How to cook tofu, and how to press it

By the Vegochef team · Editorial standards · Last checked 27 Oct 2026 · 8 min read

Quick answer: for crispy tofu, buy firm or extra-firm tofu, press it for 15–30 minutes to squeeze out water, cut it into cubes and toss in a little cornstarch. Then pan-fry over medium-high heat for 8–10 minutes, turning, or bake at 200 °C (400 °F) for 25–30 minutes. Season or glaze at the end.

Tofu has a reputation for being bland and spongy, but that's a cooking problem, not a tofu problem. Choose the right type, get the water out, and give it high heat and a good sauce, and it's one of the quickest proteins you can cook.

Which tofu to buy

TYPE	TEXTURE	PRESS IT?	BEST FOR
Silken	Smooth, custard-like	No	Smoothies, desserts, creamy sauces and dressings
Soft	Delicate	No	Soups, scrambles, mapo tofu
Firm	Holds its shape	Yes	Stir-fries, baking, scrambles, curries
Extra-firm	Dense, little water	Briefly	Crispy cubes, grilling, air-frying
Super-firm / high-protein	Very dense, vacuum-packed	No	Straight into the pan

Tip: look for "calcium sulfate" in the ingredients. Calcium-set tofu is one of the best plant sources of calcium. Firm tofu has about 10–16 g of protein per 100 g, depending on how firm it is: see how much protein is in tofu, and the protein calculator for your daily target.

How to press tofu

Pressing squeezes out water, so the tofu browns instead of steaming and soaks up more flavour.

1. **Drain** the block and pat it dry.
2. **Wrap** it in a clean tea towel or a few paper towels.
3. **Weigh it down** with something heavy and flat: a cast-iron pan, a chopping board with a few cans on top, or a stack of books on a plate.
4. **Wait 15–30 minutes.** Longer is better for extra-crispy results.

With a tofu press: put the block in, tighten, and leave for 15 minutes. Handy if you cook tofu often, but not essential.

In a hurry: cut the tofu into slices, lay them on a towel, cover with another towel and press firmly with your hands for a minute.

Freeze-and-thaw trick: freeze the whole block in its pack, thaw it in the fridge, then squeeze it. The ice crystals make it chewier and spongier, so it absorbs marinades like a sponge.

Five ways to cook tofu

Crispy pan-fried tofu

1. Cut pressed tofu into 2 cm (¾ in) cubes and toss with 1 tbsp cornstarch and a pinch of salt.

2. Heat 2 tbsp neutral oil in a large non-stick or cast-iron pan over medium-high heat.
3. Add the cubes in one layer with space between them. Leave them for 3 minutes before turning.
4. Fry for 8–10 minutes in total, turning, until golden on most sides.
5. Toss with your sauce in the last minute.

Baked tofu

Toss cubes with 1 tbsp oil, 1 tbsp soy sauce and 1 tbsp cornstarch. Spread on a lined tray and bake at **200 °C (400 °F) for 25–30 minutes**, turning halfway. Good for meal prep: it keeps for 4 days.

Air-fryer tofu

Same coating as baked tofu. Air-fry at **200 °C (390 °F) for 12–15 minutes**, shaking the basket every 5 minutes.

Tofu scramble

Crumble firm tofu into a hot pan with a little oil. Add a pinch of turmeric for colour, garlic powder, black pepper, a tablespoon of nutritional yeast and, if you have it, black salt (kala namak) for an eggy taste. Cook for 5 minutes and add spinach at the end.

In soups and curries

Soft or firm tofu, cut into cubes, goes straight into simmering soups and curries for the last 5–10 minutes. No pressing needed. Our spicy tom kha soup is a good example.

Silken tofu works without cooking: blend it into smoothies, creamy dressings or desserts, as in our 3-ingredient chocolate mousse.

A simple all-purpose marinade

For one 400 g block: 3 tbsp soy sauce or tamari, 1 tbsp maple syrup or sugar, 1 tbsp rice vinegar or lime juice, 1 tsp sesame oil, 1 grated garlic clove and a little grated ginger. Marinate pressed tofu for at least 20 minutes, or overnight. Variations:

- **Smoky:** add 1 tsp smoked paprika and swap the vinegar for liquid smoke or a splash of barbecue sauce.
- **Peanut:** whisk in 2 tbsp peanut butter and a little chilli sauce; best tossed on after cooking.
- **Lemon herb:** olive oil, lemon juice, garlic, oregano and salt for Mediterranean bowls.

Common mistakes

- **Not pressing firm tofu**, so it steams instead of browning.
- **A crowded pan:** cook in batches if needed.
- **Moving it too soon:** let each side set and brown before turning.
- **Adding the sauce too early:** sugary sauces burn and wet sauces stop the crisping. Add them at the end.

Storing tofu

Unopened, keep tofu in the fridge until its date. Once opened, cover leftovers with fresh water in a closed container, change the water daily and use within 3–5 days. Cooked tofu keeps about 4 days in the fridge. You can freeze tofu for up to 3 months; the texture becomes chewier.

Want a firmer, nuttier soy protein? See what is tempeh. For meal ideas, read high-protein vegan meals.

Frequently asked questions

Do you have to press tofu? +

How do you press tofu without a tofu press? +

Can you eat tofu raw? +

Why is my tofu soggy? +

How do you get flavour into tofu? +

How long does tofu last once opened? +

This guide is general information for healthy adults, not medical advice. Talk to your doctor or a dietitian before starting or changing supplements, especially if you're pregnant, breastfeeding or have a health condition.

Sources

- USDA FoodData Central: tofu, raw, firm and silken (fdc.nal.usda.gov)
- USDA FoodKeeper: tofu storage (foodsafety.gov)

From vegochef.com: meal planner and nutrition tracker for vegans, vegetarians and pescatarians. Free for 7 days on the App Store.