

Tōfu & Vegetable Chowder

Kenchin-Jiru けんちん汁



A classic soup on temple-vegetarian menus, there are hundreds of variations on the basic theme of **KENCHIN-JIRU**. What is common to all is the inclusion of some form of *tōfu* and lots of vegetables, making the soup into a chowder. The broth can be kept clear, or thickened with *miso* just before serving.

Kenchin-jiru makes a satisfying brunch or light supper when served with steamed rice and a side dish of pickled vegetables. Or serve with crusty rustic bread and a salad.

Look in your veggie bin and see what bits and pieces might be languishing there. Use this **BASIC RECIPE** (more like a coordinated series of kitchen activities) to create your own house version. ENJOY!

Makes 4-6 servings.

CHOOSE at least two kinds of TŌFU: You want a total of 12-14 ounces (400 grams). It can be a combination of two or more types of *tōfu* such as firm *momen-dōfu*, silky *kinu-dōfu*, grilled *yaki-dōfu* or slices of *abura agé* (fried *tōfu*) or chunks of *atsu agé* (thick blocks of fried *tōfu*).

Depending upon the kind of *tōfu* you choose, the amount of time needed to prep it will vary from only a few minutes (blanching and/or blotting away oil from fried *tōfu*) to 10 minutes (draining water-packed firm *momen-dōfu*, grilled *yaki-tōfu*, or silky *kinu-dōfu*). Draining and/or blanching and blotting can be done hours ahead and the prepped *tōfu* held in the refrigerator if that suits your schedule better. Decide what kind (or kinds) of *tōfu* you will be using and plan accordingly.



If using **firm *momen-dōfu***, or **silky *kinu-dōfu***, or **grilled *yaki-dōfu*** open the package and drain off the packing liquid. Wrap the *tōfu* in paper towels or a clean tea towel or kitchen cloth and place it between two flat plates or small cutting boards. Tilt this “sandwich” in a large bowl at an angle so that excess liquid can drain off. After 10 minutes discard the accumulated liquid and blot away excess moisture.



Dice firm, silky or grilled *tōfu*. To keep the *tōfu* from crumbling, Japanese will place it on the open palm of their hand and use gentle strokes of a sharp knife to dice it. It is not as dangerous as it sounds.



If you feel uncomfortable following suit, place the *tōfu* on a sheet of paper towel on your cutting board. The paper towel will help blot up excess moisture and make it easier to lift the cubes to place in the soup afterwards. Since *tōfu* can pick up bacteria from a cutting board it will be more hygienic to place on paper towel.

If you prefer, use your hands to break the *tōfu* into irregular pieces (these absorb more flavor than straight edged *tōfu*)



Set aside your cubed or irregular pieces of *tōfu* to add to the soup shortly.

If using **slices of fried *tōfu***...Blot away excess oil from the fried *tōfu* with paper towels. Or blanch briefly in boiling water and drain. When cool enough to handle, place the fried *tōfu* between the palms of your hands and press out excess liquid. Cut thin slices of *abura agé* into strips.

CHOOSE at least three kinds of vegetables and/or tubers and/or mushrooms:

You want a total of 12-14 ounces (400 grams), about 2 cups of pieces after prepping. A few suggestions: carrots, daikon, turnips, parsnips, mushrooms, lotus root, *gobō* (burdock root), *kabocha* (pumpkin squash), leeks and/or scallions. Scrape or peel and trim as needed to make bite-sized pieces. Consider which items will require longer cooking time (typically root vegetables) and which will need only brief cooking time (turnips, *kabocha* and potatoes tend to crumble quickly). Carrots could go either way; some people like them very soft, others prefer them rather firm.



In addition to vegetables, I encourage you to include KONNYAKU (scientific name: *Amorphophallus konjac*) even though it is a (frankly) weird corm. What is a corm? A short, vertical, swollen underground plant stem that serves as a storage organ that some plants use to survive winter or other adverse conditions such as summer drought and heat. Above left is *konnyaku* in corm form; it gets dried, desiccated, reconstituted, and cooked before being shaped into loaves.

Konnyaku adds volume and a satisfying “chew” to dishes (yet near-zero calories) while absorbing flavors from the pot. *Konnyaku* has no fat but is rich in dietary fiber. Studies indicate that eating *konnyaku* helps stabilize blood sugar and lower cholesterol and high blood pressure. Further detail WASHOKU pg 28-30.

Konnyaku can be sliced with a knife but pinched into irregular pieces with fingers or scooped with a soup spoon is preferred when adding to soups or stews. It is best to briefly blanch and drain *konnyaku* before adding to the soup pot.



PREPARE Stock: Place several 3-inch pieces of *kombu* (kelp) in a pot filled with 2 quarts tap water. Soak the *kombu* in the water for at least 10 minutes (and up to several hours).

Place the pot over low heat and slowly bring to a simmer.

When bubbles begin to break on the surface, remove the *kombu* to avoid the broth becoming murky.

COOK Vegetables in Stock: Start by adding those vegetables that require more time (such as *gobō*, parsnips, rutabaga, lotus root and *daikon*; *konnyaku*, too, if you will be using it) simmering them for about 6 or 7 minutes until tender but still firm. Skim away any froth before adding those vegetables and mushrooms that cook more quickly. Cook for another 2 to 3 minutes. Skim away any froth before adding your *tōfu*. Heat through thoroughly to be sure the *tōfu* is very warm.

ADD Miso just before serving: 5 tablespoons *miso* (a combination of 2 or more kinds of miso is called *awasé miso* and that is recommended)

Mix the *miso* in the hot broth:

EITHER place the combination of *miso* pastes in a special *miso koshi* (fine-meshed strainer with a deep bowl that can be dipped into the pot; pictured below, left) and stir directly in the pot.

OR place the *miso* pastes in a separate bowl and ladle in some of the broth, stirring to mix. Then add this thinned *miso* concentrate to the pot.



When ready to serve, ladle out piping hot into soup bowls. Some like to place minced scallions or leeks in individual bowls and pour piping hot soup over them. Others will shower the finished soup while in the pot with scallions before ladling out.

