Chinese Ingredients List

Sixteen pantry staples by name, character, role and stand-in — the shelf a Chinese kitchen is actually built on.

VERSION	PUBLISHED	LAST UPDATED	INGREDIENTS
1.0	5 November 2026	5 November 2026	16

Read This First

Most "Chinese ingredient list" pages are a shopping list. This one is organised by **what the bottle does in the pan**, because that is the only thing that tells you which to reach for. Salt, colour, acid, funk — four jobs, and almost every Chinese seasoning is doing one of them.

The **stand-in** column matters more than the substitution culture suggests: the closer a substitute sits to the original on the salt–umami axis, the less you have to re-balance the rest of the dish. Where no honest substitute exists, the table says so rather than offering one.

> **How to use this sheet.** Find the job the recipe is asking for, then pick within that block. A recipe that needs colour is not asking for salt — reaching for light soy to darken a braise adds salt without adding colour, and that is the most common mistake home cooks make with Chinese seasonings.

The Shelf, by Job

Sixteen staples in five blocks. The block tells you which job the bottle is doing; the **reach for it when** column tells you which dish is asking for that job. Read down the block, not across the sheet.

SIXTEEN CHINESE PANTRY STAPLES — WHAT EACH DOES AND WHAT STANDS IN FOR IT

Name	Chinese	What it does	Reach for it when	Stand-in
Soy family 生抽 · 老抽 · 溜酱油 · 海鲜酱				
Light soy sauce	生抽	Salts and seasons. Thin, salty, first-press.	Almost everything: stir-fries, marinades, dipping, dressings.	Tamari (close), Japanese shoyu (sweeter), fish sauce (salt only, no soy aroma)
Dark soy sauce	老抽	Colours. Thick, aged longer, lightly sweet, far less salty than light.	Red-braised dishes, anything that should look mahogany.	Light soy plus a pinch of sugar — never the reverse. Dark soy cannot salt a dish on its own.
Tamari	溜酱油	Japanese soy with little or no wheat. Saltier, rounder.	When wheat is off the table, or as a light-soy stand-in.	Light soy, reduced slightly
Hoisin sauce	海鲜酱	Sweet, thick, fermented bean paste — a glaze rather than a seasoning.	Peking duck pancakes, char siu glaze, dipping.	Oyster sauce plus sugar and a little five-spice
Fermented pastes 豆瓣酱 · 豆豉 · 甜面酱 · 腐乳				
Doubanjiang	豆瓣酱	Fermented broad bean and chilli paste. Salty, deeply savoury, moderately hot.	Mapo tofu, twice-cooked pork, anything Sichuan that needs a red base.	Gochujang (sweeter, no bean funk); miso plus chilli oil (closer in salt, misses the bean)
Douchi	豆豉	Whole fermented black soybeans. Salty, wrinkled, concentrated.	Steamed fish, stir-fried bitter melon, braises wanting a fermented bass note.	Jarred black bean garlic sauce (use twice as much); fermented black bean paste
Sweet bean sauce	甜面酱	Fermented wheat flour paste, sweet and mild.	Peking duck, spring onion pancakes, northern braises.	Hoisin (sweeter, thinner)
Fermented tofu	腐乳	Soft cubes of fermented tofu in brine or chilli oil. Very salty, very savoury.	Water-spinach stir-fry, congee, marinades that need a funk backbone.	Nothing honest. Miso is the nearest in spirit but not in function.
Acids 镇江香醋 · 山西老陈醋 · 米醋 · 绍兴酒				
Chinkiang vinegar	镇江香醋	Malty, faintly sweet black rice vinegar. The default Chinese table vinegar.	Dumpling dip, hot and sour soup, cold appetisers, braises needing acid at the end.	Balsamic (add salt, use three-quarters); rice vinegar (cleaner, less malty)

Name	Chinese	What it does	Reach for it when	Stand-in
Shanxi aged vinegar	山西老陈醋	Sharper, smokier, darker than Chinkiang. Wheat and sorghum based.	Noodle dishes from the north, anything wanting a harder acid edge.	Chinkiang plus a splash of balsamic
Rice vinegar	米醋	Light, clean, low aroma. Neutral acidity.	Pickles, dressings, when you want acid without colour or malt.	White wine vinegar, diluted
Shaoxing wine	绍兴酒	Fermented rice wine. Aromatises and de-glazes; alcohol carries aroma compounds off the wok.	Marinades, deglazing, steaming fish, red-braised pork.	Dry sherry (closest); sake (lighter); mirin (sweeter — reduce the sugar elsewhere)
Umami bottles	蚝油 · 鱼露 · 芝麻酱 · 香油			
Oyster sauce	蚝油	Sweet-salty, viscous, glutamate-rich. Adds body as well as savour.	Stir-fried greens, noodle dishes, marinades that need cling.	Hoisin (sweeter, no oyster); vegetarian oyster sauce made from mushrooms
Fish sauce	鱼露	Pure salt and glutamate, fermented from fish. Pungent raw, mellow cooked.	Dipping sauces, marinades, anywhere you would otherwise use salt plus soy.	Light soy (misses the fish); salt plus a pinch of MSG
Sesame paste	芝麻酱	Toasted sesame, thick and nutty. Chinese version is darker and more bitter than tahini.	Dan dan noodles, cold noodle dressings, hotpot dips.	Tahini (close, add a little sugar); peanut butter (sweeter, use less)
Sesame oil	香油	Toasted, aromatic. A finishing oil, not a frying oil.	Finishing dishes off the heat, dressings, dumpling fillings.	Nothing equivalent. Toasted sesame oil is the ingredient; other oils are not substitutes.
Aromatics and spices	花椒 · 八角 · 干辣椒 · 白胡椒			
Sichuan pepper	花椒	Citrus-scented husk. Produces má — a tingling, buzzing sensation, not heat.	Sichuan cooking, chilli oil, anything meant to numb.	Sansho pepper (citrus, weaker buzz); grains of paradise (buzz, no citrus)
Star anise	八角	Sweet liquorice aroma. The backbone of five-spice and red braising.	Red-braised pork, braised beef, master stock.	Five-spice blend; fennel seed plus clove in a pinch
Dried chilli	干辣椒	Heat plus colour when fried in oil. Fruity varieties carry more aroma.	Chilli oil, kung pao, Sichuan stir-fries.	Fresh chilli (more moisture, less colour); chilli flakes (no whole-fry stage)
White pepper	白胡椒	Sharp and musty. Used where black pepper's appearance would spoil a pale dish.	Hot and sour soup, wonton filling, steamed dishes.	Black pepper (visibly different in pale dishes)

Two rules worth memorising. Light soy is the salt; dark soy is the paint — if a braise looks pale the fix is dark soy, if it tastes flat the fix is light soy. And do not confuse the beans: douchi is a fermented *soybean*, the black beans in a burrito are an unfermented *common bean*. Different species, different job, not interchangeable.

Cooking wine is not Shaoxing wine. Chinese *liàojiǔ* (料酒) is its own product category, defined with added salt — that is what makes the "salted" note below worth watching for. Shaoxing huangjiu itself, made to GB/T 17946 or GB/T 13662, contains no added salt. Buy the drinking-grade wine and you control the seasoning; buy cooking wine and the dish is already salted before you pick up the salt jar.

Oyster sauce goes in late. It is a finishing seasoning: added at the end it brings gloss and sweetness, held over high heat it darkens and turns bitter. Standard kitchen advice across Chinese cooking sources is to add it off the flame, or in the last thirty seconds with the wok still moving. There is no single citable temperature threshold in the standards for this — it is accumulated practice, not a measured number, so treat it as a rule of thumb.

6. What to Buy First

Six bottles and one bag cover most of the repertoire. In order of how much ground each one buys you:

A STARTER SHELF, RANKED BY USEFULNESS PER BOTTLE

#	Ingredient	What it unlocks	If you skip it
1	**Light soy sauce** 生抽	Essentially every savoury Chinese dish	Nothing else compensates for missing salt-plus-umami

#	Ingredient	What it unlocks	If you skip it
2	**Shaoxing wine** 绍兴酒	Marinades, deglazing, steamed fish	Dry sherry works; the wok aroma is different
3	**Cornstarch** 玉米淀粉	Velveting, thickening, coating	No substitute for the texture job
4	**Chinkiang vinegar** 镇江香醋	Dipping, cold dishes, finishing acid	Balsamic plus salt gets close
5	**Oyster sauce** 蚝油	Greens, noodles, quick marinades	Hoisin is sweeter and lacks the oyster depth
6	**Dark soy sauce** 老抽	Colour in braises and red-cooked dishes	Braise stays pale; light soy only adds salt
7	**Sesame oil** 香油	Finishing aroma	Nothing equivalent

On the seventh bottle. Sesame oil earns its place last because it only finishes. Everything above it changes what a dish *is*; sesame oil changes what it smells like in the last ten seconds. If the budget is six bottles, drop this one.

7. Storage, in One Table

WHERE EACH BOTTLE LIVES AND HOW LONG IT KEEPS

Ingredient	Where	Keeps	Sign it has gone
Light and dark soy	Cool cupboard, dark	Long; dark soy improves	Mould on the surface, or a flat, dusty smell
Oyster sauce	Fridge after opening	Months	Separation that will not stir back, sour smell
Chinkiang vinegar	Cupboard	Indefinitely	Sediment is normal; mould is not
Shaoxing wine	Cool cupboard, sealed	Best within months of opening	Flat, vinegary, or oddly sweet
Doubanjiang	Fridge after opening	Months	Dry crust, or a sour edge replacing the savoury one
Douchi	Fridge, airtight	Long; flavour deepens	White crystals are harmless tyrosine; ammonia is not
Sesame oil	Cool, dark, small bottle	Months; rancidity is the enemy	A stale, crayon-like smell
Sichuan pepper	Sealed, away from light	Best within a year	No tingle when you chew one — the má is gone

Where These Entries Come From

REFERENCE ENTRIES BEHIND EACH BLOCK ON THIS SHEET

Block	Source entry
Soy family	Light soy sauce · Dark soy sauce · Light vs dark
Fermented pastes	Doubanjiang · Douchi
Acids	Chinkiang vinegar · Shaoxing wine
Umami bottles	Oyster sauce · Fish sauce · Sesame paste
Aromatics	Sichuan pepper · Oil temperature
Substitution logic	Substitution calculator · Pantry audit

Missing Umami missingumami.com · Ingredients hub

About the ratings and numbers on this sheet. Substitution guidance and "closest stand-in" calls are editorial judgements from kitchen testing, not laboratory measurements. Storage timings are practical ranges for a home kitchen, not food-safety certification — use your own judgement on any bottle that smells or looks wrong. Where a figure has a citable standard (such as the grade thresholds for soy sauce), the linked reference entry names it. Nutrition and health statements, where they appear on the site at all, describe traditional usage and are not medical advice.

Sources behind the specific claims. Soy sauce grading — GB/T 18186-2000/2025 (特级 ≥0.80, 一级 ≥0.70, 二级 ≥0.55, 三级 ≥0.40 g/100 mL amino acid nitrogen). Pixian douban — GB/T 20560-2006 (salt 15–22 g/100 g; grades by sensory and physicochemical assessment, not by age). Zhenjiang vinegar — GB/T 18623-2011 (total acid ≥4.50 g/100 mL, amino acid nitrogen ≥0.10 g/100 mL; 香醋 ≥180 days, 陈醋 ≥365 days). Shaoxing wine — GB/T 17946 and GB/T 13662; cooking wine — SB/T 10416. Sichuan pepper mechanism — Bautista et al., *Nature Neuroscience* 2008 (KCNK3/9/18 inhibition). Winter melon moisture — USDA FoodData Central. All specific numbers and mechanisms reflect the standards and literature available as of November 2026; formulations vary by brand and process. Version 1.0, published 5 November 2026. When this document is revised the version and last-updated date on page 1 change; the file name stays the same so links keep working.