



The
Sichuan

Home Kitchen

Recipes with love from

The Robot Book Club

The Sichuan Home Kitchen

Bold Flavors and Everyday Recipes from Southwestern China

The Robot Book Club

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Preface

This book, and The Robot Book Club, is an experiment large scale AI generation. Every page, from layout to images to copy, was generated with zero human review.

The authoring and publishing teams were implemented in the Kaya scripting language. They were given only the input: Sichuan Home Cooking.

This is the only page authored by a human: Hello there!

— Ted Benson

Prologue

The Sichuan home kitchen is not a museum piece, nor a sanitized stage for exotic performance. It is a living, breathing entity, an uncompromising sensory world. For a child growing up in the manicured calm of an American suburb, the true geography was often found not on any map, but behind the kitchen door. There, the sharp tang of *pao cai*, the numbing hum of *hua jiao*, the visceral thunderclap of a wok became a birthright.

This book is not about compromise or gentrification. Forget the glossy, airbrushed approximations. This is the unapologetic truth of a cuisine built on history, on necessity, and on the quiet authority of generations. It's for those who remember the authentic, searing comfort and seek to reclaim a culinary legacy before it fades into memory.

From the bubbling, ever-renewing "mother brine" that stands sentinel in your pantry—a direct, living link across continents—to the savage grace of a morning noodle bowl, built to wake the dead and shake off the suburban sleep, these are the anchors. This is the everyday rhythm: the swift, flavorful *jiachangcai* for weeknights, built on muscle memory and the deep umami of fermented bean paste. And when the weekend arrives, it's about bringing the joyous, boisterous spirit of the "fly restaurants" home, transforming a dining room into a

chile-fueled celebration. Later, when the chaos subsides, there's the quiet comfort of dough, of soothing broth, of hands that knead and shape not just food, but belonging.

These aren't just recipes. They are a language. A testament. A way to tell your children, and yourself, who you are, one searing, comforting, unforgettable bite at a time. No apologies. No compromises. Just the true taste of home, wherever your kitchen happens to be.



The Mother Brine: Pao Cai

The living, bubbling foundation of the Sichuan kitchen, demystified for the American pantry.

Every serious kitchen in Sichuan has a heartbeat, and it lives in a ceramic crock in the dark. The pao cai tan—the mother brine— isn't just a recipe. It's a living, breathing ecosystem, an heirloom of lactic magic fed by scraps of radish, cabbage, and time. It provides the acidic backbone that cuts through the numbing assault of chili oil and pork fat. You don't just make a brine; you raise it.

Moving that tradition into an American pantry doesn't mean compromising the soul of the thing. The mechanics are honest and simple: water, salt, aromatics, and patience. Once the mother is

awake, it provides. From lightning-fast overnight "shower pickles" to crisp, sour radishes that slap the palate awake, these are the indispensable, everyday sidekicks of the weeknight table. No pretense. Just the foundational funk of home.





Stir-Fried Minced Pork with Pickled Long Beans

烂肉豇豆
làn ròu jiāng dòu

IN THE LOCAL SICHUAN DIALECT, THEY CALL IT LAN ROU jiang dou—literally 'mushy meat' with pickled long beans. Don't let the humble name fool you. It actually refers to pork that's been aggressively wok-fried until it scatters into tiny, crispy, savory nuggets. This is the ultimate 'rice killer,' a dish born out of the humid summer months when appetites fade and grandmothers reach into the

RINSE OFF THE HARSH INDUSTRIAL BRINE, AND FINISH THE wok with a pinch of sugar. No extra salt. Just pure, unadulterated, deeply comforting homeland flavor.

INGREDIENTS

8 oz	ground pork	4 med	dried red chilies <i>snipped into small segments</i>
1 tbsp	Shaoxing cooking wine	4 small	garlic <i>finely minced</i>
1 tsp	light soy sauce	cloves	
1 tsp	cornstarch	1 tbsp	fresh ginger <i>finely minced</i>
4 tbsp	neutral cooking oil <i>divided</i>	2 med	scallions <i>white parts only, thinly sliced</i>
12 oz	pickled long beans <i>rinsed, dried thoroughly, and cut into 1/4-inch pieces</i>	1 tsp	dark soy sauce
1/2 tsp	whole Sichuan peppercorns	1/2 tsp	granulated sugar

PREPARATION

- **Tame the pickle.**

Open the pickled beans, rinse them under cold water to strip away the harsh industrial brine, and pat them aggressively dry with paper towels. Water is the enemy of the wok.

- **Marinate the pork.**

In a bowl, mix the ground pork, Shaoxing wine, light soy sauce, and cornstarch, finishing with 1 teaspoon of the oil to help the meat separate when it hits the heat.

INSTRUCTIONS

1 **Render and crisp the pork.**

Heat a wok or large skillet over high heat until smoking, add 2 tablespoons of oil, drop in the pork, and immediately smash it into the pan with the back of your spatula. Cook aggressively for 3 to 4 minutes until the pink is gone, the water evaporates, and the meat crisps into tiny, distinct crumbles in its own fat. Push it up the side of the wok.

2 **Bloom the aromatics.**

Add the remaining 1 tablespoon of oil to the center of the wok, then drop in the peppercorns and dried chilies for 10 seconds. Once the chilies darken, toss in the garlic, ginger, and scallions, stirring constantly for 15 seconds.

3 **Fry the beans.**

Crank the heat back to high, dump in the dry, chopped pickled beans, and stir-fry vigorously for 2 minutes to let the beans absorb the aromatic oils and rendered pork fat.

4 **The final toss.**

Bring the pork back to the center, drizzle the dark soy sauce around the edges, and add the sugar. Toss for 30 seconds. The sugar is the grandmother's trick—it does not make the dish sweet, it just wrestles the sharp lactic acid into a perfectly balanced, savory masterpiece. Serve immediately with a massive pile of steamed rice.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The golden rule of the brine.**

Do not add a single grain of salt to this dish. The pickled beans already carry the heavy salinity of the mother brine, and adding more will ruin the balance.

- **Cast iron works wonders.**

While a carbon-steel wok is canonical and imparts exceptional flavor, a standard American cast-iron skillet handles this brilliantly due to its heat retention, quickly evaporating the moisture from the pork to crisp it.



Yu Xiang Rou Si

鱼香肉丝
yú xiāng ròu sī

IF THERE'S ONE DISH THAT TESTS THE METTLE OF A SICHUAN home cook, it's Yu Xiang Rou Si. The name is a culinary ghost story—a nod to the way grandmothers used a heavy-handed, sweet-and-sour blend of pickled chilies, garlic, and ginger to mask the muddy flavor of river fish. When those same aromatics hit humble pork slivers, a legend was born. You won't find the heavy, cloying bean pastes of takeout joints here. A true home kitchen relies purely on crimson Pao Jiao pulled straight from the family pickle crock. Get your prep done early, because once the wok is hot, this perfectly balanced weeknight marvel takes exactly three minutes.

INGREDIENTS

10 oz	pork tenderloin <i>slightly frozen for easier slicing</i>	3 tbsp	Sichuan pickled red chilies <i>finely minced</i>
1 tbsp	Shaoxing cooking wine	1 tbsp	fresh ginger <i>finely minced</i>
1 tsp	light soy sauce	1 1/2	garlic <i>finely minced</i>
1/2 large	egg white	tbsp	
1 tbsp	cornstarch	3 med	scallions <i>separated into white and green parts, cut into 1-inch pieces</i>
1 tbsp	neutral cooking oil	5 tbsp	unsalted chicken broth
1/8 tsp	salt	4 tbsp	Chinkiang black vinegar
1/8 tsp	white pepper	3 tbsp	white sugar
1/2 cup	dried wood ear mushrooms <i>rehydrated in hot water for 30 minutes</i>	2 tbsp	light soy sauce
1/2 cup	bamboo shoots <i>canned, julienned, and rinsed well</i>	1 tbsp	cornstarch
		3 tbsp	neutral cooking oil

PREPARATION

- **Slice the ingredients into uniform matchsticks.**

Cut the pork, rehydrated wood ear mushrooms, and bamboo shoots into slivers roughly 1/8-inch thick and 2 inches long to ensure they cook evenly in a matter of seconds.

- **Velvet the pork to protect it from the high heat.**

Aggressively massage the salt, white pepper, Shaoxing wine, and 1 teaspoon of light soy sauce into the meat until entirely absorbed. Mix in the egg white and 1 tablespoon of cornstarch until tacky, then stir in 1 tablespoon of oil so the slivers won't stick together in the pan. Let it sit for 15 minutes.

- **Mix the Golden Sauce.**

Whisk the broth, black vinegar, sugar, 2 tablespoons of light soy sauce, and 1 tablespoon of cornstarch in a small bowl until the sugar dissolves. The 5-4-3-2-1 ratio is a bulletproof grandmother's mnemonic you'll use for the rest of your life.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1 **Pass the meat through the hot wok.**

Heat a wok or heavy skillet over high heat until wisps of smoke appear, add 3 tablespoons of oil, and rapidly toss the marinated pork for 60 seconds just until opaque. Remove the pork immediately, leaving the residual oil behind.

- 2 **Sizzle the mother brine.**

Drop the heat to medium and stir-fry the minced pickled chilies for 30 seconds. Watch as the oil miraculously turns a brilliant, fragrant red.

- 3 **Bloom the aromatics.**

Toss in the minced garlic, ginger, and scallion whites for 15 seconds until your kitchen smells undeniably like a Sichuan restaurant.

- 4 **Warm the vegetables.**

Crank the heat back to screaming high, add the wood ear mushrooms and bamboo shoots, and stir-fry for 30 seconds.

- 5 **Glaze the dish.**

Return the pork to the wok, give your reserved Golden Sauce a quick stir, and pour it around the hot edges of the pan so it immediately bubbles and thickens.

1 Finish and serve.

Toss furiously for 15 seconds until everything is draped in a glossy, clinging glaze, fold in the scallion greens, and slide onto a platter.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Substituting authentic pickled chilies.**

If you cannot source traditional Sichuan Pao Jiao or Lao Gan Ma Pickled Red Chilies at your local Asian market, substitute 2 tablespoons of Sambal Oelek mixed with 1 teaspoon of white vinegar.

- **Omitting Doubanjiang is a deliberate choice.**

Modern recipes often rely on fermented broad bean paste, but classic grandmother-era preparations omit it entirely to allow the pure, delicate sweet-sour-spicy balance to shine.



The 7:30 AM Awakening: Sichuan Breakfasts

High-impact, fast-assembly savory morning meals designed to wake up the senses.

There is no gentle easing into the day in Chengdu. Morning arrives with a slap to the senses—the sharp, metallic tang of roasted chilies and the deep hum of toasted peppercorns cutting through the damp air. This chapter brings that unapologetic wake-up call to the sterile quiet of an American suburb. It is an arsenal of high-

impact, fiercely savory breakfasts engineered for the rush of a Tuesday morning, relying on smart weekend prep to bridge the gap between the street stalls of home and the bleary-eyed school run.

A steaming bowl of Chongqing Xiao Mian or a slick, chili-bathed Long Chaoshou before 8:00 AM isn't just sustenance; it is a defiant act of holding onto who you are. Here are the street-corner classics—from air-fryer crispy Juntun Guokui to savory, silken Doufunao—streamlined for the modern kitchen but stripped of none of their soul. Fast, fiery, and completely uncompromising.





Chongqing Xiao Mian

重庆小面

Chóngqìng xiǎo miàn

IN THE STEEP, MISTY STREETS OF CHONGQING, MORNINGS run on the percussive sound of boiling water and the sharp, intoxicating hit of chili oil. This is the canonical street-stall bowl, where the mastery lies not in the wheat, but in the highly calibrated assembly of seasonings waiting at the bottom. It demands respect for the ungentrified truths of the homeland: rendered lard for lip-coating richness, MSG for unapologetic street-level umami, and an essential steep of ginger and garlic water that extracts the aromatic soul

WITHOUT THE CRUDE BURN OF RAW ALLIUMS. IT IS A visceral, deeply comforting ten-minute shock to the system that cuts straight through the noise of suburban America.

INGREDIENTS

2 large	garlic <i>smashed and roughly chopped</i>	1/2 tsp	MSG
1 small	fresh ginger <i>smashed and roughly chopped</i>	1/8 tsp	sugar
3 tbsp	boiling water	8 oz	fresh thin alkaline wheat noodles
2 tbsp	light soy sauce	2 cup	water spinach <i>roughly chopped</i>
3 tbsp	Sichuan chili oil with flakes	2 tbsp	pickled mustard tuber <i>finely diced</i>
2 tsp	lard	2 tbsp	roasted peanuts <i>crushed</i>
1 tsp	toasted sesame oil	1 med	scallion <i>finely chopped</i>
1/2 tsp	Chinkiang vinegar		
1/2 tsp	Sichuan peppercorn powder		

PREPARATION

- **Steep the aromatics.**

Combine the smashed garlic and ginger in a small bowl, cover with the boiling water, and let steep for ten minutes to extract their essential oils without the harsh raw bite.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1 Assemble the seasoning base.**

Divide the soy sauce, chili oil, lard, sesame oil, black vinegar, peppercorn powder, MSG, and sugar evenly between two serving bowls.

1 Add the ginger-garlic water.

Spoon one and a half tablespoons of the steeped aromatic water into each bowl, leaving the solid pieces of ginger and garlic behind.

2 Boil the noodles.

Bring a large pot of water to a rolling boil, drop in the fresh noodles, and untangle them immediately with chopsticks.

3 Bloom the spices to create the broth.

Right before the noodles finish, ladle a half cup of the starchy boiling noodle water into each serving bowl to melt the lard and awaken the seasoning base.

4 Cook the noodles to Duan Bai.

Boil until the opaque white core of the noodle just disappears, dropping the greens into the water for the final fifteen seconds.

5 Assemble and garnish.

Lift the noodles and greens from the pot, fold them into the seasoned broth, and top generously with crushed peanuts, pickled mustard tuber, and scallions.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The alkaline noodle hack.**

If fresh alkaline noodles are unavailable, boil thin dried spaghetti in water treated with one tablespoon of baking soda to achieve the authentic yellow hue and springy chew.

- **The sesame paste debate.**

Canonical soup versions omit sesame paste entirely, but if you prefer a creamier finish akin to the dry-tossed variations, whisk one teaspoon of Chinese sesame paste into the bowl before adding the hot water.



Long Chaoshou (Sichuan-Style Wontons in Red Chili Oil)

龙抄手
lóng chāoshǒu

IN CHENGDU, THE DAY DOESN'T TRULY BEGIN UNTIL YOU'VE taken a seat on a low plastic stool and slurped down a bowl of chaoshou. For a diaspora kid missing the humid mornings of the Sichuan basin, this is the ultimate homecoming. The secret to that impossible, bouncing texture isn't fancy equipment—it's whipping scallion-ginger water into fatty pork in a single, uncompromising direction, and bathing the delicate wrappers in a fiercely balanced

EMULSION OF RED CHILI OIL AND STEEPED GARLIC WATER.
Make a hundred on a Sunday, freeze them flat, and you are never more than eight minutes away from absolute comfort.

INGREDIENTS

1/3 cup	warm water <i>reserved for aromatics</i>	1 tbsp	cornstarch
1 med piece	fresh ginger <i>smashed flat</i>	1 package	Shanghai-style square wonton wrappers <i>covered with a damp paper towel</i>
2 med	scallion <i>roughly chopped and smashed</i>	2 large cloves	garlic <i>smashed and roughly minced</i>
1/4 tsp	whole Sichuan peppercorns	2 tbsp	warm water <i>reserved for garlic</i>
1 lb	ground pork <i>ideally 30% fat, chilled</i>	4 tbsp	Sichuan chili oil with sediment
1 large	egg	2 tbsp	Chinking black vinegar
5 tbsp	light soy sauce <i>divided</i>	1 tsp	sugar
1 tbsp	toasted sesame oil <i>divided</i>	1/2 tsp	ground Sichuan peppercorn
1/2 tsp	kosher salt	1/2 tsp	MSG
1/4 tsp	ground white pepper	1 med	scallion <i>finely chopped, green parts only</i>

PREPARATION

- **Batch and freeze for weeknight survival.**

These wontons are meant to be made in massive batches. Freeze them flat on a parchment-lined baking sheet before transferring to a zip-top bag; you can boil them straight from frozen by simply adding an extra minute or two to the cooking time.

INSTRUCTIONS

1 Brew the aromatics and steep the garlic water.

Combine 1/3 cup warm water, ginger, smashed scallions, and whole peppercorns in a small bowl, massaging them briefly to release their volatile oils. In a separate dipping bowl, mix the minced garlic with 2 tablespoons of warm water. Let both steep for 10 minutes, then discard the solids from the scallion-ginger water.

2 Whip the filling relentlessly in one direction.

Place the ground pork, egg, 1 tablespoon of light soy sauce, 1 teaspoon of sesame oil, salt, white pepper, and cornstarch in a large mixing bowl. Using chopsticks, stir vigorously in a single direction without ever reversing; slowly pour in the strained scallion-ginger water in three additions, waiting for the meat to completely absorb the liquid before adding more, until the mixture becomes a pale, sticky paste that pulls from the sides of the bowl.

3 Fold the wontons into the traditional crossed-hands shape.

Place a wrapper in your palm oriented like a diamond, add a teaspoon of filling slightly below center, and wet the top edges with water. Fold the bottom point up to form a triangle and press out the air to seal, then wet one bottom corner, pull both bottom corners across the belly of the filling to overlap them like crossed arms, and pinch firmly.

1 Build the red oil sauce directly in individual serving bowls.

For each of the four serving bowls, add 1 tablespoon chili oil, 1 tablespoon light soy sauce, 1/2 tablespoon black vinegar, 1 teaspoon of your steeped garlic water, 1/2 teaspoon sesame oil, 1/4 teaspoon sugar, and a pinch each of ground Sichuan pepper and MSG.

2 Boil the wontons and temper the water.

Drop the wontons into a large pot of rolling, boiling water, stirring gently with the back of a spoon to prevent sticking. When the water returns to a furious boil, pour in 1/2 cup of cold tap water to calm the surface; this traditional technique prevents the delicate wrappers from tearing before the pork inside can fully cook.

3 Awaken the sauce and serve immediately.

Just before the wontons finish cooking and float to the surface (about 4 minutes total), ladle 2 tablespoons of the hot, starchy cooking water into each serving bowl to temper and awaken the raw sauce condiments. Use a slotted spoon to transfer the cooked wontons directly into the bowls, tossing gently to coat them in the red oil, and garnish with chopped scallions.

CHEF'S NOTES

• **The meat must drink.**

Do not skip the scallion-ginger water or drop raw minced aromatics into the filling. Hydrating the pork with this infused liquid is the non-negotiable grandmother secret to a bouncy, undeniably juicy chaoshou.

- **Respect the one-way street.**

Reversing your stirring direction will mechanically break the protein bonds you are trying to build. Stirring in one continuous direction creates the cohesive, snappy texture you recognize from the homeland.

- **Garlic water over raw garlic.**

Dropping raw minced garlic into the sauce will burn your palate and overpower the dish. Steeping it in water extracts the flavor smoothly, allowing it to coat every fold of the dumpling without the harsh bite.



Jiachangcai: The Weeknight Wok

The beating heart of everyday Sichuan family cooking. Pragmatic, deeply flavorful dishes relying on potent flavor bases, optimized for swift execution on a standard stove.

Forget the banquet halls and the ceremonial whole fish. Jiachangcai is the real pulse of Sichuan—the bruised, battered wok hitting the residential burner at six o'clock after a long shift. It's pragmatic, ruthless, and unapologetically bold. This is food built on the dark, funky backbone of fermented Pixian doubanjiang and the

numbing hum of tribute pepper. It's what actual families eat when there are mouths to feed and exactly thirty minutes to pull it all together.

There is no pageantry here, just pure, engineered comfort. From the blistered snap of dry-fried green beans to the fatty, garlicky salvation of twice-cooked pork, these are the indispensable survival rations of the Sichuanese weeknight. Unfussy, lightning-fast, and devastatingly good.





Sichuan Salt-Fried Pork

盐煎肉
yán jiān ròu

IF TWICE-COOKED PORK IS THE UNDISPUTED KING OF Sichuan cuisine, Salt-Fried Pork is the brilliant, pragmatic sister who gets things done on a Tuesday night. It skips the time-consuming forty-minute boil, relying instead on *sheng bao*—stir-frying raw, thinly sliced pork directly in the wok until the fat renders into crispy, golden edges. The dish gets its name from a genius kitchen trick: hitting the raw pork with a pinch of salt to rapidly draw out moisture and melt the fat. Anchored by the unapologetically earthy, robust funk of unwashed fermented black beans and chili bean paste, this is exactly

WHAT A HOME KITCHEN IN CHENGDU SMELLS LIKE—AND with a few accessible pantry staples, you can have it on your own table in fifteen minutes.

INGREDIENTS

10 oz	skinless pork belly or highly marbled pork shoulder <i>frozen for 30 to 40 minutes, then sliced 1/8-inch thick against the grain</i>	1 1/2 tbsp	Pixian doubanjiang <i>finely minced</i>
2 med	leeks <i>dark tops trimmed, halved lengthwise, washed, and sliced on a steep diagonal</i>	1 tbsp	Sichuan douchi <i>roughly chopped without washing</i>
1 tbsp	neutral cooking oil	1 tsp	light soy sauce
1/4 tsp	kosher salt	1/2 tsp	white sugar
		1 tsp	Shaoxing cooking wine

PREPARATION

- **Firm up the pork for precision slicing.**

Place the pork in the freezer for 30 to 40 minutes. Cold fat is firm fat, allowing you to easily achieve the ultra-thin slices required for rapid rendering.

- **Pre-mix your finishing seasonings.**

Combine the soy sauce and sugar in a small prep bowl before the wok gets hot so you aren't scrambling to measure while the pork is frying.

- **Mince the doubanjiang.**

Dump the chili bean paste on your cutting board and run your knife through it until it is a fine paste, which prevents large, harsh pieces of fermented broad bean from disrupting the final texture.

INSTRUCTIONS

1 Render the pork over medium heat.

Heat a wok or large heavy skillet over medium until hot, add the oil, then the sliced pork. Immediately sprinkle with the salt and stir-fry gently for 4 to 6 minutes until the water evaporates and the pork edges curl into crispy, golden rings.

2 Fry the chili bean and black bean pastes.

Push the pork up the side of the wok to expose the pooled fat in the bottom. Lower the heat to medium-low and add the minced doubanjiang and chopped douchi to the fat, frying gently for 20 to 30 seconds until the oil turns a brilliant red.

3 Marry the pork with the aromatics.

Toss the crispy pork back into the bubbling red oil to coat evenly. Splash the Shaoxing wine around the edge of the wok, followed immediately by the soy sauce and sugar, tossing for 15 seconds to caramelize.

4 Flash-fry the leeks.

Crank the heat to high, toss in the white parts of the leeks, and stir-fry for 30 seconds. Add the green parts and toss for another 30 seconds until they are wilted and sweet, but still retain a vibrant crunch.

5 Serve immediately.

Remove from the heat and serve straight out of the wok alongside steaming bowls of jasmine rice.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Do not add extra salt at the end.**

The 'Salt-Fried' name comes solely from the initial pinch used to rapidly render the raw fat. The fermented pastes provide all the complex salinity the final dish requires.

- **Never wash authentic Sichuan douchi.**

Rinsing washes away the deeply flavorful fermented paste clinging to the beans; just chop them roughly to release their potent aroma.



Sichuan Homestyle Tofu

家常豆腐

jiā cháng dòu fǔ

IF MAPO TOFU IS THE FLASHY SIBLING WHO MOVED TO THE big city, Jia Chang Dou Fu is the dependable one who stayed home. This isn't the watered-down, vegetable-heavy stir-fry found in suburban strip malls; it is the exact, deeply savory flavor profile that fed generations of Sichuan families. The secret lies in patience, slowly pan-frying firm tofu until it forms a porous golden crust, then braising it in rendered pork fat and fermented chili bean paste until every curd drinks up the rich, unapologetic taste of the homeland.

INGREDIENTS

14 oz	firm tofu <i>pressed for 10 minutes and cut into 1/2-inch thick triangles</i>	1 small	fresh ginger <i>minced</i>
4 oz	ground pork	2 med	scallion <i>sliced, white and green parts separated</i>
1 1/2 tbsp	Pixian Doubanjiang	1 tbsp	light soy sauce
1/2 cup	wood ear mushrooms <i>rehydrated and torn into bite-sized pieces</i>	1/2 tsp	dark soy sauce
1 small	green bell pepper <i>cut into 1-inch diamond shapes</i>	1 tsp	sugar
3 small	garlic <i>minced</i>	3/4 cup	chicken broth
		1 tbsp	cornstarch <i>mixed with 2 tbsp cold water</i>
		3 tbsp	neutral cooking oil

PREPARATION

- **Extract moisture from the tofu.**

Wrap the tofu block in a clean kitchen towel and place a heavy plate on top for 10 minutes to press out excess water, ensuring a perfect crust when frying.

- **Mix the braising liquid.**

In a small bowl, whisk together the chicken broth, light soy sauce, dark soy sauce, and sugar before you begin cooking.

INSTRUCTIONS

1 **Pan-fry the tofu to a golden crisp.**

Heat 2 tablespoons of neutral oil in a large non-stick skillet or wok over medium heat, adding the dry tofu triangles in a single layer. Fry undisturbed for 4 to 5 minutes until deeply golden, flip carefully, and fry the other side for 3 to 4 minutes before removing to a paper towel-lined plate.

2 **Render the pork fat.**

Return the pan to medium heat, adding another tablespoon of oil if dry. Add the ground pork and fry until cooked through and crisped at the edges, rendering its savory fat into the pan.

3 **Bloom the soul of the dish.**

Push the pork to the side of the pan, add the Pixian Doubanjiang directly into the pool of oil, and stir-fry for 30 seconds until the oil turns a brilliant, glossy red and the harsh fermented smell mellows into a deep umami.

4 **Build the aromatics and vegetables.**

Stir the pork and chili paste together, then add the minced garlic, ginger, and scallion whites, tossing for 15 seconds until highly fragrant. Add the bell pepper and wood ear mushrooms, tossing for 1 minute to blister them slightly.

5 **Braise the tofu.**

Return the golden tofu to the pan and pour in the broth, soy sauce, and sugar mixture. Bring to a gentle simmer and let it bubble for 3 to 4 minutes, allowing the porous tofu to suck up the spicy, meaty broth.

1 Finish with a glossy sheen.

Stir the cornstarch slurry to recombine any settled starch, then pour it slowly into the bubbling pan. Gently fold the ingredients until the sauce thickens into a glossy gravy that clings to the tofu, garnish with the scallion greens, and serve immediately with copious amounts of rice.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Respect the Doubanjiang.**

Look for jars labeled Chili Bean Sauce or Broad Bean Paste with the characters 郫县 (Pixian). This fermented broad bean and chili paste is the uncompromising soul of Sichuan cooking, providing the essential red oil and deep umami that defines this dish.

- **Use a non-stick skillet.**

While a seasoned carbon-steel wok is traditional, a large non-stick skillet is highly recommended for the home kitchen to ensure the tofu fries evenly and develops a solid crust without sticking or scrambling.



Cangying Guanzi: The Weekend Fly Restaurant

Unapologetic, punchy flavors and communal street food inspired by Chengdu's famous 'fly restaurants'.

There is a universal truth in Chengdu: the dingier the awning, the better the food. These are the cangying guanzi—the 'fly restaurants.' They are cramped, unapologetic joints where the plastic stools wobble, the air hangs heavy with toasted chili, and the flavors punch you square in the mouth. It is not about linen napkins or

delicate plating. It is about cold beer, a roaring fire under a bubbling vat of huoguo, and chili-dusted lamb skewers passed around a loud, crowded table.

Recreating this in a suburban American dining room isn't about faking the grime; it's about resurrecting the unapologetic soul of those nights. These dishes—from a towering, ruby-red mountain of La Zi Ji to the cold, numbing perfection of Fuqi Feipian—are built for the weekend. Gather your people, crack open the beer, and let the mala do the talking.





La Zi Ji (Chongqing-Style Firecracker Chicken)

辣子鸡
là-zǐ-jī

IN CHONGQING'S ROADSIDE FLY RESTAURANTS, THIS DISH hits the table looking like a terrifying, glowing red mountain of fire. The locals playfully call it "hide and seek chicken." You don't eat the chilies; they exist solely to perfume the oil with a rich, smoky, and floral aroma while you use your chopsticks to hunt through the rubble for the real prize. The secret to recreating this unapologetic street food on an American weeknight is twofold: cross-cutting standard

CHICKEN WINGS TO GET THAT CRUCIAL BONE-IN FLAVOR without the burden of a deep-fryer, and aggressively salting the meat before it ever touches the heat. Once that golden crust forms, the flavor is locked out.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 lb	chicken wings <i>chopped crosswise with a heavy knife into 1-inch pieces</i>	1/2 cup	dried hot chilies <i>snipped into 1-inch segments, loose seeds discarded</i>
1 tsp	kosher salt	2 tbsp	whole Sichuan peppercorns
1 tbsp	light soy sauce	1/4 cup	neutral oil
1 tbsp	Shaoxing cooking wine	4 clove	garlic <i>thinly sliced</i>
1/2 tsp	ground white pepper	1 inch	fresh ginger <i>cut into thin matchsticks</i>
1/2 inch	fresh ginger <i>smashed</i>	2 med	scallion <i>white and light green parts cut into 1-inch pieces</i>
1 med	scallion <i>smashed</i>	1 tsp	granulated sugar
2 tbsp	cornstarch	1/2 tsp	MSG
1 tbsp	neutral oil	1 tbsp	white sesame seeds <i>toasted</i>
1 cup	dried mild chilies <i>snipped into 1-inch segments, loose seeds discarded</i>	1/4 cup	roasted unsalted peanuts

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1** Aggressively massage the chicken with the salt, soy sauce, wine, white pepper, smashed ginger, and smashed scallion in a mixing bowl.

Do not skimp on the salt here. Once the chicken hits the hot oil and forms its signature crust, the interior meat becomes completely sealed off from any further seasoning.

- 1 Discard the smashed aromatics, sprinkle the cornstarch over the chicken, and mix until coated in a tacky paste.**

Stir in the one tablespoon of neutral oil to help separate the pieces when they hit the pan, then let sit at room temperature for at least 20 minutes.

- 2 Place your snipped chilies and Sichuan peppercorns in a fine-mesh strainer and quickly run them under warm water for five seconds.**

Shake them dry immediately. This microscopic layer of moisture acts as a crucial buffer, preventing the delicate spices from instantly turning to bitter ash in the hot wok.

- 3 Heat the quarter cup of oil in a wide cast-iron skillet or flat-bottomed wok over medium-high heat until it shimmers.**

Carefully add the chicken in a single, uncrowded layer and leave it entirely undisturbed for 4 to 5 minutes to develop a thick, craggy crust. Flip and fry for another 3 to 4 minutes until the meat is dehydrated and exceptionally crispy, then remove to a paper towel-lined plate.

- 4 Pour off all but two tablespoons of the hot oil, reduce the heat to medium-low, and fry the garlic and ginger matchsticks until fragrant.**

Add the slightly dampened chilies and peppercorns, stirring continuously for a minute or two. Watch carefully until the oil turns slightly orange and emits a spicy, nose-tingling vapor, but do not let the chilies turn black.

- 5 Immediately return the crispy chicken to the skillet along with the chopped scallions and peanuts.**

Toss everything vigorously to coat the craggy exterior of the chicken in the fragrant, numbing chili oil.

1 Sprinkle the sugar, MSG, and toasted sesame seeds over the top and give it three more tosses.

The small pinch of sugar is essential here; it magically rounds out the sharp, aggressive heat of the chilies. Transfer the entire mountain to a large platter and serve immediately with cold beer and steamed white rice.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The Chili Substitution Secret.**

To replicate the authentic visual volume of the homeland without the heat becoming completely inedible, use a three-to-one ratio of mild, fragrant chilies (like Guajillo or Japones) to sharp, hot chilies (like Chile de Árbol).

- **Warn your guests about the rules of Hide and Seek.**

Make sure diners know that the mountain of chilies is strictly structural. They are there to perfume the dish, not to be eaten as vegetables.



Jianyi Sichuan Huoguo (From-Scratch Streamlined Communal Red Pot)

简易四川火锅

jiǎnyì sīchuān huǒguō

IT'S IN THE ALLEYWAYS OF CHONGQING, SITTING ON A CHEAP plastic stool at a “fly restaurant” where luxury sedans park next to battered bicycles, that you find the real soul of Sichuan hot pot. This is working-class ingenuity boiled down to its furious, numbing essence—a fiercely red, fat-slicked broth designed to ward off the river

DAMP. YOU DON'T NEED A COMMERCIAL KITCHEN OR TWO hours of pounding chilies to recreate it on a weeknight. With good beef tallow, a jar of funky Pixian Doubanjiang, and a handful of unapologetic aromatics, this streamlined red pot delivers the uncompromising, heavy-hitting comfort of the homeland straight to your dining table.

INGREDIENTS

2 tbsp	red Sichuan peppercorns	1/2 cup	neutral oil
1 tbsp	green Sichuan peppercorns	1 1/2 cup	dried Asian chilies <i>halved and seeds shaken out</i>
3 whole	star anise	1/2 cup	Pixian Doubanjiang <i>finely minced</i>
1 large piece	cassia bark	2 tbsp	fermented black soybeans <i>roughly chopped</i>
1 tbsp	fennel seeds	1 med	fresh ginger <i>unpeeled and cut into thick slices</i>
2 whole	Chinese black cardamom pods <i>cracked open</i>	8 large cloves	garlic <i>smashed</i>
4 whole	dried bay leaves	4 med	scallions <i>cut into 3-inch lengths, white and green parts separated</i>
4 whole	whole cloves	8 cup	unsalted bone broth
2 tbsp	warm water	2 tbsp	Laozao
3 tbsp	Shaoxing wine <i>divided</i>	1 tbsp	rock sugar
1 cup	beef tallow	1 tbsp	MSG

PREPARATION

- **Prepare the garlic-sesame dipping sauce.**

Provide individual bowls with 3 tablespoons of pure toasted sesame oil mixed with a hefty spoonful of minced garlic, chopped cilantro, and scallions to protect the stomach from the aggressive chili heat.

- **Assemble the raw ingredients.**

Arrange platters of classic hot pot dippers: sliced beef tripe, paper-thin fatty beef, thick rectangles of Spam, thinly sliced russet potatoes, and firm tofu.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1 **Grind and hydrate the dry spices.**

Pulse the star anise, fennel seeds, and cloves in a spice grinder until coarsely ground, then mix in a small bowl with the whole spices, peppercorns, warm water, and 1 tablespoon of the Shaoxing wine to prevent them from burning later.

- 2 **Infuse the cooking fats with aromatics.**

Melt the beef tallow and neutral oil in a wide, heavy-bottomed Dutch oven over medium-low heat, then gently fry the ginger, garlic, and scallion whites for 5 to 7 minutes until golden before removing and discarding the solids.

- 3 **Fry the pastes to develop the signature red oil.**

Reduce the heat to low, add the minced Pixian Doubanjiang and fermented black beans, and stir continuously for 8 to 10 minutes until the moisture evaporates and the oil turns a deep, brilliant crimson.

1 Toast the chilies and the moistened spice blend.

Once the oil is fiercely red, stir in the dried chilies and the bowl of wet spices, cooking constantly for 2 to 3 minutes until the aroma is intensely fragrant and slightly choking.

2 Build the broth and simmer.

Carefully pour in the broth, bring to a rolling boil, and add the Laozao, remaining 2 tablespoons of Shaoxing wine, rock sugar, MSG, and scallion greens. Reduce to a simmer and let it steep for 15 to 20 minutes to marry the flavors.

3 Transfer to the table and eat.

Move the pot to a portable tabletop burner, keeping it at a steady simmer, and let everyone cook their own ingredients directly in the bubbling broth.

CHEF'S NOTES

• **Do not skip the beef tallow or the MSG.**

Tallow provides the essential 'Hou'—the luxurious richness that allows the broth to cling to the meat—while MSG effortlessly replicates the hours of bone-simmering done in traditional fly restaurants.

• **Embrace the mess.**

Frying the Doubanjiang will cause the oil to sputter; wear an apron, use a deep pot, and enjoy the chaotic joy of making real hot pot at home.



Grandma's Hands: Doughs, Broths, and Comfort

The tactile, soothing, and gentle side of Sichuan cuisine.

Forget the fire and brimstone for a minute. There is a quieter side to Sichuan—a gentle, flour-dusted world far removed from the relentless swagger of chili oil and málà. This is the food of lazy Sunday afternoons and dimly lit kitchens, where grandmothers fold pork and chive jiaozi by muscle memory and ladle out crystal-clear bowls of restorative yang chun mian.

It is the tactile, soothing work of shaping dough and simmering bones. Whether it is the warm, street-side nostalgia of a dan hong gao pastry or the icy relief of summer bingfen, these are the unapologetic comforts of the homeland. No pretense, no performing for the tourists. Just the quiet, essential business of taking care of your own.





Laozao Fenzi Dan (Rustic Hand-Pinched Rice Dumplings with Poached Egg in Sweet Wine Broth)

醪糟粉子蛋

láo zāo fēn zǐ dàn

THIS ISN'T RESTAURANT FOOD; IT'S WHAT A SICHUANESE grandmother hands you on a brutal winter night or when you need bringing back to life. No perfectly rolled dumplings or thickened syrups here. You pinch the dough straight into the water with your bare hands, gently poaching an egg in a dark, sugar-laced broth before

FINISHING IT WITH SWEET FERMENTED RICE. IT IS MESSY, fast, intensely comforting, and entirely unapologetic. Keep a jar of laozao in the fridge, and this bowl of pure, unadulterated nostalgia is never more than fifteen minutes away.

INGREDIENTS

3/4 cup	glutinous rice flour	2 large	eggs
1/3 cup	warm water <i>heated to around 120°F</i>	3 tbsp	Chinese brown sugar <i>broken into small pieces, or substituted with dark brown sugar</i>
3 1/2 cup	water	1 tbsp	dried goji berries <i>optional</i>
3 small	dried red dates <i>optional</i>	5 tbsp	jarred sweet fermented rice <i>at room temperature</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1 Mix the dough.**

Pour the warm water into the glutinous rice flour, kneading gently until it forms a smooth, pliable dough that feels like soft clay and doesn't stick to your hands. Cover with a damp towel.
- 2 Prepare the broth base.**

Bring the 3 1/2 cups of water and the red dates, if using, to a boil in a medium saucepan.
- 3 Poach the eggs in still water.**

Turn the heat down to a bare whisper so the water is almost completely still. Crack each egg into a small ramekin and gently slip it into the water, leaving them entirely undisturbed for two minutes so the whites set perfectly without clouding the broth.

1 Pinch the fenzi.

Nudge the heat up to maintain a gentle simmer. Hold the dough in one hand and use your thumb and index finger to rapidly pinch off irregular, thumbnail-sized fragments, dropping them directly into the pot around the eggs.

2 Sweeten and simmer.

Add the brown sugar, swirling the broth gently so as not to break the eggs. Cook for 2 to 3 minutes until all the dough fragments float to the surface.

3 Finish with laozao.

Toss in the goji berries, stir in the fermented rice, and immediately turn off the heat. Boiling the fermented rice will destroy its delicate aroma and turn the broth sour.

4 Serve immediately.

Ladle into deep bowls, making sure everyone gets a whole poached egg, a generous scoop of the chewy fenzi, and plenty of that sweet, amber broth.

CHEF'S NOTES

• **Embrace the irregular dough.**

Do not roll these into neat balls. The jagged, uneven edges of the hand-pinched dough absorb the sweet wine broth in a way that smooth, store-bought tangyuan never will.

• **Protect the fermented rice.**

Jarred sweet fermented rice (laozao) is delicate. Add it strictly at the end, off the heat, just to warm it through.

- **Broken yolks happen.**

If your egg breaks while poaching, don't panic. You've simply created 'laozao danhua'—an egg-drop variant that is just as authentic and universally beloved in Sichuan homes.



Chengdu Dan Hong Gao

成都蛋烘糕

chéng-dū dàn-hōng-gāo

WHEN THE AFTERNOON BELL RINGS IN CHENGDU, THE AIR outside the schools thickens with the smell of toasted yeast and caramelized sugar rising from a peddler's tricycle cart. This is the city's quintessential street snack—golden, spongy half-moons wrapped around violently savory or unapologetically sweet fillings. For the diaspora kid trading memories for a box of Western pancake mix, it's time to put the box down. The secret to that iconic honeycomb texture and homeland flavor is a slow-fermented batter and a rigorously dry skillet. No specialized copper street-cart pan required—just a little patience and a grandmother's respect for the process.

INGREDIENTS

1 cup	cake flour	1 pinch	kosher salt
3/4 cup	warm water	1/2 cup	pickled long beans <i>rinsed under cold water and finely chopped</i>
1 large	egg <i>brought to room temp</i>	1/4 lb	ground pork
1 1/2 tbsp	dark brown sugar <i>lightly packed</i>	1 small clove	garlic <i>minced</i>
1 tbsp	granulated white sugar	1 small piece	fresh ginger <i>peeled and minced</i>
1/2 tsp	active dry yeast	1 tsp	Pixian Doubanjiang
1/2 tsp	baking soda		
1 tsp	neutral oil		

PREPARATION

- **Source the pickled long beans.**

Look for vacuum-sealed packets of Pao Jiang Dou in the pickled vegetable aisle of your local Asian market; their fermented tang is what cuts through the sweet, yeasty pancake.

- **Plan your fermentation schedule.**

This batter is highly forgiving. Whisk it together in three minutes the night before and let it sleep in the fridge so it's ready the moment you walk through the door.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1 Dissolve the sugars and activate the yeast.**

Whisk the warm water, dark brown sugar, and white sugar in a small bowl until completely dissolved, then sprinkle the yeast over the top and let sit for five minutes until frothy.

1 Mix the batter to a flowing consistency.

In a large bowl, whisk the egg and neutral oil, then pour in the yeast mixture. Add the flour and salt, whisking until you have a smooth, pourable batter that hangs off the whisk like a thick crepe batter.

2 Ferment the dough to develop the honeycomb texture.

Cover with plastic wrap and let it sit at room temperature for an hour and a half until doubled and bubbly, or stash it in the fridge overnight for an easy weeknight cook.

3 Activate the chemistry with baking soda.

Just before cooking, sprinkle the baking soda evenly over the bubbly batter and gently fold it in to neutralize the sourness and guarantee rapid browning in the pan.

4 Heat a completely dry non-stick skillet.

Place a high-quality non-stick skillet over medium-low heat. Do not add oil; liquid oil creates a barrier that fries the batter into a mottled mess instead of baking it to a uniform, caramelized golden-brown.

5 Swirl and steam-bake the pockets.

Pour two to three tablespoons of batter into the center of the hot pan, immediately swirling it into a four-inch circle. Cover with a tight-fitting lid for 45 to 60 seconds until the surface is dry, set, and dotted with popped air bubbles.

6 Prepare the classic savory filling.

In a separate wok or skillet, stir-fry the ground pork until crispy, then add the garlic, ginger, and doubanjiang. Fry until the oil turns red, toss in the chopped pickled beans, and cook for one more minute.

1 Fill, fold, and serve immediately.

Use a silicone spatula to slide the hot pocket onto a plate. Spoon the savory pork and bean filling into the center and fold it in half like a taco, letting the residual heat lightly seal the edges.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The dual-sugar matrix is non-negotiable.**

Chinese brown sugar, or standard American dark brown sugar, provides the crucial Maillard reaction and molasses depth that white sugar alone cannot achieve.

- **Go classic sweet if you prefer.**

For a traditional sweet version, fill the hot pockets with a mix of toasted sesame seeds and sugar, or a smear of mayonnaise layered with fluffy pork floss.