Lo Mein to Laksa
by Allaya Fleischer

Allaya's Kosher Pad Thai
Possibly one of the most well-known and beloved Thai dishes among Westerners is Pad Thai, and really, what’s not to love? Hot, greasy, spicy noodles flung at you from a street cart promises all kinds of gastronomic adventure.

So what’s the secret to perfecting this divine heap of pasta? It sounds kind of obvious, but it’s mostly in the sauce. The “real” Thai dishes (that is, excluding the curries, heavily influenced from India and the Middle East) are simplicity incarnate, and it should come as no surprise that Pad Thai sauce is no exception. The ingredients are simple, but balancing them is an art; and this is what distinguishes good Pad Thai from great Pad Thai.

The challenge here is to successfully pull off the flavor-balancing act while still keeping it kosher. Fish sauce is an essential ingredient in Pad Thai. With fish sauce being a fermented mixture of anchovies, salt, and water, some traditions question its kosher status, since, at the time of writing this, there is no fish sauce that exists with a hechsher. In Thailand, our family always made our own fish sauce, which was a common practice among the families in the area, so this was never an issue.

Another concern comes from the status of fish. Even if fish sauce were deemed to be “acceptable,” many traditions hold that fish and meat must not be eaten together. So, as you can see, making Pad Thai kosher poses some challenges that are not easy to overcome.

I’ve often been asked about a kosher and vegetarian alternative to fish sauce. The answer is that there’s no definitive singular substitute. There are many recipes for vegan fish sauce online, but I’ve found most of them lacking. Although some taste good, and are relatively good condiments all on their own, as I said, in some applications, it’s easier to “swap” out this ingredient than in others. For this particular dish, we really need to try hard to replicate the essence and flavor of fish sauce, rather than simply adding an umi flavor, as we can in other dishes that have a more complex flavor profile.

For kosher Pad Thai, I substitute fish sauce with one part shiro miso to two parts Bragg’s Liquid Aminos (certified OU). In this combination, the miso adds the fermented “fishiness” quality, and the Liquid Aminos provides the saltiness while rounding out the flavors. This combination is much less salty than actual fish sauce, so please keep this in mind, as you may need to add extra salt (depending on how salty your miso is) to your final product. The other ingredients in the sauce are tamarind, which adds a tart fruitiness (at the time of this writing, does not require a hechsher, if it is “only” tamarind in the ingredients), and brown sugar (it’s traditional to use palm sugar, but brown sugar is more readily available most places, and the difference in flavor is almost indistinguishable in this application), which provides the sweetness. The paprika is really for making the color a little nicer, so if you don’t have any, there’s no need to panic.

The only element that may make this dish appear challenging is the sheer number of ingredients in it. You really don’t have to worry, though, since a lot of it can be made in advance and put together in a matter of minutes.
Allaya’s Kosher Pad Thai

About 6 servings (you can halve the recipe, but still make the full amount of sauce and save the rest for later)

Ingredients:
• 1 package (about 8 ounces) chicken substitute, such as Smart Chicken or seitan, cut into bite sized pieces, or about 1 lb skinless, boneless chicken thighs, cut to bite sized pieces
• 8 eggs, beaten
• 1/2 block firm tofu, sliced into strips
• 1 pound bean sprouts
• 1 bundle of scallions, chopped
• 2 large shallots or 1 medium onion, finely chopped
• 4 cloves garlic, minced, or through a press
• 1/2 cup or so unsalted peanuts, finely chopped
• Chili flakes, as desired
• 1 lemon, cut up into wedges for serving
• 8 ounces rice stick noodles for Pad Thai (about the width of linguine or fettuccine)

For the sauce:
• 2 tablespoons tamarind paste
• 2 tablespoons shiro miso
• 4 tablespoons Bragg’s Liquid Aminos
• 8 tablespoons brown sugar
• 1 1/2 teaspoons paprika
• 4 tablespoons water kosher salt, to taste

1. In a large bowl, pour enough hot water over rice noodles to cover them and allow to soften for about 30 minutes. Drain in a colander and toss with a little bit of toasted sesame oil or other vegetable oil to prevent sticking. Set aside for later (can be made in advance)

2. Meanwhile, prepare other ingredients and prepare the sauce: Combine tamarind paste with four tablespoons of hot water and mix well, until mostly dissolved. Strain and discard the solids, if desired. In a small pot over medium heat, combine tamarind mixture with Liquid Aminos, miso, brown sugar, and paprika. Stir together until mixture begins to boil, then turn heat to low and allow sauce to simmer for about 10 minutes for flavors to combine. Adjust the sweet/sour/salty flavors by adding more sugar, salt, and/or vinegar, if needed, but this combination usually works pretty well, and is generally on the less salty side of the spectrum (you may need to adjust for this in the end). Set aside.

3. Heat about a tablespoon of oil in a large wok over medium-high heat and scramble eggs. Set eggs aside. Add some more oil and fry tofu and chicken substitute with about two tablespoons of sauce. If using real chicken, cook until the chicken is done and cook the tofu in a separate step. Set aside.

4. Add about a tablespoon more of oil to hot wok over medium high heat and add shallots and garlic plus about two tablespoons of sauce. Add noodles, tofu, chicken substitute, eggs, bean sprouts, and scallions and mix well, tossing in more sauce as needed to keep things moist. If the noodles are too hard/dry, sprinkle with some extra water (this rarely happens, though). Continue tossing over a flame until all the ingredients are heated through, but avoid overcooking, as the rice noodles will become mushy.

5. Serve hot with chili flakes and peanut crumbles on top and lemon wedges on the side. I personally like to use sriracha in lieu of the chili flakes.