

Introducing Thai Pork Lettuce Wraps

Making this light but bold-flavored Thai specialty isn't a matter of rounding up a lot of exotic ingredients. The problem is as familiar as it gets: ensuring tender, juicy pork.

≧ BY KEITH DRESSER ≦

As much as I like ordering a rich, spicy curry when I'm in a Thai restaurant, sometimes I long for the same complexity of flavor in a lighter incarnation. That's when I order a salad of boldly flavored minced pork (or sometimes beef or chicken) known as *larb*. Served slightly warm or at room temperature, this Thai classic is made with finely chopped, cooked meat tossed with fresh herbs and a light dressing that embodies the cuisine's signature balance of sweet, sour, hot, and salty flavors. My favorite way to eat the moist, tangy pork is to scoop it up with lettuce leaves.

When I reviewed a few recipes for the dish, I discovered it has yet another thing going for it: This pungently flavored, light meal is not only incredibly simple to make, it also calls for ingredients I could easily find in the supermarket. Along with the ground pork, shallots, and limes, it takes the salty, fermented Asian condiment known as fish sauce, which these days is found in grocery stores everywhere. Even the raw rice that's toasted, ground, and sprinkled over the dish wouldn't be hard to replicate. As for the palm sugar and Thai bird chiles that are occasionally listed, I was confident that my pantry could provide worthy substitutes.

It's a Grind

Nearly every recipe I found, whether in traditional Thai cookbooks or aimed at an American audience, treats the meat in a similar way: It's cooked briefly in a large pot of boiling water, then drained, cooled, and tossed with a dressing made from lime juice, fish sauce, chiles, mint, cilantro, shallots, and some form of sugar. The difference is that traditional recipes call for hand-chopping pieces of pork (usually from the rib), while those aimed at American cooks typically call for supermarket ground pork.

How does preground pork from the meat section affect the recipe? Not positively, I soon found out. The meat was sometimes grainy and dry, sometimes greasy; rarely was it tender, flavorful, and juicy. It didn't matter what brand of pork I used or where I bought it; the results



We like the fresh crispness of a lettuce wrap, but this pork can also be served on its own with rice.

is never listed and, judging from my testing, seems to vary from package to package. Conversations with supermarket butchers confirmed that most grind whatever scraps are on hand—making ground pork akin to packaged stew meat, where any number of different cuts may be included.

To get a consistent result, I would have to chop the meat myself. In Thailand, cooks mince meat using two cleavers. In my kitchen, a food processor would do just fine. I bought the most commonly available boneless pieces of pork—tenderloin, boneless rib chops, and boneless country-style ribs—cleaned them of visible fat, put them in the freezer long enough for them to harden around the edges (so they would process more uniformly), chopped them coarsely in the food processor, and made a batch of the recipe from each sample. Tasters unanimously favored the ground tenderloin for being the leanest and most tender. Though tenderloin is a slightly less flavorful cut than chops and ribs, once the other ingredients were added, this didn't matter much. What did matter was dryness—a problem tasters had with even the fattiest cuts of pork.

were equally inconsistent. Closer inspection of the raw meat in samplings from different packages helped explain why: Some were ground almost to a paste; others had visible chunks of meat and fat. Furthermore, unlike ground beef, the fat percentage in ground pork

Main Squeeze

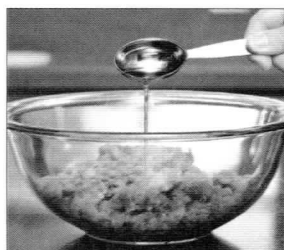
How can meat cooked in liquid turn out dry? The problem is that when pork is heated above 165 degrees, its protein fibers shrink, wringing out liquid like a wet towel and making the meat chewy and dry,

AT-A-GLANCE | KEYS TO TENDER, FLAVORFUL PORK



GRIND YOUR OWN

Supermarket ground pork is fatty and grainy when cooked. Grinding lean pork tenderloin ensures the best texture.



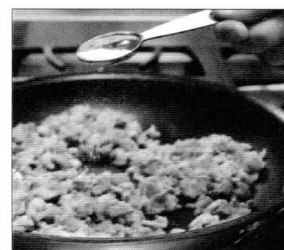
SOAK IN FISH SAUCE

Marinating the pork in fish sauce for 15 minutes boosts flavor and helps the meat retain moisture and tenderness.



COOK IN BROTH

Cooking the pork in ¼ cup of broth, instead of a whole pot of water, adds flavor and keeps the meat from expelling moisture.



ADD RICE POWDER

Sprinkling toasted rice powder into the pork contributes nutty flavor and adds body.

even if it's surrounded by broth or water. Water is an excellent conductor of heat (even better than the air in an oven), so that pork cooked in boiling water quickly rises above the crucial 165-degree mark. And any flavor that leaches into the boiling water eventually gets dumped down the drain.

Many of our pork recipes, whether for stir-fries or grilled chops, call for marinating the meat in a salty liquid (either soy sauce or a saltwater brine) before cooking. This precooking soak alters the structure of the meat, allowing it to retain more moisture. I didn't want to add soy sauce or a brine to my recipe, but since I was already using salty fish sauce in the dressing, I tried adding a tablespoon to the chopped meat. For ground meat, just 15 minutes was sufficient for the sauce to penetrate the pork, adding depth of flavor without tasting fishy. Now the meat was more moist and tender, but could I do even better?

I tried stir-frying. It helped the meat cook evenly (provided I stirred constantly) but required me to add oil to the pan, making the final salad a little greasy—exactly what I was trying to avoid by using tenderloin—and detracting from the lightness that defines the dish. Next, I tried cooking the pork with much less water—just 1 cup. When I added the cold pork to this smaller volume of hot water, its temperature dropped enough to allow the pork to cook much more gently. I cooked it just until its pink color faded, keeping its overall temperature below 165 degrees, and the results were even better, tender and juicy. This inspired me to try reducing the liquid even more. Using a mere ¼ cup and exchanging the water for flavorful chicken broth killed two birds with one stone: This pork was perfectly cooked and the most flavorful yet.

“Thai-ing” Up the Flavors

With the cooking method set, my next task was refining the flavors. Fish sauce is essential in Thai cuisine, much like soy sauce in Chinese cuisine. Although many traditional recipes call for equal amounts of fish sauce and lime juice, my tasters preferred a ratio of 3 tablespoons of lime juice to 2½ tablespoons of the salty stuff. As for heat, this salad should have only a hint. Dried chiles are nearly as common in traditional recipes as fresh chiles. While the two don't taste the same, in such small doses only the heat comes through anyway. I found that ¼ teaspoon was the perfect amount. Finally, Thai food invariably has some sweetener to balance the tart, salty, and hot flavors. The most traditional choice is palm sugar. Since white sugar is often used even in Thailand, I went for that.

As for the aromatic components, recipes varied. Many simply added a handful of familiar fresh herbs like cilantro and mint; others used harder-to-find ingredients like galangal, lemon grass, and kaffir lime leaves. In due diligence, I took a trip to several Asian markets to round up these items. The salads made with them were good, but they didn't justify the extra trouble. The slight pungency of thinly sliced shallots and the bright flavor of roughly chopped mint and cilantro yielded a very flavorful salad without a trip to a specialty store.

I also had to address *kao kua*, which is an integral but less familiar element of this dish: the raw rice toasted until golden brown, ground in a mortar and pestle, and sprinkled over the meat. Tasters found just a tablespoon of toasted, ground white rice (any size grain will do) made for a good hit of nutty flavor and subtly pleasing textural contrast. Some cooks claim this rice also helps absorb excess moisture from the meat, but I didn't find this to be true. I did find that if I sprinkled a teaspoon of toasted rice over the cooked pork, it blended with the juices released by the meat and added satisfying body to the dressing.

The lettuce cups were my final consideration. Although most any lettuce leaves could be used to eat the pork, I prefer the crisp spine, tender leaf, and mild taste of Bibb lettuce. It's a perfect complement to this full-flavored salad.

THAI PORK LETTUCE WRAPS

SERVES 6 AS AN APPETIZER OR 4 AS A MAIN COURSE

NOTE: We prefer natural pork in this recipe. If using enhanced pork, skip the marinating in step 2 and reduce the amount of fish sauce to 2 tablespoons, adding it all in step 5. Don't skip the toasted rice; it's integral to the texture and flavor of the dish. Any style of white rice can be used. Toasted rice powder (*kao kua*) can also be found in many Asian markets. This dish can be served with sticky rice and steamed vegetables as an entrée. To save time, prepare the other ingredients while the pork is in the freezer.

- 1 pork tenderloin (about 1 pound), trimmed of silver skin and fat, cut into 1-inch chunks (see note)
- 2½ tablespoons fish sauce
- 1 tablespoon white rice (see note)
- ¼ cup low-sodium chicken broth
- 2 medium shallots, peeled and sliced into thin rings (about ½ cup)
- 3 tablespoons juice from 2 limes
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 3 tablespoons roughly chopped fresh mint leaves
- 3 tablespoons roughly chopped fresh cilantro leaves
- 1 head Bibb lettuce, washed and dried, leaves separated and left whole

1. Place pork chunks on large plate in single layer. Freeze meat until firm and starting to harden around edges but still pliable, 15 to 20 minutes.

2. Place half of meat in food processor and pulse until coarsely chopped, 5 to six 1-second pulses. Transfer ground meat to medium bowl and repeat with remaining chunks. Stir 1 tablespoon fish sauce into ground meat and marinate, refrigerated, 15 minutes.

3. Heat rice in small skillet over medium-high heat; cook, stirring constantly, until deep golden brown, about 5 minutes. Transfer to small bowl and cool 5 minutes. Grind rice with spice grinder, mini food processor, or mortar and pestle until it resembles fine meal, 10 to 30 seconds (you should have about 1 tablespoon rice powder).

EQUIPMENT TESTING

Mortars and Pestles

When it comes to crushing or grinding small amounts of food, many chefs swear by a mortar and pestle. We tested large and small models made of various materials like porcelain, marble, cast iron, granite, and ceramic, grinding a tablespoon of toasted rice as called for in our Thai Pork Lettuce Wraps as well as crushing whole peppercorns and tapioca. Smaller models (with a capacity of less than 1 cup) required so many strokes that our wrists got sore. Larger models with longer, heavier pestles performed the same tasks with much less time and effort, especially if the bowl had a rough interior to keep food from sliding around. Our favorite, a large, rough cast-iron model, crushed the competition. For complete testing results, go to www.cooksillustrated.com/oct09.

—Meredith Butcher

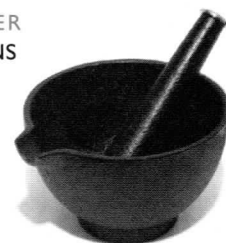
WEIGHTY WINNER FOX RUN KITCHENS

Iron Mortar and Pestle

Price: \$29.99

Comments: The

mortar's rough interior provided traction to keep food in place for easier grinding, while the big, heavyweight pestle crushed effortlessly.



SMOOTH NONSTARTER

AMCO Mortar and Pestle

Price: \$19.45

Comments: The smooth surface of this small, bottom-ranked mortar made it hard to break down ingredients, and the tapered pestle dug into our palms.



4. Bring broth to simmer in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat. Add pork and cook stirring frequently, until about half of pork is no longer pink, about 2 minutes. Sprinkle 1 teaspoon rice powder over pork; continue to cook, stirring constantly, until remaining pork is no longer pink, 1 to 1½ minutes longer. Transfer pork to large bowl let cool 10 minutes.

5. Add remaining 1½ tablespoons fish sauce remaining 2 teaspoons rice powder, shallots, lime juice, sugar, red pepper flakes, mint, and cilantro to pork; toss to combine. Serve with lettuce leaves.

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HOW TO MAKE

- Thai Pork Lettuce Wraps

VIDEO TIPS

- How do I use a mortar and pestle?
- What's the best way to store lettuce?