them into golden blocks of joy that explode with flavor when you crunch through, like restaurant tofu should.

**Marinated Restaurant Tofu**

For a fun side dish, save the onions from the marinade, roll them in extra corn starch, and deep fry into a tasty side, snack or garnish.

*Serves 2*

1 12 oz. brick firm or extra-firm tofu, frozen for at least three days, thawed overnight, squeezed of excess water and cut into ½-inch cubes
1 tablespoon each soy sauce, oyster sauce, rice vinegar
1 teaspoon each fish sauce, hoisin sauce, hot sauce, sesame oil, brown sugar
¼ teaspoon black pepper
¼ onion, sliced and teased apart
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 cubic inch ginger, peeled and sliced
2 cups vegetable oil
4 tablespoons cornstarch (more for onion ginger garlic fritter rings)

Mix all of the sauces, along with the onion, garlic, ginger and black pepper, and toss the cubes of thawed tofu in the sauce. The tofu will absorb every last drop.

Heat the oil to 350 degrees in a small, deep pan suitable for frying. While the oil is heating, toss the tofu cubes and cornstarch in a bowl until the tofu is coated. Save the onions for later.

Deep-fry the cubes 2-to-4 minutes, depending on how dark and crispy you want them. They don’t need much. Remove and allow to drain and cool in a colander or on paper towels.

Toss the onion sections in the cornstarch, adding more if necessary, and then fry these onions in the hot oil. They take a bit longer to cook because of all of the water. Don’t stir them. Let it fry into a 3D matrix.

If serving your tofu with a stir-fry, prepare it first and set it aside while you make the stir-fry. Don’t add the tofu until serving time, or serve it on the side, shoulder to shoulder and ready to mix. Stir-fry and restaurant tofu need each other, and when you put them close enough together they'll figure it out.