

BUSYCOOK



'Baby' bakchang

Small bite-sized dumplings don't take hours to cook

MY mother is guest chef this week. She took on the multiple roles of head chef and narrator-of-stories as we gathered at her house for our annual bakchang wrapping session.

I decided to bow to her superior knowledge even as I set her "conditions" on how our bakchang should taste, and look. I wanted smaller bite-sized dumplings, not because of health reasons if the truth be told, but because I'm too impatient to wait four hours for the larger dumplings to boil.

My baby bakchang took just two hours to cook properly, which is also about the time my mother had to tell my cousin and I the stories of how grandma-used-to-make-bakchang.

You may talk about the Dragon Boat Festival and how dumplings were made to commemorate patriot poet Chu Yuan, but the festival, in our family, is more a bonding session of catch-up and gossip two

weeks before the actual day, which is on June 15.

We thoroughly enjoyed the natter, and the hot tasks of soaking, marinating, frying, wrapping and tying became light and easy.

Grandma, a fastidious festival cook, took three days to wrap up the hundreds of dumplings that would ultimately be distributed to the clan and hordes, but we took just half a day to make 60.

Set aside this weekend, then, and gather the novice and the eager in the family for a wrap-up session. It's not as difficult as it looks, and even if your dumplings are not perfect pyramids, it's alright. You would have lots of fun in the effort anyway.

Here are a few tips from my mother:

- Soak the bamboo leaves in hot water and wipe each one with a damp cloth. The dirt must be seen to be believed.
- Season the meats with good quality soya sauce. The long boiling process dilutes the salt.
- After the dumplings have boiled for two hours, hang them on a bamboo pole to drip dry.
- Relax, have fun, don't worry. It's all edible.



by Pauline D Loh

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Bakchang or pork dumplings

Ingredients: (makes 60 small dumplings)

- 2 kilos glutinous rice, washed and soaked
- 500 gm belly pork, cut into small pieces
- 100 gm pork fat, cut into small cubes
- 100 gm dried Chinese chestnuts
- 50 gm dried prawns
- 50 gm dried shiitake mushrooms, soaked till soft.
- Salted egg yolk (optional), cut into eighths
- Soya sauce, five-spice powder, salt and pepper to taste
- 2 whole bulbs garlic, skinned and chopped
- 2 bundles 10 cm wide bamboo leaves, plus raffia to tie

Method:

1. Soak and clean bamboo leaves. Trim off hard stems and tips. Soak the dried raffia so they become pliable. Gather into bunches of 10 and tie one end with a large knot.
2. Marinate belly pork with good quality soya sauce and five spice powder, salt and pepper.
3. Divide pork fat cubes into two. Marinate half with five-spice powder. Place the other half into a medium hot pan, and start rendering the fat. When you have about two tablespoons oil, throw away the lard, and add the chopped garlic to the oil. Stir fry till garlic turns golden. Drain garlic, set aside.
4. In remaining oil, fry the mushrooms. Set aside. Add belly pork

and fry in oil with a little garlic added. Add more soya sauce. Drain belly pork pieces and set aside.

5. Keep pan juices. Add more garlic into pan. Add the rice and stir well so that the grains are lightly coloured with soya sauce and flavoured with garlic. Switch off heat, gather rice in a big pot.
6. Prepare to wrap dumplings.

a. Make a fold halfway in the bamboo leaf and bring the two halves together so a cone is created. Hold leaf by its two edges, add in one Chinese soup spoon of rice.

b. Add chestnut, mushroom, belly pork, salted egg yolk if using, some dried prawns and a piece of five-spice marinated pork fat. Cover filling with more rice.

c. Cupping the bamboo leaf and shaped between thumb and forefinger, use your other hand to fold the leaf over, pressing down slightly.

d. Flip the cone over, and wrap the ends of the leaf around and about the rice cone. Holding the completed cone firmly in one hand, use a raffia string and wrap around the sides, tying it with what I call a fisherman's knot.

7. When you have completed bunches of 10, place them in a large pot of boiling water for two hours. Remember to top up with boiling water if the water level falls low. It must cover dumplings completely. (larger dumplings need longer cooking time.)

8. When dumplings are cooked, hang them up to dry off completely before storing them.