Sauces / China

XO Sauce

Hong Kong's most celebrated condiment — a slow-fried collision of dried scallops, dried shrimp, Chinese ham, chilli, and garlic, each ingredient separately rendered into its most concentrated, aromatic self before being united in a pool of shimmering oil. The result is a dark, rust-red, intensely savoury paste that elevates everything it touches: noodles, rice, stir-fries, steamed fish.

Time 90 min **Servings** 4

What you'll need.

- ☐ 3 parts Dried scallops (conpoy), soaked 2 hr
- ☐ 2 parts Dried shrimp, soaked 30 min
- ☐ 1.5 parts Chinese cured ham (Jinhua or prosciutto di Parma)
- ☐ 2 parts Shallots (very finely minced)
- ☐ 1 parts Garlic (very finely minced)
- ☐ 1 parts Dried red chillies (árbol or tianjin), finely chopped
- ☐ 6 parts Neutral oil (rice bran, peanut, or grapeseed)
- ☐ 0.5 parts Soy sauce
- ☐ 0.3 parts Caster sugar
- ☐ 1 parts Shaoxing rice wine

Let's make it.

01 Soak dried scallops in cold water for 2 hours; soak dried shrimp separately in cold water for 30 minutes. Reserve the scallop soaking liquid — it is intensely flavoured and will be added to the sauce. Drain and shred the rehydrated scallops by hand into thin strands along their natural fibres — they should pull apart like cooked chicken. Roughly chop the rehydrated shrimp. Finely dice the cured ham into pieces no larger than 5 mm.

02 Heat half the oil in a wok or wide, heavy skillet over medium-low heat. Add the shredded scallops first — they take longest. Fry slowly, stirring frequently, for 10–12 minutes until they turn golden and slightly crispy at the edges but remain tender inside. Add the shrimp and ham and continue frying for another 5–6 minutes until the shrimp are golden and fragrant and the ham's fat is rendered. The oil will turn orange from the scallop collagen. Remove all from the oil with a slotted spoon and set aside, reserving the flavoured oil.

03 In the same wok with the reserved flavoured oil, reduce heat to low. Add the remaining oil. When the oil is shimmering but not smoking, add shallots and fry slowly, stirring constantly, for 8–10 minutes until they are deeply golden and beginning to crisp. Add garlic and fry for another 3–4 minutes — garlic burns faster than shallots, so watch carefully. Finally add the dried chilli and fry for 2 minutes. The entire allium-chilli base should be deeply golden, fragrant, and slightly crispy at the edges.

04 Return the fried scallops, shrimp, and ham to the wok. Add soy sauce, sugar, and Shaoxing rice wine. Add 2–3 tablespoons of the reserved scallop soaking liquid. Stir everything together and simmer over medium-low heat for 5–8 minutes, stirring frequently, until the wine has cooked off, the sugar has dissolved, and the sauce has come together into a cohesive, glistening, dark rust-red condiment. Taste and adjust salt.

05 Cool the sauce to room temperature before transferring to sterilized glass jars. Ensure the sauce is fully submerged in the oil — add a thin layer of neutral oil on top if needed to seal it. Refrigerate. The oil will solidify slightly in the refrigerator — this is normal. XO sauce keeps refrigerated for 1 month and frozen for 3 months. Use a clean, dry spoon each time.

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Servings are an estimate; check quantities in the source recipe.
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