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3.5.1 Tree Ears with Ginger

By Chuan C. Chang

Tree ears (auricularia [mu-er in Chinese, ki-kurage or “tree jellyfish” in Japanese], also called wood ear, cloud ear fungus, black fungus) are found in two forms in stores: (1) loose, dried, in bags and (2) compressed and dried into cubes about half the size of those yellow “post-it” sticker packs – these usually come in boxes of 10 cubes each. Each cube makes about two servings; I recommend purchasing these for this recipe. Those in bags tend to crumble into little pieces, making it a time-consuming job to wash them. Those in cubes will expand into nice large pieces that are better looking and easier to wash.

Although there are at least 5 types of tree ears commonly eaten all over the world, you will find mainly two varieties in Oriental stores: a dark, frilly, tender variety (sometimes referred to as cloud ear) and a tougher, thicker variety that is almost black on the top surface, and light grey on the bottom (sometimes referred to as wood ear). The tender variety can be bought as compressed cubes and we will use these for our recipe. The tougher variety has certain uses different from the tender ones and we will not discuss them here; they are generally packaged in loose dry form in plastic bags because they are not as brittle when dried and can survive shipping and handling without crumbling into small fragments.

Ingredients:

- 1 cube dried tree ear
- 1 ginger, about 1 inch cube
- 2 tbsp seasoned gourmet rice vinegar (e.g. , Marukan)
- 1 tsp soy sauce
- 1 tbsp canola oil

Remove the paper wrapping from the tree ear cube and soak 20 min in a 10 inch bowl filled $\frac{3}{4}$ with room temperature or warm water. This will cause the dried tree ear to expand by over a factor of ten. Then rinse with water a few times and empty into sink. Rinse bowl clean and fill half way with clean water. Wash the expanded tree ears individually under running water, being careful to remove any woody material stuck to the root end of each tree ear (rare). Break up pieces that are too large by tearing them into 1-2 inch pieces while washing, and put the washed pieces back into the bowl with clean water. Now drain the water. Cover with plastic wrap (or transfer into a plastic bag or container) and keep in the fridge if you are not going to cook it the same day. It will keep for a week in the fridge.

Julienne the ginger into strips less than $\frac{1}{8}$ th inch wide and about an inch long. Place the ginger and oil in a frying pan and heat until ginger begins to sizzle, then add the tree ears being careful to completely drain all water. Heat and stir constantly at medium heat (setting of 7/10 on an electric range) for 1 min until evenly heated. If the tree ears begin to pop, heat is too high. If the tree ears begin to shrink, you have over-cooked them! Add the vinegar and soy sauce, stir about 10 seconds and shut off heat. Continue to stir until the vinegar and soy sauce are evenly distributed and immediately transfer into serving dish.

Some consider ginger too tough to eat; in that case, slice them into thin slices so that they can be easily fished out.

If you can't find the cubed tree ears, you can follow the same recipe using the loose dried form in plastic bags; you will need to soak only $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 cup of it for 2 servings (they expand a lot more than you think), so soak $\frac{1}{2}$ cup to see how much you get before soaking any more.