Tofu Mastery Guide

What the six grades actually are, what the numbers on the package mean, and which one survives which pan — with the invented figures removed.

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The One Thing to Understand First

Tofu is soybean curd with water still in it. Every grade on the shelf — silken, soft, firm, extra-firm, pressed — is the same curd at a different moisture level. Press out water and the protein network packs tighter; the block gets denser, chewier, and harder to break. Nothing else is added or removed. That single variable explains almost every practical difference in the kitchen.

Which means the useful question is not "what is this called" but **"how much water is left in it."** The label will not tell you. This sheet will.

The labels are not a standard. "Firm" is a producer's opinion, not a specification. USDA FoodData Central lists a product called "firm" at roughly 70% water and a product called "regular" at 84.6% — a spread wider than the gap between some brands' "soft" and "extra-firm." Two packages saying "firm" can behave like two different foods. Buy by feel, and use the press test on the next page.

What the Numbers Actually Are

Two sources are worth trusting here, and they measure different things. The Chinese national standard sets legal *ceilings* — a product may contain less water, never more. USDA measures *actual commercial products*. Both are given below, because the gap between "allowed" and "typical" is where most confusion lives.

MOISTURE AND PROTEIN, BY GRADE — WET WEIGHT

Grade	Chinese	Water	Protein (per 100 g)	Source of the figure
Silken / kinugoshi	絹ごし ・ 内酯豆腐	⩽92%	⩾4.0 g	GB/T 22106 ceiling for 内酯豆腐; measured products run 87–91%
Soft / southern	嫩豆腐 ・ 南豆腐	⩽90%	⩾5.0 g	GB/T 22106 ceiling; measured products sit near the cap
Regular	豆腐	84.6%	8.08 g	USDA FDC 172476, set with calcium sulfate
Firm / northern	老豆腐 ・ 北豆腐	⩽80%	⩾8.0 g	GB/T 22106 ceiling; USDA's "firm" entry lands near 70%
Dried / pressed	豆干	⩽75%	⩾13 g	GB/T 22106 ceiling; composition tables average about 65%

Why three grades have no number. "Soft," "medium-firm," and "extra-firm" are producer conventions. No standard fixes their moisture, and no authority publishes a per-grade table. Writing a percentage next to them would be inventing precision, so this sheet does not. What they can and cannot do in a pan is measurable, and that is on the next page.

Which One Survives Which Pan

This is the table that matters at the stove. A grade's water content sets what is physically possible: past a certain point the protein network will not hold under a spatula, no matter the technique. Ratings below are from cooking all six in the same stir-fry — the same test described on the site.

METHOD BY GRADE — FROM WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED IN THE PAN

Grade	Cold dish	Steam / soup	Braise	Stir-fry	Deep-fry	What it tastes like plain

Grade	Cold dish	Steam / soup	Braise	Stir-fry	Deep-fry	What it tastes like plain
Silken 嫩豆腐	**Best**	**Best**	Barely	**No**	**No**	Custard; dissolves on the tongue, tastes of soy and nothing else
Soft 软豆腐	**Good**	**Good**	**Good**	**No**	**No**	Slightly firmer custard; fractures along internal lines rather than crumbling
Medium-firm 中豆腐	Okay	**Good**	**Best**	**Best**	**No**	Tender centre, browned exterior — the default for most cooked dishes
Firm 老豆腐	**Too firm**	Okay	**Good**	**Best**	**Good**	Dense and springy; takes a golden crust without losing shape
Extra-firm 超硬豆腐	Sliced only	**No**	**Good**	Dry	**Best**	Meaty and chewy; dry crumb inside — closer to chicken than to custard
Dried 豆干	**Best**	**No**	**Good**	**Good**	Chewy	Rubbery cold, softens when heated, keeps the chew; sauce sits on the surface

Two blocks are enough. One medium-firm for anything cooked, one silken for anything cold, steamed, or simmered. That covers roughly nine in ten home tofu dishes. The other four grades exist for specific preparations you will meet as you go deeper — none of them is a better version of the first two.

The Press Test — Buying Without Trusting the Label

Three fingers on the plastic, over the centre of the block. The response tells you the grade regardless of what the package says or what language it is in.

Water balloon Gives freely under light pressure, contents shift sideways. **Silken** — cold dishes and soup only.

Firm pillow Yields, then resists; springs back. **Soft to medium-firm** — the useful middle.

Feta cheese Firm with minimal give, cool and dense to the touch. **Firm** — stir-fry, pan-fry, grill.

Pencil eraser Almost no give, slightly springy, noticeably heavy for its size. **Dried tofu** — slice it, do not cook it soft.

The trap that costs people dinner. "Firm Silken" is a real product line, and it means "firm *for a silken tofu*" — not "firm enough to stir-fry." It is still a custard set in a box. Buy it for mapo tofu if you have the technique; do not put it in a hot wok and expect cubes.

Coagulants — Why Two Blocks of the Same Grade Taste Different

Water content explains texture. The coagulant explains flavour, and it is the variable most guides skip. The salt used to set the curd determines how much calcium or magnesium ends up in the finished block, and how sweet or neutral it reads.

THE THREE SETTING AGENTS

Agent	Chinese	Where you find it	What it does to the block
Calcium sulfate (gypsum)	石膏	Southern-style tofu 南豆腐; most US supermarket tofu	Sets a tender curd, adds substantial calcium — the USDA reference product carries 350 mg per 100 g
Magnesium chloride (nigari)	卤水	Northern-style 北豆腐; Japanese 木綿	Faster, coarser set; commonly described as sweeter and more distinctly beany — a reputation, not a laboratory result
Glucono delta-lactone (GDL)	内酯	Boxed silken 内酯豆腐, including shelf-stable cartons	Acidifies slowly, sets a very smooth custard; the highest water ceiling of the three

Traditional pairings are broad tendencies, not rules. Southern China leans on gypsum, the north on nigari, boxed silken on GDL — but modern production mixes them freely, and a Chinese "old tofu" set with gypsum

exists. If the flavour of a block feels flat or unusually sweet, the coagulant is usually the reason.

Five Failures Worth Knowing Before You Cook

SYMPTOM, CAUSE, FIX

What happens	Why	What to do
It falls apart in the wok	Grade too soft for the method; surface water hitting hot oil flashes to steam and blows the cube apart	An hour pressed under a weighted plate firms the surface; or switch to medium-firm and accept the chew
It browns but stays bland	Salt and sauce sit on the surface — the interior has taken on nothing	Salt the block or simmer it in salted water ten minutes first; the curd absorbs through the water phase, not the fat
It goes spongy and squeaky	Frozen and thawed; ice crystals rupture the protein network and leave a porous sponge	Not a fault — lean into it. Frozen tofu is the right product for braises and hotpot, and the wrong one for anything silky
It tastes sour within a day	Opened without being kept in water, or held too long	Keep covered in water in the fridge, changed daily; it keeps about 2–3 days once opened, per the pack
It crumbles when stirred	Stirring instead of pushing; the curd holds against a spatula's edge, not against a spoon's vortex	Push from the edge with the back of a spatula, never stir in circles — the standard technique in mapo tofu

Start Here

Buy two blocks this week. One medium-firm, one silken. Press-test both in the shop before you pay, and note what your hand felt — that is the only labelling system that travels across brands, countries and languages. Once those two are habit, add dried tofu for cold plates and firm for anything that needs a crust.

If a specific dish is giving you trouble, the tofu matcher takes the dish and returns the grade; the deeper explanation of why water content behaves the way it does is in Six Types of Tofu.

> **Keep reading on the site.** Six types of tofu, cooked side by side · Silken tofu · Firm tofu · Tofu for baking · Why mapo tofu falls apart

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Where the numbers come from. Moisture ceilings and protein floors: GB/T 22106 非发酵豆制品 (non-fermented soy products) — ceilings, not typical values. Measured product data: USDA FoodData Central, FDC 172476, "Tofu, raw, regular, prepared with calcium sulfate" — 84.6% water, 8.08 g protein, 350 mg calcium per 100 g. Protein figures are wet weight, as sold.

What is a judgement, not a measurement. The pan-by-pan ratings come from cooking all six grades in the same stirred dish and are qualitative assessments, not instrument readings. The coagulant flavour note is a culinary reputation rather than a documented sensory result — it is written as "commonly described as" for that reason. Storage timings are practical home-kitchen guidance, not food-safety certification. Where no standard fixes a number, none is printed.

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.