



FREE STARTER GUIDE

The 7 Things That Ruin Asian Cooking

And the exact fix for each one — from a kitchen in Ho Chi Minh City, where these mistakes are corrected every single day.

Asian Kitchen Pro
asiankitchenpro.com

Why this guide exists

Most Asian recipes fail for seven reasons. Not fifty. The same seven, over and over.

Every failure below is something that happens in a real kitchen with real ingredients — and each one has a cause you can name and a fix you can apply the next time you cook. No vague advice like "cook with love."

How to use this: read the seven once. Then, when a dish comes out wrong, come back and find which of the seven it was.

1. The pan was not hot enough

This is the single most common cause of Asian food that tastes "home-cooked" in the bad sense: pale, wet, and steamed instead of seared.

What actually happens: food goes into a pan that is warm, not hot. The surface temperature drops, moisture comes out of the food, and it boils in its own liquid. You cannot brown anything in a puddle.

The fix: heat the empty pan until a drop of water beads and skates across the surface before it evaporates. Only then add oil, and only then add food. Cook in two batches rather than crowding the pan — crowding is the same mistake wearing a disguise.

2. Aromatics were added all at once

Garlic, ginger, shallot and spring onion do not cook at the same speed. Put them in together and the garlic burns before the shallot softens.

The order that works:

1. Hard aromatics first — ginger, thick shallot, white parts of spring onion.
2. Soft aromatics next — garlic, chilli, shallot that has been minced fine.
3. Leafy aromatics last — green spring onion, coriander, Thai basil, off the heat.

The fix: garlic needs roughly 30 seconds in hot oil. Any longer and it turns bitter. If a recipe tells you to "fry garlic until golden" and then keep cooking for ten minutes, the garlic will be black by the end — add it later instead.

3. Fish sauce was added at the wrong time

Fish sauce is salt with aroma. Added at the start, the aroma cooks away and you are left with an expensive way to salt your food. Added at the end, it keeps its character.

The fix: season with fish sauce in the last two minutes of cooking, off the boil. Taste first, then add — the salt level of fish sauce varies enormously between brands (roughly 25°N to 43°N nitrogen, which is the number on the label most people ignore).

Check your bottle: if the first ingredient listed is water or sugar rather than fish and salt, you are using a diluted product. You will need more of it, and it will taste flatter.

4. The stock was boiled, not simmered

A rolling boil emulsifies fat and protein into the liquid. That is how you get cloudy broth that tastes muddy instead of clean.

The fix: keep the pot at a bare simmer — small bubbles breaking the surface, never a rolling boil — and skim the grey foam in the first twenty minutes. For bone-based broths, parboil the bones first: cover with cold water, boil ten minutes, drain, rinse away the scum, then start again with fresh water.

Temperature to aim for: about 95 °C. Not 100 °C.

5. Whole spices were never toasted

Star anise, cassia, clove, coriander seed and fennel seed carry their aroma in oils that need heat to release. Untoasted, they are furniture in the pot.

The fix: dry pan, medium heat, three to five minutes, moving constantly, until you can smell them from arm's length. Then tie them in cloth or put them in a spice ball — and take them *out* after two hours. Left in for eight hours, cassia turns the whole pot bitter.

Check your cupboard: ground spices lose their aroma in about six months. Whole spices last two to three years. If your five-spice smells like dust, it is dust.

6. The noodles were cooked too early

Rice noodles absorb liquid and keep absorbing after they leave the water. Noodles cooked twenty minutes before serving arrive at the table as a solid block.

The fix: soak dried rice noodles in warm — not hot — water for thirty minutes, then boil for two to three minutes immediately before serving. If you must work ahead, cook them, rinse in cold water, drain thoroughly, and toss with a little neutral oil.

7. Meat was sliced with the grain

This one is invisible until you chew. Beef, pork and chicken sliced along the muscle fibre stay long and stringy no matter how tender the cut.

The fix: find the direction the fibres run, then cut across them at 90 degrees. For thin slices, put the meat in the freezer for thirty minutes first — firm meat cuts to one or two millimetres instead of sliding around.

The one-page summary

Symptom	Real cause	Fix
Pale, wet stir-fry	Pan not hot enough	Heat until water beads and skates
Burnt garlic, raw shallot	All aromatics added together	Hard → soft → leafy, in that order
Salty but flavourless	Fish sauce added too early	Add in the last two minutes
Cloudy, muddy broth	Boiled instead of simmered	Parboil bones, hold at 95 °C
Bitter braise	Spices never toasted, or left too long	Toast 3–5 min, remove after 2 hours
Noodles in one block	Cooked too far ahead	Boil 2–3 min just before serving
Tough, stringy meat	Sliced with the grain	Freeze 30 min, cut across the fibres

Asian Kitchen Pro — recipes tested in a real home kitchen in Ho Chi Minh City. Exact grams, exact temperatures, and the reason behind every step.
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