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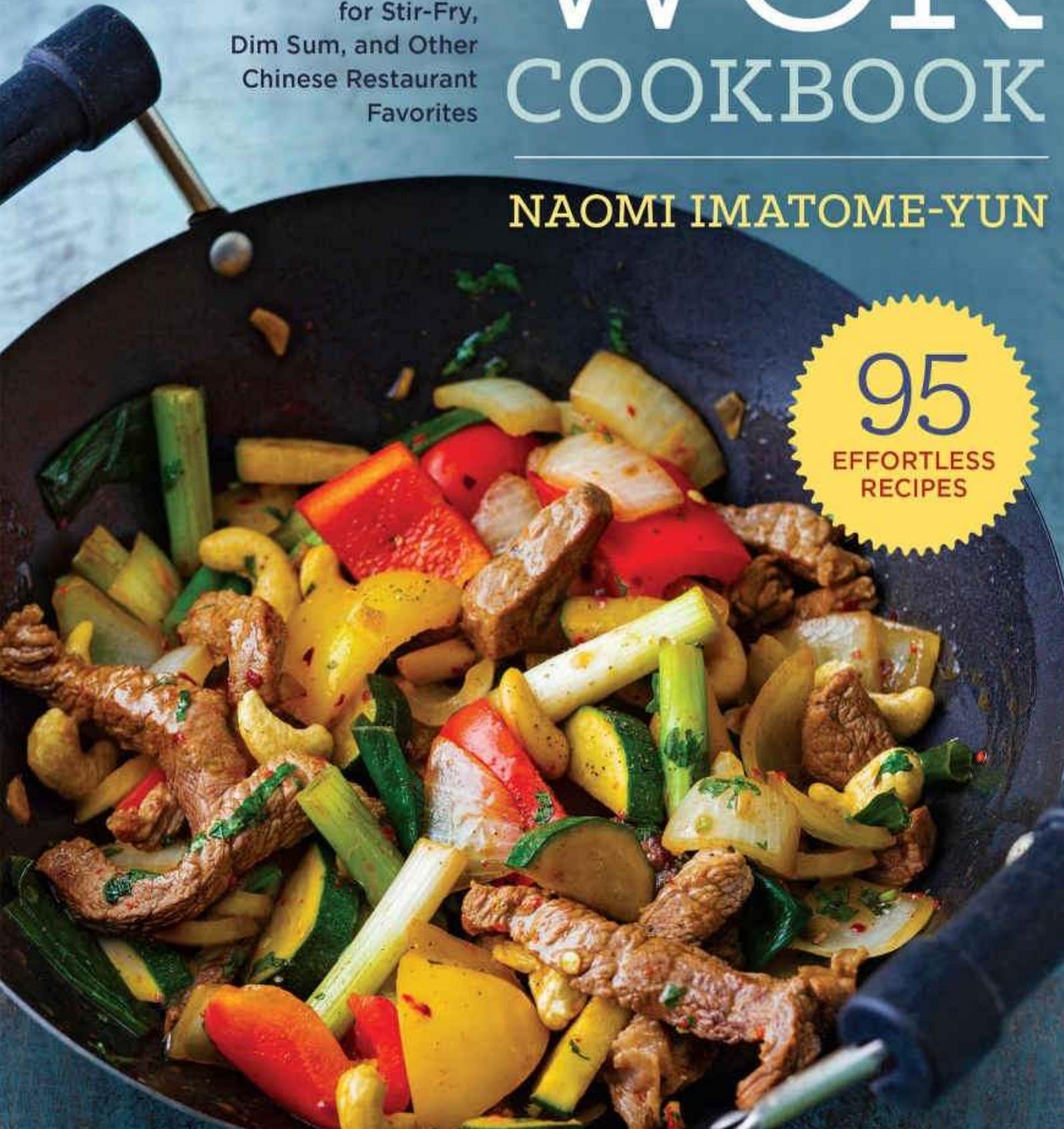
ESSENTIAL WOK COOKBOOK

Simple Recipes
for Stir-Fry,
Dim Sum, and Other
Chinese Restaurant
Favorites

NAOMI IMATOME-YUN

95

EFFORTLESS
RECIPES





THE ESSENTIAL WOK COOKBOOK

Simple Recipes for Stir-Fry,
Dim Sum, and Other Chinese Favorites

Naomi Imatome-Yun

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INTRODUCTION

Chinese food has become as American as pizza, bagels, and tacos. It's a comfort food that we enjoy and love, whether we live in big cities or small towns. Although foodies might scoff at Chinese take-out for its lack of authenticity, Chinese food in America is an incredible story of immigration, invention, and adaptation. According to Andrew Coe's *Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States*, there are more than 40,000 Chinese restaurants in the United States, more than all the McDonald's, Burger King, and Wendy's fast-food restaurants put together. But unlike with other beloved regional eats, such as Italian or Mexican fare, many people still don't regularly make Chinese food at home.

This book will teach you that preparing your favorite Chinese restaurant dishes in your own kitchen is simple, healthy, and cost-efficient. You don't even need to go to a special Asian grocery for the bulk of the ingredients, as most supermarket chains now carry the essentials needed to make Chinese food at home. And now that online sites such as Amazon carry hard-to-find spices and seasoning, everything you need is within reach.

There are undeniable conveniences to Chinese delivery: It is fast (usually ready in 30 to 45 minutes), easy (a quick phone call or online order), and satisfying. But, like most fast food, it's not always the healthiest option.

Chinese home cooking is a lot less salty, oily, and heavy than its restaurant take-out counterpart. It's also packed with fresh ingredients. Although those ubiquitous white boxes have their charm, you will be surprised to learn how simple it is to make healthy Chinese dishes at home. And you'll save money while you're at it.

The secret to cooking delicious Chinese food at home is the wok: a large pan with a bowl-like shape that has either two handles or one long wooden handle. With just this one pan, you can make thousands of tasty dishes quickly and cheaply. Yes, *thousands*. Many American homes have a wok or woklike pan in their collection of kitchen equipment; it's a favorite for preparing stir-fries of all kinds. And although it *is* the perfect pan to use for great-tasting stir-fries, the wok has so much more potential. There's a reason that the Chinese have used the wok for more than two thousand years with very few changes to the pan itself. In addition to stir-frying, you can also steam, boil, stew, braise, deep-fry, poach, smoke, sear, and sauté in a wok. The recipes in this book were designed to highlight the versatility of this time-tested piece of kitchen equipment—the wok is the only pan you will need to cook your way through these pages.

The recipes in this cookbook are designed with the take-out lover in mind. Unnecessary salt, unneeded oil, and undesirable ingredients, such as MSG, have been eliminated without sacrificing flavor. You won't miss anything by cooking this way. You may even come to prefer it.

Think about flavor-packed Kung Pao Chicken, crispy egg rolls, and comforting wonton soup. Consider spicy eggplant with garlic and mu shu vegetables. They all hit a different spot, and now you can enjoy healthier versions of your favorite Chinese dishes at home. So let's fire up the wok and start cooking!



1

EVERYDAY CHINESE COOKING

If you grew up eating Chinese food in America, then you might be surprised to learn you likely wouldn't find most of your favorite dishes on a visit to China. Much like American cuisine, Chinese cuisine itself is not one thing, as China is a huge country and its different regions have very different ways of preparing food, based on local ingredients. Chinese food in America is the product of immigration, local tastes, and American ingredients, which have influenced the evolution of the cuisine since the Gold Rush days of the 1850s.

~~During the 1860s, Chinese workers came to California to work on the railroads. Most were working~~ men who came to do hard labor, and they were almost all from rural villages outside Canton (now called Guangzhou). Some of these new immigrants opened Chinese restaurants, hoping to provide the familiar flavors of home. So Chinese food in America got its start very loosely from Cantonese cooking. The immigrants were not trained chefs, and they didn't have the same vegetables, herbs, or spices they were used to in China. Instead, they had to improvise, using non-Chinese ingredients, such as broccoli, yellow onion, pineapple, and carrot, in their food.

It was during the next hundred or so years that the Chinese American dishes of chow mein, wonton soup, chop suey, moo goo gai pan, and egg foo young were created and introduced around America. In this time, Chinese immigrants traveled to different parts of America, often establishing Chinatowns where large groups of immigrants settled. With them, they brought their knowledge of their cuisines and adapted it to include what was available.

The US government severely curtailed Chinese immigration in the late 1800s. It wasn't until 1906 that American immigration laws for Chinese people changed, and the doors opened to a new wave of immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan. These new immigrants landed mostly in cities, and it is this second wave that gave birth to the American standards of Kung Pao Chicken, General Tso's Chicken, and hot and sour soup.

Today, Chinese noodles, egg rolls, and sweet and sour pork are as beloved by Americans as pizza and hot dogs. Ordering Chinese food for delivery or take-out and enjoying a meal that arrives in overstuffed white containers is a familiar part of American culture.

ORIGIN STORIES | *Wonton Soup*

Wontons and other dumplings have been part of Chinese cuisine for a very long time. Roughly translated from Cantonese, *wonton* means “swallowing clouds” because of the way the white dumplings float in soup. But the wonton soup served at most American-style Chinese restaurants is very different from the dumpling soups served in China. Chinese wontons are plump with a very thin wrapper. One of the most famous types has a juicy shrimp and pork filling. American-style wontons have a very small amount of meat—usually pork—and are covered in a thick, doughy wrapper.



The broth of Americanized wonton soup is a premade watery stock, a stark contrast to the traditional long-simmered pork-based broth found in China. Chinese restaurants in America serve wonton soup in small bowls as an accompaniment to or appetizer before the main part of the meal. Soup is a main course in most regional Chinese cuisines, and it can even be a meal by itself. The American-style wonton soup evolved, over time, based on the need of restaurants to make a quick, tasty dish that wasn't expensive (hence less meat and more filler).

WOK BASICS

The wok is an integral part of Chinese cooking because its unique shape and surface area make it good not just for stir-frying, but also for braising, stewing, poaching, steaming, deep-frying, and even smoking. The traditional wok, used for almost 2,000 years, has a rounded bottom, which easily allows a spatula or other utensil to move the food around the pan.

Wok hay, or *wok hei*, is a Cantonese phrase used to describe a well-made stir-fry dish. It translates as “breath of a wok,” and it refers to the concentrated, rich flavor that can come only from making stir-fry in a well-seasoned wok over very high heat.

CHOOSING A WOK

There are so many different types of woks on the market that it can be dizzying to choose the right one for your needs. When buying a wok, don't be fooled into thinking that the most expensive one is the best choice. A \$10 carbon steel wok purchased in Chinatown can be perfect for home cooking needs.

➤ 12- or 14-inch Flat-Bottomed Carbon Steel Wok

This pan is really your best choice. Light and easy to handle, a carbon steel wok develops a nonstick surface after you season it, so you don't have to use much oil when cooking. It also heats up quickly, conducts heat well, and cools down quickly, which is essential for good stir-fry technique.

Most home stoves cannot get as hot as professional stoves or traditional Chinese stoves (on which the wok sits in the flames). The flat-bottomed wok makes up for this lack because it covers more of the heat than its round-bottomed cousin. If you don't cook large meals and are cooking for one or two, then a 12-inch wok will be good for you. For families, a 14-inch wok will be perfect.

➤ Round-Bottomed Carbon Steel Wok

This traditional Cantonese wok has a round bottom and two handles. Because the rounded-bottom wok isn't stable on the stove, you need to use a wok ring underneath it so it doesn't tip over. For this safety reason, cooks new to a wok may not want to start off with a round-bottomed wok.

➤ Cast Iron Wok

An American cast iron wok is quite heavy and takes longer to heat up, which makes stir-frying a challenge. If that's all you have, don't fret. You can still follow the recipes in this book to make tasty stir-fry and excellent poached, steamed, braised, and fried dishes. When you get the chance, invest in a lighter, easier-to-use carbon steel wok.

➤ Nonstick Wok or Skillet

Most stir-fry experts don't recommend using this type of wok or skillet because the food won't taste the same. A nonstick wok or skillet cannot reach the high heat level conducted by a carbon steel or cast iron wok, which is necessary to create the best-tasting stir-fries. But if that's what you have at home, you absolutely can go ahead and make these recipes with your nonstick pan. They will still taste great! Once you're ready, get a carbon steel wok and be impressed with the flavor difference.

➤ Electric Wok

This isn't ideal for stir-frying because it doesn't retain heat well, making it difficult to achieve *wok hay*. However, you can use an electric wok happily for poaching, steaming, braising, and stewing.

SEASONING YOUR WOK

When you buy a new carbon steel or cast iron wok, you need to season it before you start cooking with it. ~~Do not season a nonstick wok or an electric wok. Seasoning will take at least 30 minutes, but once done, you'll have created a naturally nonstick surface without the chemicals found in a Teflon coating.~~

As always when dealing with high heat and oil, be careful and focused during the seasoning process so that you don't burn yourself.

How to Season Your Wok: A Step-by-Step Guide

1. Your carbon steel or cast iron wok will come home from the store smelling like oil. This oil is a preservative applied by the manufacturer. It will need to be cleaned off the wok. Wash the wok in soapy water, and scrub it clean on the inside and the outside.
2. Now you need to “burn” the wok. Place it on the stove, and dry it over very high heat.
3. Remove the wok from the heat, and put a few tablespoons of peanut oil in the bottom of the wok. Using a dry cloth, spread a thin layer of the oil completely over the inside surface of the wok. Be careful not to burn yourself.
4. This next part will get smoky, so turn on your oven fan and open your windows. Over very high heat, heat the oil in the wok for a few minutes. Turn off the heat, take the wok off the heat, and let it cool to room temperature.
5. Once the wok is at room temperature, put it on high heat again, making sure the first layer of oil gets “burned” into the wok. Once it is, turn off the heat, take the pan off the stove, and return the pan to room temperature again.
6. Once at room temperature, add another thin layer of oil, and spread it over the inside surface of the wok, as you did in step
3. Heat the wok again for a few minutes, and then turn off the heat, take the pan off the heat, and return it to room temperature once more.
7. Repeat steps 5 and 6 a few more times. Wipe off any excess oil that collects in the bottom center of the wok. Once the wok starts to darken and look shiny, it's ready to use.
8. If you can, do a first stir-fry of sliced onions to remove any unwanted smells from the wok.

The more you cook with your wok, the better its seasoning will be and the less oil you'll have to use when cooking with it. Reseason your wok if it becomes necessary.

CARING FOR YOUR WOK

Employ some simple and basic tips to keep your wok in good condition and ready for use. New woks need oil to continue developing their seasoning layer. So don't do a lot of poaching with a newly seasoned wok—do a lot of stir-frying! Wok expert Grace Young (coauthor with Alan Richardson of *The Breath of a Wok*) recommends making a few batches of popcorn in your wok with peanut oil to speed up the seasoning process. And when cooking, always heat the wok until it's hot before adding oil. Remember that television chef Martin Yan often instructed his viewers to add cold oil to a hot wok so that food wouldn't stick.

Never wash your seasoned wok with soap. Rinse it with warm water, and wipe it with a gentle sponge or brush. Don't abrasively scrub your wok, as that will affect the seasoning layer. Don't use steel pads or scouring sponges on the inside, though you can use them on the outside of your wok if it gets very dirty. For a new wok, you might want to dry it over high heat after you rinse it. For a well-seasoned wok, just wipe until dry. Don't let it sit around wet. It could develop rust if that happens.

Over time, your wok will become deeper in color and the seasoning layer will develop. Once that happens, you can just wipe out your wok with a paper towel, like you would a nonstick pan.

The more you cook with your wok, the better seasoned it will be. If you don't use your wok often, rub a small amount of peanut oil onto the inside surface of the wok before storing it. If you forget about your wok for a while and it gets rusty or if it gets very burned once you use it again, then do a full reseasoning of it. In *Stir-Frying to the Sky's Edge*, Grace Young recommends giving it "wok facials" from time to time. To do a wok facial, fold three layers of paper towels into a wad, and set the wad aside. Heat the wok over high heat. Once hot, remove it from the heat, and add a couple of teaspoons of peanut or vegetable oil and some kosher salt (use a 2 to 1 ratio of oil and salt). Using the paper towels, gently rub and scrub the oil and salt all over the inside of your wok until it's clean and shiny. Rinse out the wok with warm water, using a textured sponge to remove any lingering salt crystals. Voilà! Your wok is rejuvenated.

ORIGIN STORIES | *Fortune Cookies*

Opening a crunchy yellow cookie and reading the “fortune” inside is the ritual ending to a meal at an American Chinese restaurant. But these vanilla-flavored cookies are a purely American tradition. They aren’t made, served, or eaten in China. In fact, unlike some of our favorite Chinese take-out foods, they might not even have been invented by a Chinese American. It seems that the original fortune cookies were based on confections made at a Shinto shrine near Kyoto, Japan; there is no consensus on who first started making and serving them in America.



Regardless, they became popular in Chinese restaurants in California after World War II, and these early fortune cookies were usually filled with Bible verses and quotes from Confucius, Benjamin Franklin, and other philosophers. From the West Coast, they spread to every other Chinese take-out joint in the States. Now they are an integral part of every American-style Chinese restaurant meal.

BETTER THAN DELIVERY

American-style Chinese food is convenient and often budget-friendly, but it's still part of America's fast-food culture. Cheap and fast generally means unhealthy, and American-style Chinese food is no exception. Like most well-loved convenience foods, take-out Chinese food is full of extra salt and (thanks to the sugar and oil used) extra calories. Many of the most popular dishes are deep-fried, heavily breaded, or covered in a sweet and syrupy sauce. The use of the flavor enhancer MSG (monosodium glutamate) is declining, fortunately, but many places do still use it. MSG occurs naturally in some foods, such as tomatoes, potatoes, and other fruits and vegetables, and it is often added to Chinese food, canned vegetables, and processed meats. Some people have adverse reactions to MSG. According to the Mayo Clinic, some consumers of the flavor enhancer have reported that it caused headaches, sweating, heart palpitations, nausea, or weakness. All the more reason to make your favorite Chinese dishes at home and skip the MSG.

A HEALTHY ALTERNATIVE

Authentic Chinese food, on the other hand, is a healthy cuisine. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development reports that the obesity rate is only 2.9 percent in China. Compare that with the US obesity rate of 35 percent.

So what's the difference between American Chinese take-out and authentic Chinese cuisines?

Vegetables take center stage in traditional Chinese cooking, most ingredients are stir-fried (not deep-fried), and sauces aren't filled with sugar. At your local Chinese establishment, your stir-fried noodles (chow mein or lo mein) or dishes such as beef with broccoli are made with a liberal amount of oil. But that's not actually the correct way to cook in a wok. Because of its unique shape and high heat retention, you need very little oil to cook in a seasoned wok. When cooking in a seasoned wok, the finished meat and vegetables are pushed up the sides of the wok, thus draining the food of a lot of oil while cooking with very little effort.

The recipes in this book were created for those who love take-out Chinese food but want to make tastier and healthier versions at home. So although they are not traditional Chinese recipes, they are in the spirit of traditional Chinese cuisines, emphasizing vegetables, big bowls of soup, and the freshest produce, meats, and fish. Adding these recipes and dishes to your everyday routine (and cutting back on take-out) will do wonders for your wallet, your waistline, and your overall health.

Tips for Healthy Chinese Cooking at Home

Use a lot of vegetables. Fresh and in season is best, but you can use flash-frozen vegetables or bagged ones with great results, too. Chinese stir-fries and soups are easy to improvise, so feel free to be creative with the ingredient lists in recipes.

Think beyond stir-fry. You can steam, braise, or poach in a wok with no added oil.

A little protein goes a long way. You need a lot less meat (or seafood) when making Chinese food. A pound of chicken, a lot of vegetables, and steamed rice is a bountiful meal for a family of four.

Spice it up. Traditional Chinese food uses fragrant spices for flavor. Add ginger, garlic, and chiles to your dishes for great flavor without unnecessary sugar or salt.

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