

These melt-in-your-mouth pork belly steamed buns will vanish

By **THE CULINARY INSTITUTE OF AMERICA**
Associated Press

Steamed pork buns are popping up on menus across the country, and it's no wonder. With their pillow-y softness, rich fillings, and salty-sweet sauces, they represent everything that makes Asian cuisines so craveable.

Chinese-style steamed buns, known commonly as bao, are our most familiar representation of the dish, though you can find versions across Korean, Japanese, and southeast Asian cuisines. Sometimes the fillings, which can be sweet or savory, are fully encased in the bun. But we like this version, where the dough is folded around the filling like a sandwich.

When it comes to fillings, there are no limits. Sticky braised pork is a crowd-pleaser, and variations on the theme can be found on menus around the world. But chefs are pushing the limits now, filling their bao buns with anything from fried chicken to braised beef tongue to bold, mouth-numbing curries.

The best part of this recipe is eating it, but as a dinner host, you will most appreciate the make-ahead quality of each component. With only a few side dishes — like simple vegetables or a cold noodle salad — this dinner will come together in a flash. Because the pork is so rich, a little bit goes a long way.

While pork belly may not be a part of your typical dinner rotation, don't be intimidated. It's the cut we use to make bacon, and is characterized by layers of meat and unctuous fat. When cooked properly, the meat is soft and tender, almost melting in your mouth.

You may choose to purchase the belly with or without skin. Even after a long braise, the skin will retain some chew, so if that sounds unpleasant, skin-off might be for you.

Braised items are the ultimate make-ahead item, since they just get better over time. The key to preparing this pork belly the day ahead is in the braising liquid. You'll submerge the finished pork in some of the liquid to help keep it moist in the refrigerator. You'll reduce the rest to make a glossy sauce.

Though you may be tempted to prepare your own steamed buns, there are excellent store-bought varieties available at your local Asian market. Since you'll probably have to stop there anyway for some other ingredients, do yourself a favor and buy the buns (you'll find them in the



Pork belly steamed buns.

Phil Mansfield/The Culinary Institute of America via AP

PORK BELLY STEAMED BUNS

Servings: 12

Start to finish: 4 hours (1 hour active)

- ½ cup light soy sauce
- ½ cup dark soy sauce (see note)
- ¼ cup Korean soy bean paste (doenjang)
- One 1-inch piece fresh ginger, peeled and sliced
- 1 scallion, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1 whole star anise
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper
- ¼ cup brown sugar, divided use
- 2 pounds pork belly, with or without skin
- 12 frozen steamed buns, steamed until soft
- Cucumber Salad (recipe below)

In a large Dutch oven, combine the light soy sauce, dark soy sauce, bean paste, ginger, scallion, star anise, pepper, and 2 tablespoons of the brown sugar. Stir to combine. Add the pork belly and enough water to cover about halfway up the side of the meat (about 1 ½ cups).

Bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Reduce to a gentle simmer and cover with a tight-fitting lid. Simmer for 1 hour.

Preheat the oven to 350 F. Remove Dutch oven from the heat and set aside to cool slightly. Transfer the pork to a cutting board and slice into 12 even slices, about ¼ inch by 3 inches. Return the slices to the Dutch oven and transfer, covered, to the oven and roast until the meat is tender, but not falling apart, about 1 hour.

CUCUMBER SALAD

Servings: 12

- 1 cucumber, halved and thinly sliced
- 1 carrot, julienned or shredded
- ¼ red onion, thinly sliced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons rice vinegar
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- ½ teaspoon ground black pepper
- ½ teaspoon sesame seeds

frozen section).

You'll need to steam the buns just before serving, but they only take a few minutes. They can be a bit sticky, so cut strips of

parchment paper to wrap around the outside of the buns, to keep them from sticking together in your serving dish. Then sit back and watch them disappear.

Transfer the pork belly to a shallow baking dish or container. Add enough of the braising liquid to cover the meat and set aside or cover and refrigerate until use. Bring the remaining braising liquid to a boil over medium-high heat. Add the remaining 2 tablespoons brown sugar and simmer until the mixture has reduced enough to coat the back of a spoon, about 40 minutes. Strain through a fine mesh strainer, then cool slightly if using right away, or transfer to a covered container and refrigerate until needed.

Just before serving, preheat the broiler to high. Remove the pork belly from the braising liquid and discard the liquid. Dip each slice of pork belly into the reduced sauce and arrange in one layer on a foil-lined baking pan. Transfer to the oven and broil until the sauce begins to caramelize around the edges of the pork, about 4 minutes.

Fill each steamed bun with a slice of pork and a spoonful of cucumber salad. Serve with the sauce on the side.

Chef's note: There are many varieties of soy sauce, most of which can be easily purchased at your local Asian market. Light soy sauce should not be mistaken for "low sodium," but will instead be specially labeled as "light." Dark soy sauce might also be labeled as "thick."

Nutrition information per serving of pork buns: 556 calories; 378 calories from fat; 42 g fat (15 g saturated); 0 g trans fats; 54 mg cholesterol; 1486 mg sodium; 29 g carbohydrate; 1 g fiber; 9 g sugar; 14 g protein.

In a medium bowl, combine the cucumber, carrot, onion, and garlic. Stir to combine. Add the vinegar, sugar, salt, pepper, and sesame seeds, and toss to coat the vegetables. Refrigerate for at least 1 hour, or up to overnight.

Nutrition information per serving of cucumber salad: 9 calories; 1 calories from fat; 0 g fat (0 g saturated); 0 g trans fats; 0 mg cholesterol; 164 mg sodium; 2 g carbohydrate; 1 g fiber; 1 g sugar; 0 g protein.

This article was provided to The Associated Press by The Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York.

Black beans and mango combine in a delicious, filling salad

By **MELISSA D'ARABIAN**
Associated Press

Canned beans are fantastic convenience food. For a little over a buck, you can stock your pantry with a shelf-stable protein source that works in main dishes or in side dishes.

You can even use cooked canned beans as an inexpensive way to stretch pricier proteins: Serve seared salmon on a bed of sauteed creamy white beans, and you'll only need a few ounces of fish to make the meal feel hearty. Boost the filling factor in pasta dishes by adding a cup of rinsed canned beans to your family's recipes. Or, let beans turn a ho-hum salad into a filling comfort dish. In this week's recipe, I pair black beans with fresh mango and the result is spectacular, especially given how quickly this recipe comes together.

The hardest part about this salad is cutting the mango, navigating around its long, flat seed. You can easily purchase mango already cut in the packaged produce section, but you can save several dollars for about 3 minutes of work if

you are willing.

To slice or cube a mango, first cut it lengthwise just a little off-center, parallel to the seed, removing two large "cheeks." Score (or slice) the mango flesh right in the cheek with the skin intact, and then scoop out the recipe-ready cubes or slices with a spoon, scraping against the skin. Slice the remaining mango flesh from the edges of the seed, and either cube or just eat them. (Because you deserve a little treat after all that slicing, right?)

Mango is an excellent source of vitamin C and vitamin A, and it makes the salad feel bright and tropical. I add yellow pepper and corn (straight from the freezer; it thaws quickly) which make it pretty. Texture (and niacin!) comes from a light sprinkle of cashews and just a few smashed corn tortilla chips, which you can buy or make by roasting corn tortillas in the oven until crisp, about 15 minutes at 350 F. The tasty dressing is a result of a simple weeknight dressing hack: I add fresh lime juice and a little olive oil to prepared salsa.



Melissa d'Arabian via AP

BLACK BEAN AND MANGO SALAD

Start to finish: 15 minutes

Servings: 4

- 6 cups shredded kale, or other dark leafy greens
- 1 cup cooked black beans, rinsed and drained if canned

- 1 ½ cup cubed fresh mango
 - 1 cup organic frozen corn, thawed
 - 1 cup chopped tomato, about 2 roma tomatoes
 - ½ yellow bell pepper, chopped
 - ½ large avocado, cubed
 - 2 green onions, chopped
 - ¼ cup cashews, chopped
 - 8 baked organic corn chips, lightly crushed
 - chopped cilantro or parsley, for garnish
- For the dressing:**
- ¼ cup prepared tomato (or tomatillo) salsa
 - 3 tablespoons lime juice
 - 1 tablespoon olive oil
 - ¼ teaspoon salt
 - ¼ teaspoon black pepper

Lay the greens on a platter or individual plates. Place on top of the greens: beans, mango, corn, tomato, bell pepper, and avocado. Sprinkle on the green onions, cashews, crushed corn chips and cilantro. In a small bowl, whisk together the dressing ingredients and pour on the salad. Serve.

Nutrition information per serving: 296 calories; 114 calories from fat; 13 g fat (2 g saturated); 0 g trans fats; 0 mg cholesterol; 393 mg sodium; 42 g carbohydrate; 11 g fiber; 13 g sugar; 9 g protein.

Brazil's Ilha Grande has what Rio does not — clean beaches

By **PETER PRENGAMAN**
Associated Press

VILA DO ABRAAO, Brazil — One of the first things visitors will notice about Ilha Grande, or Big Island, is that there are no vehicles. The local government prohibits private cars, maintaining the laid-back rhythms that islanders say are central to their identity.

Dirt and sand paths that run parallel to the many beaches, however, often do have travelers: scores of crabs scurrying across at a leisurely pace that only picks up if a human approaches.

"Life here is simple," said Rodison Marcos, a 48-year-old boat operator born and raised here. "We don't need a watch, or a tie or cars."

For foreign and Brazilian tourists alike, that slowed development means this tropical island can offer something Rio de Janeiro and surrounding areas have not been able to for years: clean beaches. Ultimately it was a search for unsullied ocean, where my wife and I would feel comfortable letting our three young sons swim, that attracted us.

The island is a three-hour trip from Rio, but no highway or bridge connects it to the mainland. Several boats a day traverse a small stretch of sea from three different ports. The relative isolation means cell phone service is spotty, and Internet often feels nonexistent. In short, it's a place to disconnect while feeling strong



AP Photo/Peter Prengaman

In this Feb. 12 photo, men play paddle ball on one of the many beaches of Ilha Grande, Brazil. The tropical island remains pristine in large because of an unusual history that includes being a pirate refuge, leper colony and site of a major prison.

connections because everybody appears to know everybody.

Our Airbnb bungalow was another 10 minutes away by wobbly motorboat. Then we climbed the equivalent of six flights of stairs on a steep path through lush tropical forest. All the huffing and puffing and sweating felt worth it once there. Looking down, we saw blue ocean waters while monkeys jumped between trees.

The island, about 77 square miles, is pristine in large part because of an unusual history going back to the 16th century Portuguese coloniza-

tion. It has been a pirates' lair, a leper colony and most recently, home to a maximum security penitentiary that housed some of Brazil's most violent criminals, along with political prisoners during part of the 1964-1985 dictatorship.

Various rebellions and headline-grabbing escapes created headaches for islanders and kept investors away. In 1994, however, the Candido Mendes prison was closed and demolished. A few years later, the State University of Rio de Janeiro opened a research center to study

the environment and sustainable development.

Today, there are numerous pousadas, or guest houses, in Vila do Abraao, which has about 3,000 residents. There are also offbeat places to stay, from beachfront villas to isolated jungle dwellings. Companies offer excursions that range from some of Brazil's best snorkeling and scuba-diving to walking tours through rainforests teeming with life. Then there are the dozens and dozens of beaches that are both postcard-worthy and often empty.

"Look at this water," said Felipe Ricardo Brito, who sells caipirinhas, a mix of the national alcohol cachaca and limes, on Feiteiceira Beach. "It's totally clean. There is no sewage. You can breathe pure air."

That is not the case on most beaches in and around Rio de Janeiro, the city that hosted the 2016 Summer Games. An 18-month investigation by The Associated Press during the run up to the Olympics found dangerously high levels of bacteria and viruses in Rio beaches. Only a little more than half of the sewage in Rio is treated, meaning that each day tons of fecal matter ends up in the Guanabara Bay and surrounding beaches.

Still, while Ilha Grande doesn't have a sewage problem, it's far from an environmental paradise. For example, amid a deep economic crisis in the country, the island has struggled with garbage collection.

Earlier this year, the island

captured national headlines when hundreds of bags of garbage were strewn throughout Vila do Abraao. The local government switched garbage providers and has promised to regularize service. Still, the problem periodically pops up, irking islanders and creating eyesores. When we visited in February, crabs could be seen among the garbage.

There are also worries about overdevelopment. Much of the island is protected wildland, but Brazil has a history of big money interests winning out against environmental protections. Last year, the environmental secretary of the state government invited Ilha Grande residents to present ideas about the future, from development projects to environmental issues. While billed as a way to build consensus, many residents were suspicious that it was really just a precursor to ramming through big changes.

As the island opens up, its industries and demographics are changing. While fishing is still a central industry for many residents, increasingly fishing and crab boats are used to ferry around tourists. And some tourists like it so much that they are finding ways to stay.

"Now there are Argentines, Brazilians from other states and hippies living here," said Selma dos Santos Garcia, a 34-year-old Ilha Grande native who sells snacks on the beaches. "And we are at the mercy of tourists."