

## Vietnamese Spring Rolls with Fiery Sweet and Sour Sauce

The long instructions make this recipe appear complicated, but it is actually very simple. An inexpensive mandolin makes it easy to julienne the carrots and cucumber. But both can be sliced by hand—or the carrots can be coarsely shredded with a box grater.

The recipe relies on high quality vegetables and herbs for its fresh flavor and crispness—and the best place to find them is at the Farmers' Market. Top quality prawns are essential too—also available at the Farmers' Market. Avoid the inexpensive bags of frozen prawns from Asia because of their off flavor and mushy texture.

The spring roll skins, also called rice paper, are paper-thin dried rounds made of rice and/or tapioca—not to be confused with refrigerated dough or crepe-like egg or spring roll wrappers. Maifun are very thin dried noodles. Both the wrappers and noodles are found in supermarkets alongside other shelf-stable Asian ingredients.

**Yield:** Makes 15 rolls

- 1-1/2 cups Fiery Sweet and Sour Sauce (recipe follows)
- 3 large carrots, peeled
- 1 (10-inch) English cucumber, halved lengthwise and seeded
- 6 ounces maifun rice noodles
- 12 ounces medium prawns (about 24), peeled and deveined
- 15 (8-1/2 inch) dried Vietnamese spring roll skins (see head note above)
- 45 fresh basil leaves
- 15 fresh cilantro sprigs, stems discarded
- 15 fresh mint leaves
- 15 lettuce leaves (optional)

**Getting started:** Prepare the Fiery Sweet and Sour Sauce (recipe follows).

1. Cut the carrots and cucumber into 2-inch long pieces; julienne with a mandolin or knife (see "Tip" below). Put the carrots and cucumbers into separate bowls; toss each with about 2 tablespoons of the sauce. Cook the noodles in boiling water until just tender, 2 to 3 minutes; drain. Rinse the noodles in cold water; drain well. Transfer to a medium bowl; toss with 1/3 cup of the sauce.
2. Simmer the prawns in boiling water until just pink and translucent, about 2 minutes; drain. Plunge the prawns into a bowl of ice water to cool; transfer to paper towels to drain (save the ice water for later). Slice the prawns lengthwise into halves, following the curve in the back. Put the prawns into a bowl; toss with 1 tablespoon of the sauce. Hold the bowl of prawns over the ice water to keep them well chilled.

3. Cover a work surface with a clean, damp towel (preferably not terrycloth). Fill a 10-inch pie dish halfway with warm water (replenish as the water cools). Submerge 1 wrapper (smooth side down) at a time in the warm water until almost soft, 10 to 15 seconds. Transfer the wrapper, with the smooth side down, to the damp towel.
4. Immediately arrange 2 basil leaves, several cilantro leaves, and 1 mint leaf about 1-1/2-inches in from the wrapper sides and bottom edge. Top with about 1/4 cup of the noodles and some of the carrots and cucumbers (about 1/15 of each). Top with a basil leaf and a couple cilantro leaves.
5. Fold the bottom edge up over the filling to cover it. Tightly roll one time; fold in the right and left edges. Arrange 3 prawn halves, pink side up, across the roll. Finish by rolling into a tight cylinder; dab water on the end flap to seal. Put the roll with the seam down on the damp towel. Cover with a damp non-terry towel and plastic wrap. Can be made up to 5 hours ahead (wrap in a damp towel and plastic wrap, refrigerate). Serve with the sauce. (If using lettuce, serve each roll on top of a lettuce leaf. To eat, wrap the lettuce around the roll; drizzle with the sauce.)

**Tip:** To julienne the cucumber and carrots by hand, cut them into 2-inch lengths, and then cut them lengthwise into thin slices (between 1/8 to 1/4-inch thick). Stack several slices; cut lengthwise into thin matchsticks (julienne).

### Fiery Sweet and Sour Sauce

**Yield:** About 1-1/2 cups

- 1 cup sugar
- 3/4 cup rice vinegar
- 1/2 cup cold water
- 1 small red bell pepper, cored and chopped
- 2 large cloves garlic, chopped
- 1/4 to 3/4 teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- Grated zest of 1 lime
- 2 tablespoons fresh lime juice

In a small saucepan, combine the sugar, vinegar, 1/2 cup water, bell pepper, garlic, red pepper flakes, and salt. Bring to a boil, stirring just enough to dissolve the sugar. When the mixture boils, immediately reduce the heat to medium (watch so it doesn't overflow) and STOP stirring. Cook until slightly syrupy, 12 to 15 minutes. Let cool slightly. Puree the sauce with an immersion blender. (Alternatively, puree in a blender in two batches, holding the lid firmly in place—hot mixtures can explode.) Transfer the sauce to a serving bowl. Stir in the lime zest and juice. Serve warm or at room temperature with the spring rolls. Refrigerate leftovers.