



Lace Zhang is an avid baker and home cook. She used to run a successful online baking shop that was popularly featured in the media during her school days in Singapore Management University. When not in the kitchen working on recipes or cranking up her overused oven, she can be found reading about food, looking at pictures of food, shopping for groceries or gazing longingly at the displays in bread shops. She writes love letters to food at www.instagram.com/myjeansdontfit, where she documents her kitchen trials and photos of the food she loves to eat. Visit her website at www.aroundthediningtable.com for more recipe ideas and stories.

It is said that the soul of the home is the kitchen. And indeed, food is often how our loved ones express their care and concern for us, by pampering us with sumptuous homemade meals. In Chinese families, this typically means several side dishes served with a bowl of rice and a soup. But when we try to replicate these beloved dishes ourselves, our attempts sometimes fall short.

Faced with this situation, Lace Zhang set out to observe and note down every detail as her grandma and auntie cooked, and then tested each recipe rigorously to ensure nothing was left out. *Three Dishes One Soup* is the result of Lace's careful recording of her family's recipes. With detailed explanations and step-by-step photographs, this book is the perfect guide for anyone longing for a taste of home and needing that extra bit of help in the kitchen.

Connect with Lace at:
www.aroundthediningtable.com

"I love books that preserve Chinese culinary traditions and Lace Zhang has given us a beautiful ode to her family's Singaporean home cooking. You can almost hear Granny and Aunt Alicia murmuring cooking tips in every recipe."

Grace Young, James Beard Award-winning author of *Stir-Frying to the Sky's Edge*

"The tales and recipes of lost heritage and street food in the book do not feel like they came from a Gen Y writer. This girl has soul and it resides in the kitchen."

KF Seetoh, CEO, Makansutra

"So much of what we know and love about food are the memories ingrained in us — the home-cooked meals that we often take for granted but learn to treasure as we grow older. Like Lace, we should all make the effort to archive the knowledge that our parents and our parents' parents have acquired, so that it may never be lost."

Lennard Yeong, MasterChef Asia finalist

"Lace Zhang takes us with her into her grandmother's Singapore kitchen, where the aromas and flavours of traditional family dishes, lovingly prepared, whet our appetites and make us woozy with anticipation. With great love and humour, Lace shares her granny's lessons on cooking, life and spiritual nourishment. With a collection of enticing recipes from a lifetime of memorable meals, *Three Dishes One Soup* will leave you sated and inspired."

Tish Boyle, cookbook author and food editor

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Cuisine



Lace Zhang

Three Dishes One Soup

Marshall Cavendish Cuisine

Three Dishes One Soup

Inside the Singapore Kitchen



**Gourmand
World
Cookbook
Awards 2018**
BEST FAMILY
COOKBOOK

Lace Zhang

“ Food is not mere sustenance. It is our memories, our history. It is understanding where we come from and it forms a huge part of our identity. ”

“ Much like a child leaping into a parent's warm embrace after falling down, these are comforting patterns we know we can always rely on. ”

“ A home-cooked meal like this is a luxury. ”

“ Treat this as a guide to base your cooking on. Revel in the in-the-moment cooking process that everything can and will be different; learn to trust your instincts... ”

Excerpts from *Three Dishes One Soup*

Three Dishes One Soup

Inside the Singapore Kitchen

Lace Zhang

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To my mummy and daddy





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“ Food is Memories. ”

~ The Hundred-Foot Journey



Introduction

I look around the wooden table, every inch laden with a dish or a pot. There's golden and gleaming *ngoh hiong*, piping hot and crisply promising; there's sweet and sour fish, glistening red and interspersed with chunks of pineapple; there's a plate of stir-fried vegetables, two kinds of roast meats chopped into chunks, stir-fried noodles for the vegetarians, pork belly stewed in soy sauce with whole unpeeled garlic cloves nestled between chunks of tender meat, a plate of fried chicken wings, braised bean curd skin and a pot of collagen-rich fish maw soup, chock-full of ingredients...

I am amazed at how my maternal grandmother always manages to whip up this spectacular feast all on her own every Lunar New Year. Her tiny living room is filled with members of my extended family, a rare occurrence that we are all gathered together, sharing glimpses of our lives and filling up on granny's food. I spy my grandma, her diminutive frame at the kitchen door and her eyes slightly watery... she mutters “*wo hen gao xin ni men duo lai le.*” (It makes me so happy to see all of you here.) This is why she cooks.

Frankly, this book was borne in part due to fear. Fear that these treasured recipes will be lost along the way, and with it, a part of our culture. Fear that one day, there would be no one to prepare all these familiar dishes we grew up eating, that there would be one less reason for everyone to come together. Hence, I started to learn to cook next to my grandma, documenting her recipes with precise measurements as opposed to “*agak-agak*” (estimating the quantities), much to her chagrin. “There's no need to weigh, just anyhow,” she would say whenever she saw me whipping out the kitchen scale. Cooking is instinctive to her. She has spent most of her life cooking, day in and day out, a pinch of this, a splash of that — everything comes naturally to her. And by some form of alchemy, her cooking is always consistent and her food always tastes the same. She measures, not with a scale, but with her expert's mind, based on years of experience. She adds calculated dashes of seasoning and gauges the proportion of ingredients used. Cooking has become second nature to her.

Given that many of us do not grow up cooking next to our mothers anymore, nor do we cook daily for our families, I wanted to document the insights and

observations I've gleamed from watching someone experienced cook. That being said, although these recipes have been carefully measured, tested and recorded, there will always be many uncontrollable elements in the experiment of cooking. Treat this as a guide to base your cooking on. Revel in the in-the-moment cooking process that everything can and will be different; learn to trust your instincts and make executive decisions to adjust the dish to meet your taste preferences, needs and ideals. This is, after all, part of the excitement of cooking.

Food is not mere sustenance. It is our memories, our history. It is understanding where we come from and it forms a huge part of our identity. Food is a universal language and sometimes, tasting and understanding the food of a foreign culture is almost like being allowed a sneak peak, an insider's pass if you will, straight into their world. Like all things worthwhile, it takes effort to continue the traditions that have long been sustained by previous generations, as we become ever more reliant on the conveniences of the modern world.

The title of this book, *Three Dishes One Soup*, refers to the Chinese custom of having meals, where plain rice is eaten with a few dishes, a good mix of protein and vegetables, all washed down with a clear soup. This way of eating has been ingrained in us as being a complete, nourishing meal, what we would ideally consume for dinner at home, if we're lucky. You can choose to serve just one or two dishes alongside rice, instead of the full works — it's really up to you. Options for one-pot dishes can also be found in the Lunch Staples section if that suits your schedule better.

With my notes and cooking tips consolidated here, I hope to, in my own small way, help preserve a part of our heritage before it is lost in the vestiges of time. This is a book that I hope will help demystify certain aspects of traditional home cooking here in Singapore. It has been many years in the making as it contains recipes of many of the dishes I grew up eating and learned from my maternal grandma, my paternal grandpa and Auntie Alicia, who cooked most of my meals when I was younger. This is a book made up of much of my heart and soul. I hope it finds a way into your life and the lives of your loved ones as well.



Pantry Basics

This section highlights the essentials needed to stock a home pantry. These are the basic condiments and ingredients used in most of my family’s dishes, and as long as I’ve got them in my store cupboard, I feel strangely secure and comforted knowing that a quick meal can be rustled up easily.

CONDIMENTS AND SEASONING

These condiments are essential in the Chinese pantry. They are needed to bring out the distinctive flavours typically associated with Chinese cooking. The supermarket shelves are stacked full of various brands of condiments, and if you are ever in doubt as to which to choose, a general guideline for me would be: the fewer the ingredients and additives listed on the ingredients list, the better the quality.

Light Soy Sauce

Light soy sauce flavours many of our dishes by imparting a savouriness that is deeper and more complex than merely using salt. Quality light soy sauce is made by fermenting soy beans for months and even years to develop its flavour. This results in an amber-hued liquid, enriched with amino acids, contributing to the coveted taste sensation known as umami.

Dark Soy Sauce

Dark soy sauce is made in the same way as light soy sauce but with the addition of molasses or caramel. The resulting sauce is less salty, sweet and thicker in consistency compared to light soy sauce. It is used to add an appealing colour to dishes as well as a tinge of sweetness.

Oyster Sauce

This thick brown sauce adds a savoury flavour to dishes while helping to thicken up sauces that it has been added to. Vegetarian versions are available, made using mushrooms in lieu of oysters. There are also variations made using abalone.

Sesame Oil

This aromatic oil derived from sesame seeds is commonly used to add fragrance to marinades and dishes. It is typically drizzled over dishes towards the end of cooking to retain its fragrance.

Ground White Pepper

In recipes requiring pepper in this book, it is ground white pepper that is used unless otherwise specified. In my family, ground white pepper is the indispensable condiment for adding a dash of snugly warmth to any dish.

Salt

Where salt is used in these recipes, I have used fine sea salt. Should you be using coarser flakes of salt or fine table salt, do taste and make the necessary adjustments.

DRIED GOODS

The Chinese have been using dried goods in their cooking for centuries. This ancient method of preservation helped stretch the shelf life of foods long before the refrigerator was invented. The drying process reduces the water content of the food, concentrating and intensifying its flavours. What was borne out of necessity has changed the culinary landscape. It's amazing how a little really goes a long way in helping to amp up flavours in a dish.

Dried Shrimps

Also known as *hae bee* in Hokkien, *ha mai* in Cantonese or *xia mi* in Mandarin, these tiny, dried shrimps are indispensable in Chinese cooking. A handful will add a punch to stir-fried vegetables or noodles. It can also be used to bulk up certain dishes like glutinous rice or yam rice. It is almost magical how these add so much flavour to dishes. Soak the dried shrimps in water for 10–15 minutes to rehydrate before using. Don't soak them for too long or the flavour will leach into the liquid. Store dried shrimps in an airtight container in a cool, dry place or in the refrigerator.

Dried Scallops

Sometimes also known as conpoy, dried scallops vary in price depending on their quality, origin and size. The most expensive ones hail from Japan. Dried scallops are commonly used to sweeten and intensify the flavour of soups, stews and sauces. Soak in water for about 30 minutes to rehydrate before using. The soaking liquid can be reserved for use in the dish. Store dried scallops in an airtight container in a cool, dry place or in the refrigerator.

Dried Chinese Mushrooms

These mushrooms have an intense flavour. When used in braises, stews and stir-fries, they act as sponges and will soak up the flavour of the dish. To prepare, soak them in hot or warm water for 15–20 minutes until softened. Trim the tough stems and discard. The soft, fleshy caps can be sliced or used whole. The meaty texture of dried Chinese mushrooms makes them perfect for bulking up vegetarian dishes.

Chinese Sausages

Known as *lup cheong* in Cantonese, these Chinese sausages are made from cured minced pork. They usually come speckled with bits of fat, which is also what makes them taste so good. They add a tinge of savoury richness and sweetness to dishes.



“ For is there any practice less selfish,
any labour less alienated, any time less wasted,
than preparing something delicious and
nourishing for the people you love? ”

~ Michael Pollan

Lunch Staples

As a kid returning home from the drudgery of school, lunch was always the highlight of my day. I longed to return home to familiar comforts like Auntie Alicia's delicious lunches, cartoon reruns or a game or two of Nintendo, while plopped atop a slouchy beanbag chair with a can of ice cold soft drink within reach, clearly without any parental supervision.

I was fortunate enough (then) to have a helper, Auntie Alicia, a passionate and conscientious cook. She prepared most of my meals growing up, carefully and with heart. Even a simple weekday lunch would be sumptuous under Auntie Alicia's watchful care. Noodles? Stir-fried, in soup or even hand-kneaded. You name it. One of my favourite dishes was a comforting noodle soup with fish balls and slices of fishcake, the calm note of the broth rattled only by a jolt of aromatic fried shallots. Auntie Alicia would regularly spend a good part of the morning slicing, drying and frying those tiny alliums and sealing the crisp bronzed rings in airtight jars. They were the ubiquitous condiment that my family used to spruce

up any number of dishes. It provided instant flavour and texture. Another of my favourite dishes was handmade noodles (*mee hoon kueh*), which she made to order.

My maternal grandma would also spoil the family with her fabulous dishes whenever we visited. She would sometimes even deliver lunch boxes to our door, filled with her fried rice, yam and cabbage rice or glutinous rice, always perfectly cooked and seasoned. A common thread amongst most of these dishes is that they are one-pot or one-wok meals, easy on the clean-up and can be left to bubble away on the stovetop as the rest of the household chores get taken care of.

While dinner may seem to be more of a spread with its multitude of dishes and soups, the dishes in this section are truly stand-outs, able to hold their own, titillating and exciting the tastebuds just as well. We may not enjoy them as often now, but when life allows, on leisurely weekends, I like to take a walk down memory lane and revisit some of these dishes, much to the joy of my family.

Century Egg and Minced Meat Congee

Pei Dan Chok

Serves 4–5

Nothing soothes and salves the spirit and body like a bowl of piping hot rice porridge. This is comfort administered on the highest level for the worn and the weary. From the looser, more watery style best enjoyed with salty pickles, to the thicker, heartier congee (featured here), the hallmark of a good bowl of congee or “juk”, is its smooth mass met with some resistance, not a watery, droopy gloop with the disparate grains of rice still visible. The grains of rice have got to be properly cooked down for it to qualify as proper “juk”, otherwise, talk to the hand, for you are not real congee!

To amp up the flavour right before serving, add a splash of light soy sauce, a trickle of aromatic sesame oil (or liquid lard, page 16), a spoonful of fried shallots, a small handful of sprightly green coriander or spring onions and a dash of ground white pepper. Even the making of congee provides me with comfort — I find the repetitive, mindless stirring highly therapeutic, watching the coming together of the vast amount of liquid and the tiny amount of rice, resulting in a bowl of something silky, something smooth, something substantial.

2 Tbsp cooking oil
500 g pork bones
120 g long grain rice
45 g white glutinous rice
2 litres water
8 g young ginger
2–3 spring onions
1 tsp salt
½ tsp sugar
80 ml milk

3 century eggs, peeled
and chopped

Topping
Chopped spring onions or
coriander leaves
Fried shallots (page 16)
Ground white pepper
Sesame oil or light soy sauce

Meatballs
150 g minced pork, preferably
with some fat
2½ tsp light soy sauce
A dash of ground white pepper
1 tsp sesame oil
¼ tsp sugar
¼ tsp cornstarch

1. Heat the oil in a wok over medium-high heat. Add the pork bones and sear lightly for a bit of colour.
2. In a big stockpot, add both types of rice, the water, young ginger, spring onions, salt, sugar and the seared pork bones. Let the ingredients simmer over low heat for 1½–2 hours, stirring occasionally to prevent the rice from sticking to the bottom of the pot. The cooking time will depend on how quickly the rice grains break down. At the end of cooking, there should be no visible rice grains and the consistency should be thick. A longer cooking time will yield a thicker congee.
3. Make the meatballs when the congee is cooking. Combine all the ingredients for the meatballs in a bowl and mix using your hands or a pair of chopsticks until the mixture is homogeneous and the colour has lightened. Set aside.
4. When the porridge is done, add the milk and stir. Taste and adjust the seasoning at this point.
5. Form the meatballs into little rounds (using about 1½ tsp mixture per meatball, but don't feel obliged for anything exact) and drop them into the pot of hot congee to cook. Add the century eggs if desired.
6. To serve, ladle the piping hot (and it should be piping hot) congee into warm bowls. Top with sliced spring onions or coriander leaves, fried shallots, a dash of pepper and a drizzle of sesame oil or light soy sauce.



NOTE

- I use a mixture of white long grain rice and glutinous rice when making congee. White glutinous rice, or sticky rice, has an incredibly high level of a starch called amylopectin and using it together with long grain rice will ensure that the congee cooks up to a creamier, stickier consistency.
- What you're looking for ultimately is for both rice and liquid to combine harmoniously and take on a smooth consistency, with no grain of rice visible.
- Adding a splash of milk (any kind you like, even soy milk) towards the end of cooking will result in a creamier, silkier bowl of congee.
- You can also use pork stock in place of water to cook the congee.
- If you are serving this to guests who may be squeamish about eating century eggs, set the eggs aside in a bowl instead of adding them to the congee to cook. Your guests can then help themselves to the eggs.

Pantry Noodles

Serves 1

These noodles are alarmingly easy to slurp up, each strand coated luxuriantly with the umami-rich sauce concoction given below. It is meant to be a quick-fix, when one needs a bowlful of carbs out pronto for emergency suppers. This is more of a guideline than a recipe, and most of the ingredients can be found in your typical pantry. Anything else that you can rummage for in your fridge can be an add-on, like frozen meatballs, eggs or just a sprinkling of spring onions stirred through the noodles. Speaking of, use just about any type of noodles you have on hand — thin or thick egg noodles, dried Japanese noodles, anything that strikes your fancy, really. My cousin's favourite version of this dish is made with the handmade noodles (page 32) that Auntie Alicia very expertly pulls into stretchy curtains. When you make those noodles, do save some of the dough to try this out.

What makes this taste so ridiculously addictive is the use of the home-made dried shrimp sambal (page 17) which lends an incredibly rich, spicy and sweet flavour to the noodles. When the hot noodles hit the sauce, the heat enlivens its flavours, releasing all the aromas from within.

140 g dried noodles or for freshly-made noodles, use about 200 g

Any add-ons

Spring onions or fried shallots (page 16)

Sauce

1½ Tbsp dried shrimp sambal (page 17) or substitute with any store-bought sauce with tons of chilli and dried seafood

1½ tsp light soy sauce

1 tsp dark soy sauce

1 Tbsp sesame oil, shallot oil or garlic oil (page 16)

1. Cook the instant noodles in boiling water according to the instructions on the pack. If you want any add-ons, drop them into the boiling water at this point to cook alongside the noodles.

2. While the noodles are cooking, mix the ingredients for the sauce up in the serving bowl.
3. When the noodles are done to your liking, use a strainer to remove them from the cooking liquid and drop them into the serving bowl. Mix it up.

4. Top with spring onions or fried shallots and slurp up!

NOTES

- If you don't want to go through the trouble of frying dried shrimp sambal from ground zero, you could just as easily use a good quality jar of crispy prawn chilli or XO sauce from the store. Read the ingredient list and test if you like the flavour of it. The punchy ones would have some dried seafood in their making.



“ One cannot think well, love well
sleep well, if one has not dined well. ”

~ Virginia Woolf

Around the Dining Table

Freshly steamed whole fish topped with shards of ginger, just out the wok that doubles as a steamer; a colourful medley of vegetables given a quick blast in the wok; steamed eggs so custardy, their pillowy softness the perfect foil for steamed white rice, a bowl of soup, brewed for hours with pork bones and brimming with goodies like Chinese wolfberries, red dates, lotus root and dried scallops, promising to nourish the body after a long day's toil.

When the Chinese talk about having a meal, they use the phrase “*chi fan*”, which literally means “eat rice.” To greet others, one may also ask “*ni chi fan le ma?*” which translates to “have you eaten rice?” highlighting the importance of the grain to the Chinese.

Besides being a symbol of eating well, rice also symbolises the coming together of every member of the household, supping around the dining table

at the end of their day. A bowl of steamed rice for every person, with several dishes laid out on the dining table, bringing us back to the concept of “three dishes one soup” (*san cai yi tang*). It's amazing how quickly Chinese home cooks are able to dole out multiple dishes of family favourites, then leave the kitchen spick and span by the time we get home, leaving no trace of the frenzy that must have ensued during cooking. A home-cooked meal like this is a luxury.

Even though the term is “three dishes one soup”, you can very well use any variation or number of dishes you fancy in this section to make up your nourishing meal. If you're short on time, just two dishes would happily suffice. If you want to go the full blowout, you could choose one dish of every variety along with a soup. Mix and match. Vary it up. Do what suits your schedule or mood best. Life has enough constraining elements, cooking should not be one of them...

Meat & Poultry

Steamed Minced Pork with Salted Egg

Serves 4–6 as part of a meal

A slab of steamed, grey meat isn’t going to win any beauty contests, but as the aphorism goes, let’s not go judging a book by its cover. There are many ways to go about this giant patty of steamed meat, which is usually paired with condiments that provide a punch, such as salted fish, salted radish, fermented black beans or salted egg, all with the potential to make steamed meat exciting.

You can choose to use ready minced pork or hand chop your own, in any case, just make sure you’ve got a good amount of fat in your pork mince. The water chestnuts add sweetness and crunch to the patty, which is perfumed with ginger and spring onion, aromatics that help to cut through any strong meaty smells. After steaming, the fragrant pork will release some of its flavourful juices, making it perfect to drizzle atop steamed white rice.

2 dried Chinese mushrooms or a few pieces of dried black fungus	½ tsp grated or finely chopped ginger	½ tsp sugar
3 water chestnuts	A good dash of ground white pepper	½ tsp Shaoxing rice wine
200 g minced pork	1 tsp sesame oil	1 salted egg, yolk and white separated
4 spring onions, finely sliced	1 tsp light soy sauce	2 Tbsp water

1. Soak the dried Chinese mushrooms or dried black fungus in warm water for about 30 minutes or until softened. If using mushrooms, squeeze the excess water from the mushrooms, then trim and discard their tough, woody stems. Cut the caps into small cubes. If using black fungus, drain and cut into small cubes. Discard any hard bits.

2. Wash the water chestnuts, then peel and cut them into small cubes.
3. In a bowl, mix the minced pork together with the spring onions, ginger, pepper, sesame oil, light soy sauce, sugar, rice wine, salted egg white and water chestnuts. Using a pair of chopsticks, stir in one direction to combine the ingredients into a homogeneous mass, allowing the meat to be infused with the aromatics. Continue stirring vigorously until the mixture lightens in colour and feels tender, or less of a stodgy mass than when it started out. This is a result of the egg white working to bind everything together. Slowly incorporate about 2 Tbsp water into the meat mixture, stirring continuously.

4. Transfer the mixture to a shallow heatproof plate and spread it out evenly so it covers the base of the plate. Make a shallow indentation in the middle of the patty and place the salted egg yolk on top, either whole or chopped into pieces.

5. If there is time, allow the pork to sit in the marinade for a few minutes before steaming. Otherwise, proceed to steam over medium-high heat for 5–8 minutes, or until the pork is completely cooked through.

6. Remove the plate from the steamer and adorn the meat patty with more spring onions, chopped chillies or ginger. Serve with rice or porridge (page 15).



- NOTES
- Salted eggs are duck eggs that have been preserved in brine, resulting in a golden yolk with a powdery texture and a pristine white that’s almost like a salty agar. Some come ready cooked, but in this recipe, make sure to use the uncooked ones.
 - Use pork shoulder or pork belly for this, or a mixture of lean meat and fat. Basically, you can use any permutation you desire as long as there’s some fat and it’s not all lean meat. The fat will help make for a more tender patty.
 - The water chestnuts and aromatics are not only to flavour the pork mince. They aid in the tenderising process of the meat patty as well.
 - If mincing your own meat, freeze it for 10 minutes or so before starting the chopping process. To mince, cut the meat into thin slices, then into tiny little cubes. Once the tiny cubes are formed, roughly chop and mash the entire mass together so they form a slightly sticky paste.
 - Honestly, I get cranky if hand mincing a large quantity of meat. My solution is then to hand-mince a portion of the meat and mix it with ready minced meat.

Salted Radish Omelette

Chye Poh Neng

Serves 4–6 as part of a meal

This is the perfect salty, eggy accompaniment to a bowl of soothing, bland rice porridge. All you need are some crunchy pickles on the side and you have yourself one of the most satisfying meals. When I was growing up, rice porridge was always served with these crunchy pickles called *chye sim*, some slices of pan-fried luncheon meat and this dish of salted radish omelette. Somehow, these briny, salty dishes tasted even more delicious tempered with the porridge. Simple, inexpensive and hits the spot.

75 g salted radish (*chye poh*)
3 eggs
½ tsp sugar

1–2 dashes ground white pepper
2 Tbsp neutral-tasting oil
such as canola or sunflower oil

1. Soak the salted radish in water for about 10 minutes to remove some of its saltiness. Drain and squeeze dry.
2. Beat the eggs with the sugar and pepper.
3. Heat the oil in a wok over medium-low heat. Add the salted radish and stir-fry until lightly golden and fragrant. The little bits of radish will begin to jump around in the wok.
4. When this happens, add the beaten eggs and adjust the heat to medium-high. Let cook until the omelette is almost set and the base is golden brown. Flip it over in one deft motion and let the other side take on some colour. This may take another 20–30 seconds.
5. Transfer to a serving plate and serve with rice porridge (page 15).



NOTES

- Use a good quality salted radish (*chye poh*) for this. The kind you're after is the salted variety, not the sweet one. Check that the pack is labelled “salted” rather than “sweet”.
- Soak the salted radish for a few minutes to get rid of some of the salt. Be sure not to soak it for too long or it will lose most of its flavour.
- Flipping the omelette in one fell swoop is probably the hardest part of this dish. Make sure the bottom side up is cooked almost 80% through before attempting to flip. The best tool for this is a wide spatula that can support as much of the egg as possible. If you flip too early, you risk ripping the omelette apart. Nothing wrong with that. Practice makes perfect and it'd still taste good, so don't beat yourself up about it should the omelette break.



“ Among all peoples and in all times,
every significant event in life — be it wedding,
triumph, or birth — is marked by a meal or the sharing
of food or drink. The meal is the emblem of civilisation.
What would one know of life as it should be lived
or nights as they should be spent apart from meals? ”
~ James & Kay Salter

Special Occasions

The dishes in this section are ones that often grace my family's dinner table during special occasions. Much like a child leaping into a parent's warm embrace after falling down, these are comforting patterns we know we can always rely on. Like many Chinese families, the most important festival that we celebrate is the Lunar New Year, an extravaganza of feasting and visiting that goes on for several days.

On the eve, lunch for us would always be steamboat at my maternal grandma's place. There would be a metal hotpot in the middle of the table filled with an intensely brewed chicken stock and dishes piled high with raw sliced pork, fish, prawns, a variety of processed seafood balls, as well as an array of fresh vegetables. By the end of the meal, the stock, having been flavoured by all of these ingredients, becomes even more sumptuous. My grandma's wooden table may be humble, but she takes great pride in the preparation and selection of each ingredient, and it tastes and looks better than anything you'll find in a fancy hotpot spot.

The main snack star of the show every Lunar New Year would be my dad's pineapple tarts. He doesn't cook often, but when he does, everything he touches is gold. The pineapple filling for his pineapple tarts is always hand-grated and cooked over the stove for several hours, the constant stirring

non-negotiable as the water evaporates, concentrating the flavours and sugars. It's not an easy arm workout, not to mention the blisters that appear from the hours of constant stirring with a wooden spoon. When baked, the house smells of buttery pastry and sweet heat. The aroma of tender, fragrant dough encasing pineapple jam hits your olfactory senses even before you bite into the tart, the whiff of butter getting into the back of your nostrils.

For dinner, we'd adjourn to my paternal side, where my uncle's home would always welcome us with a huge dinner feast, all painstakingly prepared by Auntie Alicia. There would be freshly-caught seafood that my uncle would have lugged back from Malaysia. Superbly fresh fish, steamed simply with ginger and sour plums, and sea prawns fried with a sweet and sour sauce or baked with butter and garlic.

There would also be my grandpa's roast pork belly, sliced into little chunks for easy picking, the skin intensely burnished and giving off a loud crackling sound with every bite. Any leftovers would be added to stews in the following days, luxuriantly paired with collagen-rich goodies like sea cucumber and fish maw, the resultant sauce draping itself around these prized Chinese delicacies. After having our fill at dinner, we would head back home and await the visiting frenzy that would ensue the following day.

Porridge Kueh

Serves 2

This is an incredibly rare dish to find in Singapore these days and like many of the most amazing dishes around the world, this was borne out of necessity and from not wanting to let anything go to waste in leaner times. Back then, using leftover scraps from cuts of undesired meat, whipping up something to eat with the odds and ends that the rich people snubbed was like transforming lead into gold. In this recipe, leftover rice porridge is turned into a brand new dish, stretching it into sustenance for the coolies in the past. This is a Hokkien dish taught to my grandma by her mother-in-law — do give this dish of our culinary past a try, it is beguiling and the chewiness is absolutely addictive.

40 g dried shrimps	100 ml water	Dough
2 garlic cloves, peeled	1 Tbsp light soy sauce	150 g rice porridge (make sure it is thick and not too watery)
1 red bird's eye chilli	A handful of bean sprouts	160–200 g tapioca starch
2–3 Tbsp cooking oil	A handful of coriander leaves	

1. Prepare the dough. Combine the porridge and tapioca starch in a bowl and knead until a smooth dough forms. The amount of flour needed will depend on how watery the porridge is. Start with a little tapioca starch and add more as you go along. The end product should be slightly tacky but easy to work with.

2. Start a pot of water boiling. When the dough is smooth, pinch rounds of it and form into flat sheets. Drop the dough sheets into the boiling water to cook in batches. They are done when they turn opaque white and float. Drain and set aside.

3. Cover the cooked dough with cling wrap and let sit in the refrigerator overnight, or for at least a couple of hours. This will allow them to be sliced more easily.

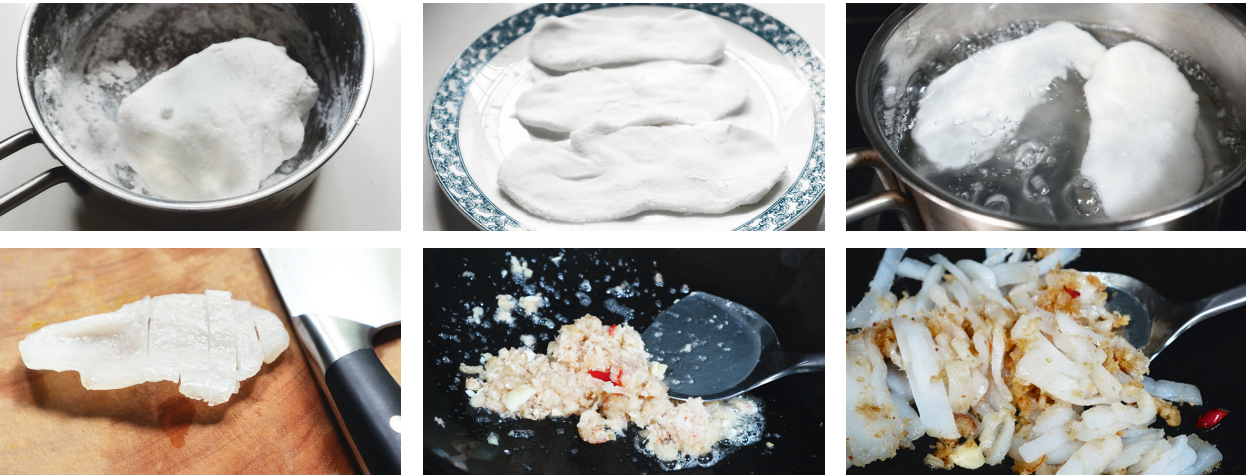
4. When ready to cook, soak the dried shrimps in water for about 20 minutes until softened. Drain well, then
- pound them using a mortar and pestle until fine. Add the garlic and chilli and pound into a paste.

5. Take the sheets of dough out of the fridge and slice them into strips. You can slice them thick or thin according to your preference. I usually slice them into strips that resemble thick French fries.

6. Heat the oil in a wok over medium-high heat. Add the dried shrimp, garlic and chilli paste and fry for a few minutes until lightly golden. Add the porridge strips and coat well with the paste.

7. Add the water and light soy sauce, then cover the wok and let the strips cook for 1–2 minutes.

8. Remove the cover and toss in the bean sprouts and coriander leaves. Turn off the heat. The vegetables will cook lightly in the residual heat. Taste and adjust the seasoning as necessary. Dish out and enjoy!



NOTES

- It is easier to start with rice porridge that is almost dried up, with as little liquid content in it as possible.
- Due to the varying moisture content of the porridge and the humidity of the environment, you could need more or less starch than stated in the recipe. Start with the lower amount and gradually increase it until a smooth, slightly tacky dough starts to come together. It should feel easy to work with.
- After the strips of porridge *kueh* are boiled, letting them rest in the refrigerator for at least a few hours (my grandma usually leaves it overnight) will allow them to cool and solidify, making for much neater and easier slicing for the final fry.

