

Tofu or not Tofu - Soy Craftsmanship

The squat one-storey building that meets my eye is white with forest green trim. Sooke Soy Foods tofu shop is smaller than I had imagined. As unassuming as the humble soybean, it greets me quietly. Through a screen door that sticks, I enter a warm almond scented mist. Wiry and jovial in his bright yellow overalls, black gumboots and thick rubber gloves, owner Andy Cunningham might pass for a mariner. Only the not-so-invisible hairnet reveals his true passion is for food production.

After donning a hairnet to restrain my own tresses, I follow the track around the periphery of the shop to view the stages a soybean goes through to become tofu. First the overnight soaking: critical for softening the bean, and loosening the hull. Then raw, organic soaked soybeans are passed through a grindstone to produce a viscous yellowish mush that resembles butter-rich cream. Through what is only the beginning of a series of stainless pumps, hoses and tubes, each batch of this pomace is pumped into one of seven 200-liter steam-jacketed kettles, where it is boiled uncovered for 20 minutes or so.

Soon the kettle is full, then boiling. As it threatens to boil over, Andy calms it with an expert flick of spray from a water hose. Lilac plumes of steam rise up into the ventilation hood. "This is an essential part of the processing", states Cunningham from behind a curtain of steam, truly a man in his element. "When cooked properly, according to traditional methods, an enzyme that inhibits digestion – a trypsin-uptake inhibitor, is cooked off, and carried away with the steam." When other producers of soy tofu use covered kettles, this enzyme-laden steam simply condenses back into the boiling froth, returning the digestive inhibitor back to the finished product. Some producers don't start with whole beans, or make their tofu from powdered genetically modified soybeans. Labeled as 'fractionated soybeans', this results in a product that compromises the health benefits of properly cooked gmo-free soy protein.

With an intentional flip of a switch, Andy initiates the process that will guide the cooked bean mush from this kettle to pass through the next step of their journey along another pipeline. From there, they are run through the hull separator. Okara is the traditional name for soybean hulls once separated from the bean, and is a biologically rich bi-product of tofu making much coveted by local organic farmers. Judging by the stockpile of bags outside their front door, it is time for someone to come pick up this soil-enriching compost ingredient. The separator is a large, neat, stainless steel contraption with a 200 liter holding tank. From this tank, the soy mush is measured out through a rotating sieve; as the liquid soymilk drains through, the okara is scraped off into a waiting waste bucket, destined to be recycled into rich humus on local farms. *Note to self: grab a few bags home for my own compost bins!*

At this point the protein-rich soy mush is hot, between 170-180 degrees, and is pumped into a cooling kettle to await the addition of nigari, a sea vegetable extract. In accordance with traditional Japanese processing techniques, this nigari is used to separate the curds. As with any cooked beans, the addition of sea vegetable works to aid digestion of the complex oligosaccharides present in bean-based vegetable protein.

It doesn't take long for the curds to separate once the nigari is added, then it is time to separate the whey in a process similar to that used in cheese-making. Cunningham dips a stainless steel ruler into the vat to measure the depth of the whey. "Each batch will be different, and these slight differences effect the end result, so it is very important to remove just the right amount of whey. Down to 90 centimeters for medium tofu, 70 for firm, and then I rely on my experience to gauge if I need to remove more. Too much, and the tofu will be crumbly, too little and it wont bind."

Sucked up into a hose, this curd is then poured into cheesecloth-lined forms. The whey settles out before the white solids go through a hydraulic press. The pressed tofu is still warm, and Kel,

the only other staff person on duty, trims off a sample for me. My teeth nip into a still-warm piece of very fresh tofu, my tongue tastes a mild clean protein that soothes the palate. Kel over-sees shrink-wrapping the one-pound bricks of tofu inside tidy packages, then sterilizes them in a hot water bath. Once labels are attached, they are crated for market, and its time for me to go. After I leave, my cravings turn to tofu, and one of my favorite recipes. Driving straight to my local health food store, I purchase the ingredients for Ginger Tofu & Snow Peas in Cashew butter Sauce.

Sooke Soy Foods produces 50 plus batches of tofu each week, supplying local grocers and health food stores with fresh, health-supporting products. Green Cuisine products are distributed as far East as the Canadian Prairies. To try a sample of their fresh tofu in original recipes, drop by Green Cuisine, a local vegan, macrobiotic whole foods restaurant located in Market Square, and taste as much or as little as you like from the pay-by-weight smorgasbord.

Recipe sidebar:

Ginger Tofu & Snow Peas in Cashew butter Sauce: *try this at home!*

1 cup Leeks, diced 1 tsp Ghee, Sunflower or Sesame oil
1 tsp EACH whole Cumin, Black Mustard seed, and Coriander ½ tsp Turmeric

Sautee leeks in the oil for 5-6 minutes, just until they begin to brown. Now add cumin, mustard and coriander, and cook until seeds begin to pop. Stir in turmeric just before adding tofu.

350 grams Firm Tofu, cut into cubes

Push the seasonings to the side of the pan, and grill tofu cubes in the middle of the pan, turning once to ensure two sides are golden.

2 cups Organic Vegetable broth 1/2 cup Cashew Butter 2 tsp Arrowroot powder
1-2 Tbs. Tamari 1-2 tsp Ginger, puree 1 cup Snow Peas

Meanwhile, puree the cashew butter with the arrowroot powder and broth until smooth. Stir in tamari & ginger and pour over leek & tofu mixture. Bring to a simmer, fold in snow peas, simmer 3-4 more minutes over low heat before serving with organic short grain brown rice. Enjoy!

For more recipes from The Good For You Gourmet, visit our website at www.gfyg.ca, and click on Seasonal Recipes, or call Chef Laura, at 250.514.1544.