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Alexander Nakhnikian --Sichuan Home Cooking

Shredded Pork in Aromatic Sauce (Yu Xiang Ruo Si)
Serves 4-6

This dish requires two preserved ingredients that are crucial to Sichuan food but relatively unknown in the West: hot bean paste and pickled chilies. Hot bean paste is a fermented mixture of fava beans and red chilies; the pickled chilis is a simple chili pepper you can buy in stores or prepare yourself (recipe below). For the bean paste, look for “Pixian dou ban jiang” in Chinese groceries. Dou ban jiang means “chopped bean sauce” or “chopped bean jam”. This is sometimes called “la dou ban jiang” -- hot bean sauce – but the “la” is often omitted since it’s clear from context when a paste is hot or mild. Pixian is a region of Sichuan province known for producing very good dou ban jiang.

1 lb. lean pork butt
2 tablespoon Shaoxing rice wine or dry sherry. Sherry is better than “cooking wine”
4 stalks celtuce (Chinese stem lettuce) or 3 stalks celery
½ cup cloud ear mushrooms
3-4 cloves garlic
½ - 1” ginger, peeled
2-3 scallions, washed and trimmed
3-6 homemade pickled chilies or a couple tablespoons of pickled chili sauce from the store
1-2 tablespoons Pixian dou ban jiang, adjust to taste
3 tablespoons chinkiang (pronounced “Zhenjiang”) vinegar. Add a bit more if using lots of chilies
2 T sugar
2 T light Chinese soy sauce (look in Chinese shops, not the same as Japanese)
3 T water or fresh stock (a few chicken parts simmered with scallion and ginger)
1 T corn starch mixed with 1T water
¼ cup peanut or vegetable oil

Using a very sharp knife, thinly slice the pork on the diagonal, then cut the pieces lengthwise into thin strips. 20 minutes in the freezer firms up the pork and makes this a bit easier if you’re having trouble. Mix with 1T of wine or sherry and a pinch of salt. Set aside at least 15 minutes.

Peel the celtuce and cut into long thin batons. Alternatively, diagonally slice the celery stalks into long thin pieces, then cut lengthwise in half or thirds depending on size.

Chop the dou ban jiang a few times to break up large bean and chili pieces. Combine the vinegar, sugar, soy sauce, and water (or stock).

Soak the cloud ear mushrooms in cool water for 20 minutes so they open up big and when done, slice into chunks.

Mince the scallions, ginger, and garlic. Combine in a small bowl and set aside

Heat the oil in a wok over medium high. When a wisp of white smoke appears add the pork. Toss for a few minutes until still cooked but still slightly raw.

Push the pork off to the side. Add the garlic/ginger/scallion mix. Stir fry for 1-2 minutes, until tender and aromatic. Adjust heat to prevent scorching. Add the celtuce or celery along with the chilies and mix thoroughly with the aromatics and meat. Stir fry for another minute. Add the cloud ear mushrooms and dou ban jiang and quickly mix.

Increase heat and pour the remaining wine down the side of the wok. Mix with the other ingredients. Pour in the sauce and bring to just a boil. Reduce heat to low and add the cornstarch slurry. Stir gently until thickened. Serve with steamed rice and a vegetable such as stir fried bok choy.

Yu xiang ruo si (lit: "fish fragrant shredded pork") does not contain any fish in its seasoning. The name comes from the combination of ingredients – vinegar, pickled chilies, sugar, soy sauce, rice wine – commonly used in Sichuan fish cooking and delicious with everything. Yu xiang wei (fish fragrant flavor) is one of the fundamental compound flavors of Sichuan, applied to vegetables, meat, and seafood. Yu xiang dishes are often labeled "such and such in garlic sauce" in American Chinese restaurants, although this complex blend of flavors is much more than "garlic sauce". Perhaps proprietors suspect "fish fragrance" sounds unappealing.

Pickled Chilis Recipe (Pao La Jiao)---shown but not demonstrated on the show. Jarred pickled chilis are easily bought at Chinese groceries, possibly Indian groceries.

Pao La jiao (“soaked” or “infused” hot pepper) is a sour chili made with vinegar or salt. My version uses salt to induce lactic acid fermentation as a souring step. Salt kills most bacteria but there are a few benign species that thrive in it. They produce lactic acid as a metabolic byproduct, which works to further impede the growth of pathogens and gives the pickles a pleasant tanginess. Sugar can also be added to amplify the natural sweetness of the chilies and give the lacto-bacteria a snack.

Moutai bai jiu is a type of distilled sorghum liquor available in Chinese liquor shops. It impedes mold growth and brings out the floral aroma of chilies. It is not essential. In fact, at its heart this preparation requires nothing more than water, chilies, and salt. Almost every cook has their own particular recipe, adding or removing ingredients as they like.

Since these pickles are not heat treated prior to storage they should be kept refrigerated and not eaten raw.

1 liter water, preferably filtered or distilled
1.5 cups salt, or as needed
1 lb. fresh long red chilies
2 peeled garlic cloves
3 inches ginger, peeled and cut into 1” lengths
2 tablespoons moutai bai jiu

Wash the chilies and allow to dry completely. Remove the stem but leave the little green caps on. Boil the water and allow to cool

In the meantime, clean a medium sized glass mason jar by filling it to the brim with boiling water then pouring it off once cool. Allow to air dry.

Place a layer of chilies on the bottom of the jar. Add the garlic and ginger then sprinkle with salt to cover. Continue in this manner, layering chilies and salt, until the jar is full. Add the bai jiu and pour over the water. Turn and lightly shake the jar to mix everything.

Let sit at room temperature for 7 days, preferably in a relatively warm part of the kitchen. Vent the jar once a day to release fermentation gases. If it bubbles it’s fine, that’s just a sign the bacteria are doing their work.

These will keep refrigerated for some time. As long as they appear bright and intact, with no smell of rot, they are good.

When the fermentation is well along the chilies will smell sharp, flowery, and sour. The lactic acid gives them a subtle tartness you cannot achieve with vinegar.