

Brimming ⅓ cup thinly sliced shallots

3 Tbsp neutral oil (such as canola or peanut)

Hành Phi

Fast-Fried Shallots

Caramelized slices of fried shallot adorn many Vietnamese dishes, lending sweet pungent notes. Ardent cooks, like my mother, fry a lot of shallots in advance, but they're never as good as when freshly made. Shallots cultivated abroad tend to be moister than ones in Vietnam, which means frying takes longer.

I've tried shortcuts, such as frying sliced dried shallots imported from Vietnam, but unfortunately they lack flavor. The Maesri brand of fried shallots from Thailand is good and so are European-made fried onions from Trader Joe's and Lars. That said, when I want to send a dish over the top, I fry a small batch of hành phi. Microwaving the shallots first quickly removes some moisture, so you spend less time frying (see Note if you don't use a microwave). When frying a double batch, use a 10-inch skillet.

Partially dry the shallots

Line a microwavable plate with a paper towel. Separate the shallots into pieces (you may have rings or half circles), dropping them on the paper towel; it's okay to leave itty-bitty, tight pieces intact. Spread out the shallots, overlapping them as needed. Microwave on high power for 60 to 90 seconds, until the slices are roughly half their original size. Expect steam and light brown streaks on some pieces.

Remove the paper towel and shallots from the plate and let cool to room temperature, 2 to 3 minutes. You can gently fluff them with your fingers to further separate the pieces as they cool.

Fry, cool, and crisp

Set a fine-mesh strainer in a medium bowl and place near the stove.

In a 1- to 1½-qt saucepan, combine the neutral oil and shallots, stirring gently a few times to combine. Set over medium-low heat and, after gentle sizzling begins, let the shallots cook for about 4 minutes, stirring or swirling frequently for even cooking. As the frying action ramps up and if you fear it getting out of hand, turn down the heat slightly to better monitor progress; it's better to fry longer and gentler.

When roughly half the shallot pieces are golden brown, remove the pan from the heat and continue stirring and swirling as the shallots keep darkening. After about 30 seconds, when most of the shallots are golden, pour them into the prepared strainer. Let cool for about 3 minutes, until crisp (shake the strainer and the shallot pieces should rattle), before using. If the shallot pieces aren't crisp, briefly and carefully re-fry them in the oil. Save the strained fragrant oil for other dishes such as fried rice (see page 67).

Notes

Equipment If you don't have a microwave, pat the cut shallots with a paper towel to remove moisture and fry a little longer. You'll have less oil remaining.

Lifespan These fried shallots are best the day they are made. When they're covered with parchment paper and kept overnight at room temperature, their flavor dulls slightly. If they soften, briefly re-fry with a touch of neutral oil over medium-low heat.