



Prickly Ash Makes about 5 teaspoons

Sichuan peppercorns, those wonderfully numbing little nuggets that are essential to Sichuanese food, aren't a true pepper but a similar-shaped dried fruit from the prickly ash tree (*Zanthoxylum piperitum*). This spice has a great aroma, which is amplified by roasting and grinding it. Salt is often considered the foundation of Sichuanese cooking, as it draws out the natural flavours of other ingredients. Where most regions use soy sauce, in Sichuan local salt, mined there for thousands of years, is more common. Traditional Sichuanese cuisine is categorised into 23 separate flavours, of which 'Sichuan Pepper & Salt' is one, with ground dry-roasted Sichuan pepper mixed with roasted salt used as a dip for deep-fried foods. From this traditional flavouring come the 'Salt & Pepper' dishes we so often see on Chinese menus. This seasoning, which chef Cheong Liew calls prickly ash after the peppercorn plant, is his favourite seasoning – I can't imagine Cheong's food without it. Make a batch to keep on hand for sprinkling over everything, especially deep-fried dishes.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 tablespoon salt flakes
- 1 tablespoon Sichuan peppercorns

METHOD

1. Place salt and Sichuan peppercorns in a dry frying pan over a medium heat and stir for 4–5 minutes, until salt is lightly coloured.
2. Grind to a fine powder in a spice grinder or using a mortar and pestle. If using a mortar, sieve to remove any large particles.
3. Store in an airtight container in a cool dark place.

