

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

By The Culinary Institute of America

Steamed pork buns are popping up on menus across the country, and it's no wonder. With their pillowy 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 the 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,



Phil Mansfield/The Culinary Institute of America via AP

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 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.

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Pork Belly Steamed Buns

Servings: 12

Start to finish: 4 hours (1 hour active)

- 1/2 cup light soy sauce
- 1/2 cup dark soy sauce (see note)
- 1/4 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
- 1/4 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 two 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 1/2 cups). Bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Reduce to a gentle simmer and cover with a tight-fitting lid. Simmer for one hour.

Preheat the oven to 350° Fahrenheit. Remove the pork from the heat and set aside to cool slightly. Transfer it to a cutting board and slice into 12 even slices, about 1/4 inch by three 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 one hour.

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 two 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 four 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 labelled as "light." Dark soy sauce might also be labelled as "thick."

Cucumber Salad

Servings: 12

- 1 English cucumber, halved and thinly sliced
- 1 carrot, julienned or shredded
- 1/4 red onion, thinly sliced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons rice vinegar
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon sesame seeds

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 one hour, or up to overnight.

Nutrition information per serving of the pork buns: 556 calories (378 calories from fat); 42 g fat (15 g saturated, 0 g trans fats); 54 mg cholesterol; 1,486 mg sodium; 29 g carbohydrate; 1 g fiber; 9 g sugar; 14 g protein.

Nutrition information per serving of the cucumber salad: 9 calories (1 calorie 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.

COMMUNITY CALENDAR

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INDEPENDENCE DAY FIREWORKS.

"A Capitol Fourth," a show featuring the nation's most spectacular fireworks display broadcast from the West Lawn of the United States Capitol, celebrates America's 241st birthday. The telecast airs twice on July 4, at 8:00pm and 9:30pm. (Photo/John Baggaley, courtesy of the Public Broadcasting Service)

"Big Pacific"

July 19, 8-9pm; repeats July 21, 1-2am; Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB). Watch "Behind the Scenes," the final episode of "Big Pacific," a five-part series about the Pacific Ocean. To verify showtimes, call (503) 293-1982 or visit <www.opb.org>. To view past episodes, visit <www.pbs.org/program/big-pacific>.

Scholastic Summer Reading Road Trip

July 22, 10am, Third Place Books (17171 Bothell Way NE, Lake Forest Park, Wash.). Attend the Scholastic Summer Reading Road Trip, a mobile reading festival aimed at families with children age 12 and younger. The event features crafts, activities, giveaways, costume character appearances, and author/illustrator signings, including a special appearance by Kazu Kibuishi of the Amulet series. For info, call (206) 366-3333 or visit <www.thirdplacebooks.com>.

Community Care Festival

July 22, 11am-3pm, Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (10301 NE Glisan St, Portland). Attend the annual Community Care Festival, a free, family-friendly event that features arts and food from various cultures; social services and public resources; information about neighborhood organizations; blood-pressure screenings, lead testing, and vision exams; activities for youth; entertainment; and more. For info, call (503) 234-1541 or visit <www.communitycarefestivals.net>.

Globe Trekker

July 22, 8-9pm; repeats July 24, midnight-1am; Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB). Watch "Myanmar," an episode of Globe Trekker in which host Megan McCormick explores the previously closed-off country, including Inle Lake, Shan Palace, Ngapali Beach, the golden Mahamuni Buddha, and Shwedagon Pagoda — the most revered Buddhist temple in Myanmar. To verify showtimes, call (503) 293-1982 or visit <www.opb.org>.

Sunday Parkways: Northeast Portland

July 23, 11am-4pm, Woodlawn, Alberta, Fernhill, and Kunamokwst Parks (Northeast Portland). Walk and bike through northeast Portland neighborhoods and parks without motor traffic during a Sunday Parkways event. Entertainment and activities take place in the parks and along the eight-mile, two-way route, which has no start or finish. For info, call (503) 823-7599 or visit <www.portlandsundayparkways.org>.

Zaher Wahab talk

July 26, 7pm, Multnomah Friends Meetinghouse (4312 SE Stark St, Portland). Attend a talk by Dr. Zaher Wahab, who is the current director of graduate studies at the Center for Teaching and Learning at American University of Afghanistan. Wahab — a native of Afghanistan — presents a critical analysis of the political, military, economic, and cultural situation in the war-torn country. For info, call (503) 274-2720 or visit <www.oregonpsr.org>.

