Chinese Soy Sauce Guide

Five bottles, five fermentation logics — what China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines and Thailand each optimised for, and how to swap one for another without wrecking the dish.

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The One Variable That Explains Most of It

Every soy sauce on the shelf is soybeans, wheat, salt and time. What changes between countries is **how much wheat**, and that single ratio drives sweetness, aroma and what the sauce is good for.

Wheat brings starch. *Aspergillus sojae* — the kōji mould used for soy sauce, with *A. oryzae* also common — turns that starch into glucose and maltose, then yeast turns the sugar into alcohol, then the alcohol reacts with acids into esters. More wheat means more of all of that. Soybeans bring protein, which the mould breaks into amino acids; glutamic acid is the one that reads as umami.

WHERE EACH COUNTRY SITS ON THE WHEAT DIAL

Tradition	Wheat use	What that produces
Japan 濃口	Roughly equal to soybeans, roasted before use	Fruity, floral top notes and a rounded sweetness the ingredient list does not mention — it is made by microbes, not added
China 生抽	A modest fraction; soybean-led	Direct salt and bean umami, little sweetness. The sharp savoury base that Cantonese stir-frying is built on
Korea 한식간장	The classic method uses none	Pure soybean: salty, savoury, slightly earthy. No fermented sweetness at all — the opposite end from Japan

This is why "soy sauce" is not one ingredient. The same word covers a sauce engineered for salt, a sauce engineered for aroma, and a sauce engineered for neither — and the recipes each one appears in were written around what it does.

The Grading Systems Do Not Compare

China and Japan both grade soy sauce. They grade on different measurements, so the numbers cannot be read against each other — and almost every comparison article gets this wrong.

WHAT EACH STANDARD ACTUALLY MEASURES

Standard	Indicator	Top grade threshold
China GB/T 18186	Amino acid nitrogen 氨基酸态氮	**⩾0.80 g/100 mL** for 特级. Free amino acids only — a proxy for how completely the protein was broken down
Japan JAS	Total nitrogen 全窒素分	**⩾1.50 g/100 mL** for こいくち 特級. All nitrogen, free or still bound in peptides
Korea 식품공전	No unified national grade. Premium 양조간장 is identified by total nitrogen, but there is no three-tier ladder to point at	

Read the units before the numbers. A Chinese 特級 at 0.80 and a Japanese 特級 at 1.50 are not the same measurement twice. Amino acid nitrogen counts only the free amino acids; total nitrogen counts everything. The gap between those figures is a difference in method, not in quality.

Japan's full ladder

JAS grades each of its five styles into 特級 / 上級 / 標準 on total nitrogen. The same word means a different number depending which style you are holding.

JAS TOTAL NITROGEN, G/100 ML — FROM THE SOY SAUCE TECHNOLOGY CENTRE SPEC

Style	特級	上級	標準
こいくち koikuchi 濃口	**1.50**	1.35	1.20
うすくち usukuchi 淡口	1.15	1.05	0.95
たまり tamari 溜	1.60	1.40	1.20
さいしこみ saishikomi 再仕込	1.65	1.50	1.40
しろ shiro 白	0.40–0.80	0.40–0.90	—

特級 is restricted to honjozo (本醸造). The one exception is saishikomi made by the blended method, which qualifies only if total nitrogen reaches 2.00 and the amino-acid-liquid fraction stays under 20% of it. Above 特級 sit two voluntary labels: **特選** needs 10% more nitrogen than 特級, **超特選** needs 20%, and neither may contain added sugar.

> **Honjozo is not an additive-free claim.** It prohibits using acid-hydrolysed amino acid liquid as a protein source. Sugar, alcohol and seasonings are all permitted. If you want a sauce with nothing added, that is a different label — and it is not what 本醸造 means.

Side by Side

FIVE SOY SAUCES, BY WHAT THEY DO RATHER THAN WHAT THEY ARE CALLED

Dimension	China 生抽 / 老抽	Japan 濃口 koikuchi	Korea 한식간장	SE Asia toyo / see ew dam
Main job	Salt + umami. Dark soy adds colour and gloss	All-purpose seasoning with aroma	Salt without darkening the broth	Sweetness and colour, especially in Thai dark soy
Wheat	A modest fraction	Roughly 1:1 with soy, roasted	None in the classic method	Present; caramel or palm sugar added on top
Aroma	Bean-forward 豉香, savoury	Fruity esters, floral	Pure soybean, slightly earthy	Caramel and molasses, less depth
Salt	High	The mildest of the three	High; long-aged batches higher still	Medium — sugar masks it in the mouth
Reach for it	Stir-fries, dumpling dip, cold dishes, steamed fish	Sashimi, sushi, nimono, teriyaki	Soups, namul, marinades, bibimbap	Adobo, pad see ew, glazed noodles
Stand-in for Chinese light soy	*It is light soy*	Yes, with adjustments	Yes — closer than Japanese	Only with care; reads sweeter

> **Salt is left qualitative on purpose.** No national standard sets a salt ceiling or a typical value, labels report sodium in different units, and brands vary widely within a single style. Measured figures exist — Chinese soy in the mid-teens as NaCl, Korean 한식간장 considerably higher — but they are not on one basis, so a tidy column of percentages would be invented precision. Read the sodium line on the bottle in your hand.

Swapping Without Wrecking Dinner

Only Japanese koikuchi, cooking Chinese

1. **Cut the recipe's sugar by about half.** Koikuchi carries fermented sweetness Chinese light soy does not. A teaspoon becomes a half.
2. **Expect less bean aroma.** The fruity top notes do not replace the deep savoury base. A few drops of dark soy or a little oyster sauce puts some back.
3. **Expect a darker colour.** Koikuchi is darker than light soy. For a red-braised dish you still need dark soy for the lacquer.
4. **Check salt rather than pouring more soy.** If the dish tastes flat, a pinch of salt is safer — more soy brings more sweetness with it.

Only Korean ganjang, cooking Chinese

Closer in some ways than Japanese. Traditional 한식간장 is pure soybean, so the bean flavour is nearer Chinese light soy than Kikkoman is. Two catches: it is **saltier**, so cut the quantity by roughly a tenth; and it has **less umami depth**, so a pinch of sugar or a dash of oyster sauce rounds it out. Modern 양조간장, brewed with wheat, behaves much more like koikuchi — treat it the same way.

Reading the Bottle

WHAT A LABEL CAN TELL YOU, IN ORDER OF RELIABILITY

Look at	What it tells you	What it cannot
Ingredient list	Whether wheat is present at all, and whether anything else was added	How much of each — Chinese labels list in descending order, but not by weight
Sodium line	The only salt figure you can trust, because it is legally required	Nothing about how salty it tastes — sugar and glutamate change perception
Grade marking	That the sauce cleared a minimum for its own country's indicator	Any cross-country comparison. 特级 and 特級 are different measurements
Colour in the bottle	Roughly, whether it is a light or dark style	Anything else. All three national styles look brown

> **Two bottles will cover most cooking.** One Chinese light soy for salt and savoury depth, one dark soy for colour in braises. If you cook Japanese food too, add a koikuchi. Everything else on the shelf is a speciality, and none of them is a better version of these three.

Where to Go Next

The full reasoning — the wheat-ratio mechanism, the six-country table including the Philippines and Thailand, and the swap rules in more detail — is in Chinese vs Japanese vs Korean soy sauce. For the Chinese pair specifically, light soy vs dark soy explains why recipes use both. To identify a bottle by its label, the soy sauce decoder takes the wording and returns the style. And if you want the whole pantry on one sheet, that is the Chinese ingredients list PDF.

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Where the numbers come from. China: **GB/T 18186**, the 2000 edition in force at the time of writing, with GB/T 18186-2025 (酱油质量通则) taking effect 1 December 2026. The 特级 threshold of ⩾0.80 g/100 mL amino acid nitrogen is unchanged between the two editions. Japan: **JAS** soy sauce grade table as published by the Japan Soy Sauce Technology Centre — total nitrogen in g/100 mL, with 特級 limited to honjozo. Korea: **식품공전** (Korean Food Code) classification of 한식간장 around meju and brine.

What is judgement, not measurement. Salt is described qualitatively because no standard fixes a comparable figure — see the note above the swap section. Aroma and "best for" descriptions are culinary assessment, not instrument readings. Storage and substitution guidance elsewhere on the site is practical home-kitchen advice, not food-safety certification.

Missing Umami — a reference library about Chinese cooking ingredients and techniques. It does not publish recipes; it explains why ingredients behave the way they do. Version 1.0, published 5 November 2026. When this document is revised, the version and last-updated date on page 1 change and the file name stays the same, so existing links keep working.