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It has to be layered in the right proportions, with a thin gelatinous skin topping alternating strata of lean meat and fat, each melting into the other but still clearly separate.

The best belly pork has at least three clear layers of fat and meat, and chefs would delight in meat with five distinct layers, evenly distributed, with the perfect ratio of lean meat to fat.

Properly prepared, it melts in the mouth, the fat dissolving on the palate, rich but not greasy — *you'er buni*. That is the pinnacle for a piece of pork belly, arguably the best cut of the pig to a Chinese chef.

It is indeed a universal favorite in China from the cold frigid northern lands to the temperate regions of the south.

You cannot talk about pork belly without mentioning Su Dongpo, the Song Dynasty poet and court official who steadily ate his way to gourmet sainthood despite his mixed fortunes as a district administrator in the Imperial court.

He was exiled several times and assigned to then remote places such as South China's Hainan Island, and Hangzhou, the capital of East China's Zhejiang province. Wherever he went, however, he endeared himself to his subjects by eating and drinking with them.

He built the famous causeway across the picturesque West Lake as an irrigation aid, and his name is on it to this day. But it is for his famous pork belly invention that he is most remembered.

Dongporou is a square of belly pork braised in soy sauce and sweet yellow wine until it is chopstick-tender.

Folk legend has it that the people were grateful because Su Dongpo had once again contained the annual floods. The farmers slaughtered pigs in celebration and they reserved the best cuts for their governor.

He loved a good drink, so they gifted him with flasks of the best yellow wine as well.

Su Dongpo woke up the next day to find his doorstep covered with slabs of belly pork, and urns of wine. There was so much food that he could not possibly finish, so he had to think of ways to preserve them.

He told his wife to cook the slabs of pork in soy sauce and yellow wine, seasoning them with the classic pairing of ginger and scallions. To hold the shape of the pork, his wife tied the squares with rice straws, which in turn gave the meats a slight grassy perfume.

The result was such delicious decadence that he invited everyone back for a feast, and soon, all were singing the praises of this newly created Dongpo Pork.

This is the tale that goes with the dish even now in the restaurants of Hangzhou, and though the details and the recipe may vary a little with each generation of chefs, the romance of its invention remains.

A square meal of pork belly

This sumptuous dish is a favorite in China, from the frigid northern lands to the temperate south



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Braised pork belly

Grandma's *Tauyu Bak* (Braised pork belly)

- 1 kg pork belly
- 500 ml light soy sauce
- 200 ml dark soy sauce
- 200 ml water
- 100g rock sugar
- 1 stick cinnamon, 2 star anise pods, 10 cloves (Placed in a muslin bag)
- Salt to taste

Scrub the skin of the pork belly very clean. Scrape it with a sharp knife to remove any stray hairs. Blanch the meat with boiling water and rinse. Cut into large pieces.

Place the soy sauces and water into a deep pot, add the spice bag and bring to a boil.

Crush the rock sugar.

Heat up a frying pan on high and sear the pork belly. Add the

rock sugar and fry till the sugar melts and the caramel coats the meat. Pour off the rendered oil, and add the meat to the boiling sauce.

Bring to a boil again, then immediately lower to a simmer until the meat is just tender.

You may add hard-boiled eggs and blanched tofu puffs at this stage. The braised meat always tastes better overnight.

The mighty pork belly manifests itself in yet another classic Chinese dish, *kourou*, or inverted pork belly braised with taro.

This dish has Hakka origins, and

traveled all over China with the "guest people" who left the Central Plains many centuries ago and led an itinerant life before they finally settled in modern day provinces of

Fujian in the east, Guangdong in the south and Sichuan in the southwest, and Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region in the south.

They brought this special pork

belly dish with them and it soon developed regional variations as the Hakka chefs adapted to local ingredients.

This is a dish that requires a complicated preparation that is hours long, and it is commonly served during all festivities ranging from housewarmings to births, deaths, weddings and major festivals on the calendar.

The best pork belly is scrupulously cleaned, marinated and then deep-fried until the skin blisters. The meat is then dunked into cold water to shock the skin into tenderness. The pork belly is then cut into the size of dominoes and sandwiched with slices of purple taro.

Meat and taro are then neatly tucked into a deep bowl, skin-side down. A secret marinade of soy sauce and spices is poured over and the whole bowl steamed over high heat for several hours.

When it comes time to serve, the bowl is inverted onto a plate so the tender pig skin is displayed, brown and gleaming with juices.

Again, the long cooking process would have rendered the oil, and the pork belly would be lusciously rich but not at all oily — *you'er buni*.

Banquet dishes aside, every Chinese kitchen has its favorite recipe of braised or roasted pork belly.

In classic Cantonese roast meats, roast pork is a staple, with slabs of crisp-skinned bellies hanging beside roast geese, sweet fillets of lean *cha-shao* and white-cooked chicken.

The secret is in the five-spice salt marinade and the laborious preparation of the skin, reminiscent of medieval torture instruments involving many needles. Of course, the chef's mastery of the open flames decides how succulent the roast pork will finally be, but the highlight of a piece of roast pork is always the skin.

For me, the best belly pork originated in my grandmother's kitchen. It was a homely braise redolent of cinnamon and cloves, and fragrant with the perfume of a good soy sauce.

The pork bellies were cut into smaller squares and they were accompanied by deep-fried tofu puffs and hard-boiled eggs tinted a chocolate brown by the sauces.

Every lunchtime, my platter of unpolished rice porridge would be accompanied by the stir-fried vegetable of the day, and the delicious nuggets of braised pork belly, and a hard-boiled egg.

My grandfather liked his pork belly really crisp, and nanny would fish out the nuggets and sear them in the frying pan. The fat would render and crisp and get really crunchy. My grandfather always shared his pork belly with me.

The Chinese pork belly has traveled far, both through time and distance. Western chefs discovered the braised meat about two decades ago, and some actually made a version of Dongpo Pork as their signature dish.

Those were the days when Asian fusion first mesmerized global gourmets. These days, however, you are more likely to find them in Hangzhou dining on the real thing.