

TWELVE SICHUAN PANTRY JARS

MATCH THE CHARACTERS

You don't need to read Chinese to find the right jar. Match the characters on the card to the characters on the label, stroke for stroke.

- 1 Match the shapes.** Names can run left to right, right to left, or top to bottom. Read them in any direction.
- 2 Read 配料 pèiliào, the ingredient list,** from the top. Chinese and US labels both list ingredients from most to least.
- 3 Labels vary by brand,** so every cue says "typically". Check your jar, and its allergen line.

Screenshot a card, or print it and take it to the store.

THE TWELVE, AS A SHOPPING LIST

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|--|--|--|
| ☐ 01 郫县豆瓣 Chili bean paste | ☐ 05 老抽 Dark soy sauce | ☐ 09 芝麻酱 Sesame paste |
| ☐ 02 绍兴酒·料酒 Shaoxing / cooking wine | ☐ 06 红花椒·青花椒 Sichuan pepper | ☐ 10 宜宾芽菜 Yacai |
| ☐ 03 镇江香醋 Black vinegar | ☐ 07 二荆条·朝天椒 Dried chilies | ☐ 11 蚝油 Oyster sauce |
| ☐ 04 生抽 Light soy sauce | ☐ 08 豆豉 Fermented black beans | ☐ 12 冰糖 Rock sugar |

01 MATCH THESE CHARACTERS

郫县豆瓣

pí xiàn dòu bàn
Pí, the old county bean split half

Píxiàn dòubàn Pixian chili bean paste (doubanjiang)

LOOK FOR	郫县豆瓣 in the name; 辣椒 and 蚕豆 near the top of 配料; typically contains wheat flour — check the allergen line.
DON'T CONFUSE WITH	豆瓣酱 with no 辣 in the name and no chili on the list: a non-spicy bean paste. Chili bean sauce built on soybean paste, sugar and garlic is a different style.
ITS JOB	Salt, fermented depth, red colour and some heat. Fried in the oil first for mapo tofu and twice-cooked pork.
BEST SWAP	Miso with chili flakes. You lose: the fermented chili depth and the red colour.
ALLERGENS	Typically wheat. Some chili bean sauces add soy.
SALT	Very salty, and brands differ. Taste first; start with two-thirds of the recipe's amount.
STORAGE	Follow the label.

TYPICALLY — CHECK YOUR JAR.

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02 MATCH THESE CHARACTERS

绍兴酒 料酒

Shàoxīng jiǔ liào jiǔ
the city wine seasoning wine

Shàoxīng jiǔ · liào jiǔ Shaoxing wine vs cooking wine

LOOK FOR	绍兴 in the name for Shaoxing wine. 配料 typically water, 糯米 (glutinous rice) and 小麦 (wheat). 食用盐 on the list means salted; 食用酒精 (edible alcohol) points to a blended seasoning wine.
DON'T CONFUSE WITH	料酒 is the broad word for cooking wine: always salted, sometimes spiced, often milder. 米酒 is a lighter, clear rice wine.
ITS JOB	Softens fishy and gamey smells in marinades and blanching water, and adds aroma splashed down the side of the wok.
BEST SWAP	Dry sherry, 1 : 1. You lose: very little in a splash. Supermarket cooking sherry adds salt.
ALLERGENS	Wheat.
SALT	Salted cooking wines are often about 1.5% salt. Taste before salting.
STORAGE	Follow the label.

TYPICALLY — CHECK YOUR JAR.

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03 MATCH THESE CHARACTERS

镇江香醋

Zhènjiāng
the city

xiāng
fragrant

cù
vinegar

Zhènjiāng xiāngcù Chinkiang (Zhenjiang) black vinegar

LOOK FOR	镇江香醋 in the name; 糯米 (glutinous rice) near the top of 配料, typically with 麸皮 (wheat bran).
DON'T CONFUSE WITH	山西老陈醋 (Shanxi aged vinegar): sorghum-based, more intense. 米醋 and 白醋: pale rice and white vinegars, sharper, with no malt.
ITS JOB	The black vinegar on the tray. Dumpling dips, cold dishes, hot-and-sour flavours.
BEST SWAP	Another Chinese black vinegar, such as Shanxi aged or Sichuan 保宁醋 Baoning. Next best: rice vinegar. You lose: with rice vinegar, the malty depth and the dark colour.
ALLERGENS	Typically wheat.
STORAGE	Follow the label.

TYPICALLY — CHECK YOUR JAR.

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04 MATCH THESE CHARACTERS

生抽

shēng
fresh, raw

chōu
to draw off

shēngchōu Light soy sauce

LOOK FOR	生抽 on the label, and 酿造酱油 (brewed soy sauce). 配料 typically water, 大豆 (soybeans), 小麦 (wheat) and 食用盐.
DON'T CONFUSE WITH	老抽, dark soy, which colours rather than seasons. “Premium”, “Superior” and “Golden Label” don't tell you which: read the word after them. 蒸鱼豉油 is a sweeter seasoned soy for fish.
ITS JOB	The everyday seasoning: salt and savoury depth, by the tablespoon. When a Chinese recipe says just “soy sauce”, it means this one.
BEST SWAP	All-purpose naturally brewed soy sauce, 1 : 1. You lose: a little. It is a shade darker, with a different aroma.
ALLERGENS	Soy, wheat.
SALT	Taste before adding any salt after it.
STORAGE	Follow the label.

TYPICALLY — CHECK YOUR JAR.

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05 MATCH THESE CHARACTERS

老抽

lǎo
old

chōu
to draw off

lǎochōu Dark soy sauce

LOOK FOR	老抽 on the label; typically 焦糖色 (caramel colour) or sugar on 配料. 草菇老抽, straw mushroom dark soy, is still dark soy.
DON'T CONFUSE WITH	生抽, light soy. Light seasons, dark colours: don't swap them one for one.
ITS JOB	Colour and gloss, by the teaspoon: red-braised dishes, fried rice, noodles.
BEST SWAP	Mushroom dark soy, 1 : 1. Without it: 1 tsp light soy + ¼ tsp molasses + a pinch of sugar. You lose: with the mix, depth of colour.
ALLERGENS	Soy, wheat.
SALT	Treat a teaspoon of dark soy as at least as salty as light.
STORAGE	Follow the label.

TYPICALLY — CHECK YOUR JAR.

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06 MATCH THESE CHARACTERS

红花椒

hóng
red

huā
flower

jiāo
pepper

青花椒

qīng
green

huā
flower

jiāo
pepper

hóng huājiāo · qīng huājiāo Red and green Sichuan pepper

LOOK FOR	花椒 on the bag: 红花椒 red, 青花椒 green. Red may say 大红袍 or 汉源; green may say 藤椒. Split husks, few black seeds, a strong citrus smell, and a recent 生产日期 (production date) where one is printed.
DON'T CONFUSE WITH	胡椒, black or white pepper, and 辣椒, chili. Neither one numbs.
ITS JOB	麻, the numbing tingle. Red is warm and woody; green is bright and lemony.
BEST SWAP	The other colour, the same amount, then taste. You lose: red for green, some warmth; green for red, some brightness.
STORAGE	Follow the label.

TYPICALLY — CHECK YOUR JAR.

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07 MATCH THESE CHARACTERS

二荆条 朝天椒

èr jīng tiáo cháo tiān jiāo
two thorn-bush strip facing sky pepper

èrjīngtiáo · cháotiānjiāo Two Sichuan dried chilies

LOOK FOR 二荆条 (a variety name): long and slender, about 4–6 in, with a slightly hooked tip; deep red. 朝天椒, “facing the sky”: short and pointed, about 1½–2½ in; 子弹头, “bullet”, is a common kind. Typically dried chili and nothing else.

DON'T CONFUSE WITH 小米辣, a smaller, hotter chili. 辣椒面 is ground chili, not whole.

ITS JOB 二荆条 brings colour and fragrance with mild-to-moderate heat: the red in red oil, and the chili in Pixian paste. 朝天椒 brings more heat, by the handful.

BEST SWAP Chile de árbol or other small dried chilies. **You lose:** 二荆条's fragrance and colour. Árbol can run hotter, so use fewer.

STORAGE Follow the label.

TYPICALLY — CHECK YOUR JAR.

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08 MATCH THESE CHARACTERS

豆豉

dòu chǐ
bean salted, fermented beans

dòuchǐ Fermented black beans

LOOK FOR 豆豉 in the name; 配料 typically 黑豆 or 大豆 (soybeans) and 食用盐. Some add ginger or spices.

DON'T CONFUSE WITH Canned or dried black beans, which are not fermented. Jarred black bean sauce, with garlic and oil, is a different product.

ITS JOB A salty, savoury punch. Chop or crush them and fry them with the aromatics.

BEST SWAP Jarred black bean sauce, about the same amount. **You lose:** the whole-bean bite. The sauce brings garlic and oil, often sugar.

ALLERGENS Soy. Check for wheat.

SALT Very salty. Rinse them if you like, and hold back other salt.

STORAGE Follow the label.

TYPICALLY — CHECK YOUR JAR.

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09 MATCH THESE CHARACTERS

芝麻酱

zhīma jiāng
sesame paste

zhīmajiāng Chinese sesame paste

LOOK FOR 芝麻酱 or 纯芝麻酱 (pure) in the name; 芝麻 as the only item on 配料; no 花生 (peanut) unless you want a blend.

DON'T CONFUSE WITH Tahini: paler and milder, from raw or lightly toasted seeds. 二八酱, a sesame and peanut blend. 黑芝麻酱, black sesame paste, for sweets.

ITS JOB Roasted, nutty body in dan dan noodles, cold noodles and hot pot dips.

BEST SWAP 1 tbsp tahini + ½ tsp toasted sesame oil for each tablespoon. **You lose:** some of the deep roast.

ALLERGENS Sesame; peanut in a blend.

STORAGE Follow the label. Stir the oil back in first.

TYPICALLY — CHECK YOUR JAR.

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10 MATCH THESE CHARACTERS

宜宾芽菜

Yíbīn yá cài
the city shoot, sprout vegetable

Yíbīn yácai Yibin preserved mustard greens (yacai)

LOOK FOR 宜宾芽菜 on the pack; 碎米芽菜 is the finely chopped kind. 配料 typically 芥菜 (mustard greens), sugar, salt and spices.

DON'T CONFUSE WITH 榨菜, a crunchier, sharper pickled mustard stem. In some shops, 芽菜 on its own means bean sprouts.

ITS JOB Savoury-sweet depth in dan dan noodles, dry-fried green beans and Sichuan fried rice.

BEST SWAP Finely chopped 榨菜, used sparingly; a chopped dill pickle in a pinch. **You lose:** yacai's sweet, spiced depth.

SALT Salty. Hold back salt until you taste.

STORAGE Follow the label.

TYPICALLY — CHECK YOUR JAR.

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11 MATCH THESE CHARACTERS

蚝油

háo
oyster

yóu
oil; here, sauce

háoyóu Oyster sauce

LOOK FOR 蚝油 in the name; 蚝汁 (oyster extract) on 配料. Lists run from most to least, so the higher it sits, the more oyster.

DON'T CONFUSE WITH 海鲜酱 is hoisin: "seafood sauce", with no seafood in it. 素蚝油 is the vegetarian mushroom version.

ITS JOB Salt, gentle sweetness, savoury depth, body and dark colour in stir-fry sauces and braises.

BEST SWAP Vegetarian oyster sauce, 素蚝油, 1 : 1. **You lose:** the brine. It is a little thinner and earthier.

ALLERGENS Shellfish (oyster); often wheat.

STORAGE Follow the label.

TYPICALLY — CHECK YOUR JAR.

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12 MATCH THESE CHARACTERS

冰糖

bīng
ice

táng
sugar

bīngtáng Rock sugar

LOOK FOR 冰糖 on the bag. 单晶冰糖: clear single crystals. 多晶冰糖: pale yellow lumps, less refined.

DON'T CONFUSE WITH 冰糖片, brown slab sugar; 红糖, brown sugar; 白砂糖, granulated sugar.

ITS JOB Rounded sweetness and gloss in red-braised dishes (红烧) and sweet soy.

BEST SWAP Granulated sugar, a little less: rock sugar is slightly less sweet. **You lose:** a little of the gloss.

STORAGE Follow the label.

TYPICALLY — CHECK YOUR JAR.

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WORDS ON ANY CHINESE LABEL

The storage phrases are the sample wording in China's labelling standard, GB 7718. Real jars may word them a little differently.

配料	pèiliào ingredients, most to least
小麦粉	xiǎomàifěn wheat flour
芝麻	zhīma sesame
生产日期	shēngchǎn rīqī production date
常温保存	chángwēn bǎocún store at room temperature

食用盐	shíyòng yán salt
大豆	dàdòu soybeans
花生	huāshēng peanut
贮存条件	zhùcún tiáojiàn storage conditions
开封后需冷藏	kāifēng hòu xū lěngcáng refrigerate after opening

NOTES FROM THE AISLE

Write down the jar you brought home, so the next shop is quicker.

JAR	WHAT THE LABEL SAID	HOW IT COOKED	AGAIN?
			☐
			☐
			☐
			☐
			☐

ABOUT THESE CARDS

Each cue was checked against at least two sources: cookbook authors, specialist grocers, Chinese national standards and labels. No brand is named, ranked or endorsed. On a jar sold in the US, the English "Contains" line is the allergen check that counts.

The full guides, with sources:
gentlehearth.com/pantry

Setting the table for mixed heat? The free Heat Card and the table planner: **gentlehearth.com/table**

The Aisle Card · Version 1.0 · 2026-09-25 · Chinese reviewed: pending. Free to print for your kitchen; share the link, gentlehearth.com/free. © 2026 Gentle Hearth.