

8 oz super-firm tofu

1 Tbsp white or brown rice flour

¼ tsp MSG, ½ tsp Asian mushroom seasoning, or 1½ tsp nutritional yeast

⅛ to ¼ tsp fine sea salt (less if using MSG or mushroom seasoning)

1 Tbsp fish sauce (store-bought or vegan version, page 29), Maggi Seasoning sauce, Bragg Liquid Aminos, or soy sauce

1½ Tbsp neutral oil (such as canola or peanut)

Thịt Bằm Chay

Umami Tofu Crumbles

Alternatives to ground-meat products are formulated for certain uses, such as hamburgers. Given that lighter-flavored ground pork is the go-to for many Viet foods, I developed this natural, inexpensive, and versatile substitute (pictured opposite, at bottom) for *thịt băm* (minced meat). It's handy for snacks, fried rice, bao, and more.

Coating nubs of super-firm tofu with coarsely ground supermarket rice flour creates the bumpy texture of cooked ground meat. This is a family-friendly recipe. Recipe tester Jenny Sager's one-year-old enjoyed helping crumble the tofu.

Crumble and season the tofu

Blot the tofu dry with a dish towel, then cut or break it into approximately 1-inch chunks. Over the sink, in batches of one or two chunks, give them a squeeze with one hand to slightly mush them, flicking excess water into the sink. (Instead of using bare hands, you may re-use the dish towel to squeeze and crush the tofu.) Using your fingers, crumble the tofu into smaller pieces that resemble very coarsely ground meat (think chili grind with some tiny bits), dropping it into a medium bowl.

Sprinkle the rice flour, MSG, and salt onto the tofu, then stir and toss to coat. Stir in the fish sauce and 1 Tbsp of the neutral oil. Let sit for 5 minutes.

Fry the crumbles

In a 10-inch nonstick, carbon-steel, or cast-iron skillet over medium heat, warm the remaining 1½ tsp neutral oil. Add the seasoned tofu and give things a stir. When you hear gentle sizzling in the skillet, lower the heat slightly and cook the tofu for 5 to 7 minutes, stirring frequently. As the tofu cooks, the jagged pieces cohere to resemble bumpy clusters of ground meat; scrape the spatula against the pan's rim to return any sticking bits to the mixture. The tofu will darken or brown a bit, depending on the liquid seasoning chosen (Maggi, Bragg, and soy sauce darken more than fish sauce). You can keep cooking it further, but it may dry up too much. Aim for moist crumbles. Remove from the heat and let cool for about 5 minutes to further meld the flavors before using, or let cool completely and refrigerate for up to 1 week.

This recipe yields 8 oz from one-half package of tofu, so use leftover tofu for the wontons on page 89. Or cook up a double batch in a 12-inch skillet.