

Pounded delicacy

Brute force is key to making Chaozhou dumplings with minced and tenderized meat, fish balls and spices



These beef balls are made from the pounding magic. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

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Fish wontons are fascinating. They look like dumplings and smell like dumplings, but when you bite into them, the texture is chewy and bouncy, and they taste nothing like the usual soft flour wrappers.

That is understandable, because the translucent skins are made with fish meat, not flour.

Fish dumplings, shaped into little bundles, are the specialty of the fishing communities in southern China. The Chaozhou cooks do them the best.

Lots of fish meat is pounded together with dustings of tapioca starch until it becomes a pliable dough. Then it is rolled out into sheets, as thin as possible. These get cut down to size, and a nugget of meat flavored with toasted flatfish gets wrapped in the center.

As a child growing up, I loved noodles served with bouncy fresh fish balls and slightly chewy fish wontons. I would often save the dumpling till last and then reverently pop it into my mouth, slowly chewing it so it would last longer.

My grandfather would watch me eat, and he would scoop up another dumpling from his own bowl and plop it on my plate.

He would be eating a bowl of swallow-skinned dumplings, or *yanpi*.

He told me these dumplings were

all pork, including the skin.

That sounded even more incredible than the Chaozhou fish dumplings, but it was all true.

Yanpi is a Fujian specialty, and I am not sure who borrowed the idea from whom — since Chaozhou (a region in South China's Guangdong province) and East China's Fujian province are such close neighbors.

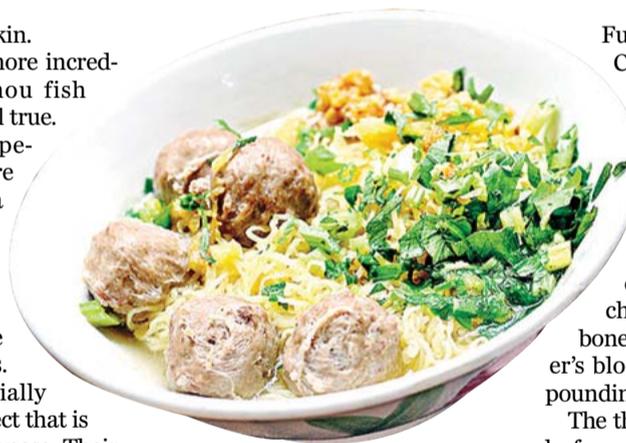
The Chaozhou, officially Cantonese, speak a dialect that is much closer to the Fujianese. Their cooking style, too, is very much similar, with an emphasis on seafood and freshness.

The Fujianese *yanpi* is made by pounding trimmed lean pork into a paste. It is a hard task that requires muscles and rhythm. The pork starts as a whole piece on the chopping board, and after 45 minutes of rhythmic pounding with two metal batons, the meat is reduced to a smooth paste.

The paste is then upturned onto a surface generously coated with sweet potato flour. The chef then shapes the meat into a dough. Next, he rolls it out paper-thin, and the sheets are hung up to dry.

Yanpi is so versatile after drying that it turns into a pantry basic that can be safely stored for some time.

The thin sheets are used as dumpling wrappers for a pork-in-pork treat, or cut up like noodles and served in soup.



Noodles served with meatballs.

Unlike the Chaozhou fish dumplings that have a lot more body and celebrate the taste of fish, *yanpi* does not taste of pork.

Instead, the flavor of the meat fades into the background and the texture takes over — a nice, crisp texture that is full of mouthfeel.

A *yanpi* dumpling becomes almost transparent, and most chefs will allow a generous amount of skin per dumpling, so the wrapper spreads out in the soup like a swallow's tail. It is also so diners can enjoy the feel of the *yanpi* — a diaphanous crunch that skates over the palate.

That tactile appeal is why *yanpi* is often cut up into strands and cooked in soup, a main attraction in itself.

This pounding magic is widely used as a preparation method in the coastal region.

Fuzhou stuffed meatballs, Chaozhou beef and tendon balls are all similar products made from meat that have been thoroughly pounded. Brute force works for once.

The Chaozhou beef balls are prepared fresh daily, and the strongman chefs will carefully lay out a boned cow hind leg on the butcher's blocks before beginning their pounding each market day.

The thoroughly mashed meat will be formed into balls and dropped into a boiling pot. Once cooked and floating, the balls are ready for market.

There are also special beef meatballs filled with a liquid center of minced meat and juices that will spurt at first bite. But be careful. They can be scaldingly hot.

Over in Fuzhou again, fish and meat are combined in a similar way. Minced meat and spices make a filling for fish balls made by mincing and pounding fish to a smooth paste.

Fuzhou, as the capital of Fujian, is proud of its mixed influences of Fujianese and Hakka heritages. The delicious meat-in-fish Fuzhou fish balls are a classic example of the Hakka style of cooking with local ingredients.

Yanpi, the wrappers made from pork, are available online direct from the source. With modern logistics, even the Fuzhou fish balls and Chaozhou beef balls can be frozen and sent across the country.

Recipes

Chaozhou beef ball soup

- 12 Chaozhou beef balls
- 12 tendon meatballs
- 12 fish balls
- 2 stalks of lettuce
- 2 liters of chicken or beef stock
- 2 tablespoons of *dongcai* (Tianjin pickled vegetables)
- 2 tablespoons finely diced garlic
- A few bunches of glass noodles, soaked

Heat up some oil in a wok and gently fry the chopped garlic till golden brown. Scoop up the garlic and oil.

In the same wok, fry the *dongcai* till slightly fragrant and add the chicken or beef stock. Bring to a boil, and add the meatballs. Cook them till they float.

Remove the beef and fish balls, and blanch the lettuce quickly. Bring the soup back to a boil.

In a separate pot of boiling water, cook the glass noodles. Divide into individual bowls and add the blanched lettuce and meatballs.

Ladle over the hot soup, add some golden garlic and a drizzle of garlic oil. Garnish with coriander if desired.

You can add various mixtures of beef balls and seafood balls such as plain fish balls, Fuzhou stuffed fish balls, squid balls or prawn balls. The basic stock remains the same.

Depending on your level of savoriness, add more or less of the pickled *dongcai*. It is salty, but it is what gives the Chaozhou soups their unique flavor.

Of course, you can always try making your own stock from chicken carcasses and pork marrow bones.

Chaozhou beef balls

- 1 kg of lean beef
- 1 cup of tapioca starch (sweet potato starch)
- 1 tablespoon of salt dissolved in 1 cup of warm water

Trim the piece of beef and cut and remove any visible vein or membrane. This is important to get the right texture.

Start to pound the meat, breaking up the connective tissues. Keep pounding until the meat becomes a paste, sprinkling salted water on it as it starts to disintegrate.

Alternate tapioca starch and water to start forming the paste. Test with your finger to see if the meat has broken down completely.

Prepare a boiling pot of water and drop little balls of the meat mixture into the pot to cook.