

Lion's Head Meatballs

Don't let their ferocious name intimidate you. These giant, savory, tender-yet-springy pork meatballs from eastern China are pure comfort food.

BY ANNIE PETITO

The meatballs I loved growing up were my grandmother's: a pleasingly coarse but tender mix of beef, pork, and veal that she seasoned boldly with Parmesan and herbs, browned, and then simmered in a bright-red sauce.

Chinese lion's head meatballs are very different. For one thing, they're made entirely from pork and seasoned only subtly with aromatics such as scallions, ginger, and white pepper, as well as modest amounts of Shaoxing wine and usually soy sauce—choices that enhance (rather than detract from) their porky, umami-rich profile.

To me, the dish is the Chinese equivalent of matzo ball soup: simple, soothing, and deeply savory.

But what really makes them stand apart from other meatballs is their size and texture: They're as big as tennis balls and boast a seemingly paradoxical combination of spoon-tenderness and sausage-like spring and juiciness. (Read on and I'll explain the two-part method for achieving their texture.)

To color the meatballs' exteriors and make them more savory, cooks often brown the meatballs before slowly braising them in clean-tasting chicken broth on a bed of napa cabbage leaves. The meatballs are typically served with the softened greens, rice noodles and/or steamed white rice, and a ladle's worth of the broth in which they cooked. The large spheres fringed with the leafy greens are said to look like a lion's mane, hence the name.



Served with softened cabbage, rice noodles, and the broth in which they cook, these unctuous meatballs make a complete meal.

They taste milder than most meatballs I've had and also mild in comparison to the intense flavors common to foods in other regions of China. But according to food journalist and Chinese cookbook author Fuchsia Dunlop, this mildness reflects the dish's origins. Lion's head meatballs are emblematic of the

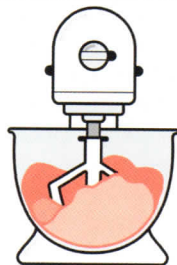
cuisine of Jiangnan, which is known for its gentleness, or *qing dan*—a term meaning “light” to convey the food's simple, unadulterated quality. To me, the dish is the Chinese equivalent of matzo ball soup: simple, soothing, and deeply savory.

The Impossible Meatball (and How to Achieve Its Unique Texture)

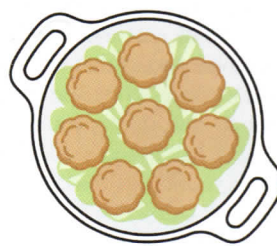
The resilient yet ultratender texture of lion's head meatballs is the result of a two-part technique.

1. Thoroughly manipulate the meat. This causes its sticky myosin proteins to link up into a tight network that traps moisture and fat so that the meat cooks up springy and juicy, like sausage. Traditional recipes call for stirring and slapping the meat against the mixing bowl; we expedite the process by beating the pork in a stand mixer.

2. Cook the meatballs gently. We braise ours for 1½ hours in a relatively low oven to allow the meat's collagen to break down as much as possible.



VIGOROUS MIXING
Develops springiness



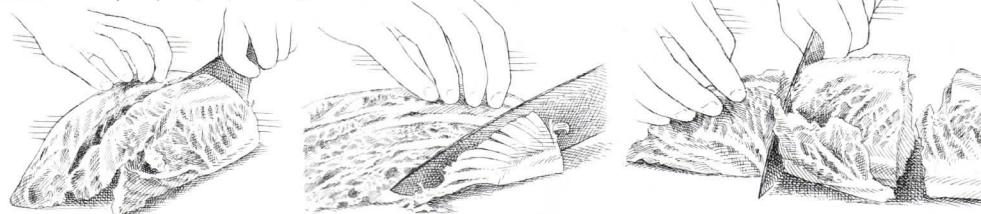
GENTLE COOKING
Tenderizes

Mix It Up

Cooks traditionally start by hand-mincing some form of fatty pork—most often belly, though some recipes call for shoulder or butt—with the aforementioned seasonings and maybe an egg. But many contemporary recipes streamline things by calling for ground pork, so I seasoned 2 pounds of ground pork with salt and a couple of tablespoons of soy sauce, which enhanced the pork's flavor without adding too much liquid. I also added a bit of sugar, Shaoxing wine, white pepper, minced scallion whites (cooks often reserve the darker greens for garnishing), and grated fresh ginger. I added an egg to give the meatballs some structure before moving on to the first unique element of the meatball-making process: the mixing method.

TECHNIQUE | HOW TO CUT NAPA CABBAGE

Here's an easy way to prep the large leaves.



QUARTER cabbage lengthwise. **REMOVE** core from each piece. **CUT** crosswise into 2-inch pieces.

Many recipes, including Dunlop's, call for working the meat vigorously by stirring and/or slapping it against the side of the mixing bowl. The effect is similar to sausage making, where thoroughly kneading the meat causes its sticky myosin proteins to cross-link and bind together into a strong network that makes the meat cohesive, fine-textured, and springy. It also helps trap moisture and fat for juicy meatballs.

We've achieved that sausage-like spring in other recipes by beating ground meat in a stand mixer, so I made a batch of meatballs using the machine and another using the traditional approach to see how each affected the texture. As a point of comparison, I also mixed a batch gently by hand, as I would Italian meatballs. I formed each mixture into balls with my wet hands (to prevent the meat from sticking to me) and then set them aside (skipping browning) while I laid a single layer of napa cabbage leaves in a few Dutch ovens, added a quart of chicken broth to each pot, and brought the broth to a boil. I carefully arranged the meatballs on the leaves, covered the pots, and braised the meatballs in a 325-degree oven for 2 hours (the ambient heat would cook the meatballs gently with minimal attention).

As expected, the hand-mixed meatballs were tender, coarse, and a tad dry (because the myosin hadn't gelled as much, they hadn't trapped much moisture). Meanwhile, the meatballs made in the stand mixer were just as smooth, springy, and juicy as those made the traditional way, confirming that the mixer was a great option. But I took that sausage-y effect one step further by adding baking soda to the meat, knowing that the alkalinity would help the proteins dissolve and create a smoother, more cohesive mixture.

The baking soda treatment came with one other perk: It raised the pH of the meat so that the meat retained more moisture during cooking and cooked up more tender. In fact, the baking soda was so effective that I could cut the braising time down to 1½ hours and produce meatballs that were every bit as tender and juicy as the 2-hour batch. But I couldn't shorten the cooking time more than that: Ground pork typically comes from a tough cut such as shoulder or butt, so even though it's ground into tiny pieces, its collagen still requires a lengthy exposure to moist heat to properly break down and tenderize.

The King of Meatballs

Chinese lion's head meatballs dwarf both the small Swedish and midsize Italian styles, but what makes them truly unique is their seemingly paradoxical texture: springy and juicy like well-made sausage but also smooth and ultratender.



LION'S HEAD
Springy, smooth, and tender



ITALIAN
Coarse and tender



SWEDISH
Springy and smooth

A Timing Solution

What wasn't great was the cabbage, which had turned to mush during braising. The whole leaves were also hard to eat, so I cut them into pieces and added them to the dish 30 minutes before the meatballs were done cooking. To do so, I transferred the parcooked meatballs from the broth to a plate, added the leaves, and then nestled the meatballs on top of them. When returning the meatballs to the pot, I took the opportunity to flip them so the side sitting above the broth could moisten and the other side could color—no separate browning step necessary.

While the pot was in the oven, I softened some rice vermicelli in just-boiled water off the heat until the noodles were fully tender. I rinsed them under cold water to remove excess starch, drained them, and portioned them into soup bowls. Then came the meatballs, cabbage, broth, and a handful of thinly sliced scallion greens—as well as a clean, savory aroma and a feeling of comfort-food satisfaction that rivaled (well, almost rivaled) the way I felt about my grandmother's meatballs.

LION'S HEAD MEATBALLS (SHIZI TOU)

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 2 HOURS

Fully cooked ground pork can retain a slightly pink hue. Don't be concerned if the meatballs develop cracks while cooking. Shaoxing is a Chinese rice wine that can be found at Asian markets. If you can't find it, use dry sherry.

- ¾ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 2 pounds ground pork
- 1 large egg, lightly beaten
- 2 scallions, white parts minced, green parts sliced thin
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 2 tablespoons Shaoxing wine or dry sherry
- 4 teaspoons sugar
- 2 teaspoons grated fresh ginger
- ½ teaspoon white pepper
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 1 small head napa cabbage (1½ pounds), quartered lengthwise, cored, and cut crosswise into 2-inch pieces
- 4 ounces rice vermicelli

1. Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Whisk baking soda, salt, and 2 tablespoons water together in bowl of stand mixer. Add pork to baking soda mixture and toss to combine. Add egg, scallion whites, soy sauce, wine, sugar, ginger, and white pepper. Fit stand mixer with paddle and beat on medium speed until mixture is well combined and has stiffened and started to pull away from sides of bowl and pork has slightly lightened in color, 45 to 60 seconds. Using your wet hands, form about ½ cup (4½ ounces) pork mixture into 3-inch round meatball; repeat with remaining mixture to form 8 meatballs.

2. Bring broth to boil in large Dutch oven over high heat. Off heat, carefully arrange meatballs in pot (7 around perimeter and 1 in center; meatballs will not be totally submerged). Cover pot, transfer to oven, and cook for 1 hour.

3. Transfer meatballs to large plate. Add cabbage to pot in even layer and arrange meatballs over cabbage, paler side up. Cover, return pot to oven, and continue to cook until meatballs are lightly browned and cabbage is softened, about 30 minutes longer.

4. While meatballs and cabbage cook, bring 4 quarts water to boil in large pot. Off heat, add vermicelli and let sit, stirring occasionally, until vermicelli is fully tender, 10 to 15 minutes. Drain, rinse with cold water, drain again, and distribute evenly among 4 to 6 large soup bowls.

5. Ladle meatballs, cabbage, and broth into bowls of noodles. Sprinkle with scallion greens and serve.

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