



ANSON MILLS

Chinese Steamed Pork Buns (Char Siu Bao)

Yield

12 buns

Time

About 4 hours of work divided over 2 or 3 days

Cooking Remarks

Try to get a piece of pork belly at least 2 inches thick and 2 inches wide, with thick bands of meat evenly sandwiched between bands of pure white fat. Much of the fat will render during roasting, raining down on the meat and basting it. By the time the pork is finished, its residual fat will be fairly minimal. When you cut the roasted pork to make the filling, don't trim away all of the fat that remains—leave some for flavor.

Meet your new neighbors! To produce its complex intoxicating flavors and aroma, *char siu* requires a number of ingredients that fall well outside the Western grocery cart. (See their mug shots for identification purposes below.)

One exotic ingredient we do not use is fermented red bean curd, the product from which authentic *char siu bao* gets its color. The bean curd in question has been marinated in brine and red yeast rice, a rice inoculated with bright red yeast mold and, in this case, milled to a flour. We were thrilled to discover it and thrilled to experiment with it in our recipe, but the fermented red bean curd we tried put a bitter twist on the marinade, so we let it go. Use a drop of red food coloring (there are safe options out there) if you wish, or forsake the coloring altogether.

•Fermented Soybeans

A number of recipes for *char siu* call for peanut butter or ketchup instead of fermented soybeans, but that was getting way too western for us. Fermented soybeans have an ethereal scent and flavor reminiscent of miso, and pitch in on a number of levels.

•Chinese Rose Wine (Mui Kwe Lu)

This is actually an eau-de-vie infused with rose petals, not a wine. We cannot describe precisely what sort of alchemical magic it performs in the company of other exotic ingredients in this recipe, but the pork notes its absence. In New York's Chinatown, we found rose wine from but two producers: one from Hong Kong and one from mainland China. They were both rather pricey. We bought the one from Hong Kong because the bottle was prettier. We've heard that some large Chinese markets sell inexpensive rose wines. Since we can't comment on their quality, it might be best to stay out of their way. But our *mui kwe lu* is tasty enough to earn a front row seat in the liquor cupboard!

- Chinkiang Black Vinegar

The ultimate rice vinegar, brewed from sticky rice, Chinkiang black vinegar has a complex smoky flavor and relatively low acidity. If you cannot find it, substitute regular rice vinegar, but not seasoned rice vinegar.

- Maltose

This is the stickiest, feistiest sugar superglue on the planet. (Maltose is produced from cornstarch through a double-enzyme technique.) It makes a huge difference in the sticky, sweet final finish on the *char siu*. We tried a number of substitutes, from reduced corn syrup to malt syrup, but nothing approached the grip and tenacity of maltose. Heaven knows, it will keep forever, so the next time you're roasting up a Peking duck, you'll know where to reach.

Baking Notes

The dough, a reasonably straightforward *pain de mie* (with a touch of lard thrown in to complement the pork), is wonderfully uncomplicated to fabricate. Its initial mixing phase may find the dough briefly too wet, but remember, Anson Mills flours are slow to hydrate. Knead boldly forth—resisting an impulse to dust the counter with flour—and watch the dough becomes supple and smooth under your fingers.

Why, after all this fuss, aren't we making our own Chinese five-spice powder? We're glad you asked. Here's why: this recipe is elaborate enough as is; we call for very little of the spice; and you'd have spice leftovers but nothing much to do with them (except make Peking duck!).

Playing for Time

The pork requires at least an overnight marinade. But two nights are even better. The third day, roast the pork and make the filling, but add the scallions and chile just before using. Finish up with the dough that same day or the next. Or simply follow the recipe for a two-day operation. Your choice.

Equipment Mise en Place

For the *char siu*, you will need a fine grater, a sharp knife, a meat mallet or rolling pin, a meat fork, butcher's twine, a heavy-duty gallon-size zipper-lock bag, a food processor, a rubber spatula, a broiler pan with slotted top, aluminum foil, a small saucepan, a small rimmed baking sheet, a pair of tongs, and a heatproof basting brush.

For the dough, you will need two large mixing bowls, a small saucepan, a whisk, and a wooden spoon.

For the filling, you will need a medium mixing bowl, a small bowl or ramekin, a small saucepan, and a whisk.

For shaping and steaming the buns, you will need a digital kitchen scale, a rolling pin (optional), foil or paper muffin liners, a double-stacked 10-inch bamboo steamer with a lid, and a wok or similar skillet to use as a steamer bottom.

Ingredients

for the char siu

1½ pounds fresh pork belly with rind or about 1¼ pounds fresh pork belly without rind
3 ounces (½ cup) drained fermented soybeans
2 fresh cayenne chiles (or other spicy red chiles, such as serranos), seeded and chopped fine
2 tablespoons Chinese sweet soy sauce (or substitute regular Chinese soy sauce and increase the honey by 1 teaspoon)
1 tablespoon Chinese rose wine (*mui kwe lu*) or dry sherry
1 tablespoon toasted sesame oil
0.8 ounces (1 tablespoon) honey
2 teaspoons Chinkiang black vinegar
½ teaspoon Chinese five-spice powder
½ teaspoon freshly ground white pepper
3 medium garlic cloves, coarsely grated or chopped fine
1 medium shallot, coarsely grated or chopped fine
1 piece (2 inches) fresh ginger, peeled and coarsely grated or chopped fine
1½ ounces (about 3 tablespoons) maltose
2 drops red food coloring, optional

for the dough

11.5 ounces Anson Mills Colonial Style Fine Cloth-Bolted Pastry Flour, plus additional for dusting while shaping
7.5 ounces whole milk
0.7 ounce (1½ tablespoons) leaf lard
1½ teaspoons sugar
¾ teaspoon fine sea salt
1½ teaspoons instant yeast

for the filling

2 tablespoons chicken broth
1 teaspoon cornstarch
1½ teaspoons reserved rendered pork fat
1 medium-large shallot, minced (2 tablespoons)
Generous ¼ teaspoon Chinese five-spice powder
2 tablespoons Chinese sweet soy sauce (or substitute regular Chinese soy sauce plus 1 teaspoon honey)
1 tablespoon Chinese rose wine (*mui kwe lu*)
¼ teaspoon Chinkiang black vinegar
¼ teaspoon finely grated fresh ginger
1 fresh cayenne chile (or other spicy red chile, such as serrano), seeded and minced (about 2 tablespoons)
3 scallions, sliced into thin rings (green parts only)

Directions

1. *Marinate and then roast the char siu:* If your pork belly has rind attached, use a sharp knife to cut it away. Discard the rind or save it to make cracklings. The belly should be left with a thick band of fat covering the layers of muscle. Whether you start with rind-on or rindless pork belly, if the piece is of uneven thickness, pound it to an even thickness with a meat mallet or rolling pin. Pierce it top and bottom several times with a meat fork, and tie it at regular intervals with butcher's twine to help the pork hold its shape while roasting. Place the pork in a heavy-duty gallon-size zipper-lock bag.

2. Place the fermented soybeans, chiles, sweet soy sauce, rose wine, honey, vinegar, five-spice powder, and white pepper in the bowl of a food processor and process until smooth, stopping the machine to scrape down the sides of the bowl as necessary. The mixture will be a thick, ruddy paste. With a rubber spatula, scrape the paste into a small bowl and stir in the garlic, shallot, and ginger. Pour the marinade into the bag containing the pork and roll the pork around until it is evenly coated. Seal the bag, forcing out as much air as possible, and fold the bag around the pork. Refrigerate overnight or for up to 48 hours.

3. Adjust an oven rack to the upper-middle position and heat the oven to 425 degrees. Line the bottom of a broiler pan with aluminum foil, and then set the slotted top in place. Remove the pork from the marinade and wipe it clean with paper towels. Place it fat side up on the prepared broiler pan and roast for 30 minutes. Remove the pan from the oven and remove the top, with the pork, to a baking sheet. Pour the rendered fat into a small bowl; set aside the fat for basting. Replace the slotted top. Turn down the oven temperature to 325 degrees and continue roasting the pork, basting with rendered fat every 15 to 20 minutes, until fork tender and much of the surface fat has rendered, at least 1¼ hours—and up to 2 hours—more. Pour additional rendered fat into the basting bowl as it accumulates in the bottom of the broiler pan.

4. *While the pork is roasting, make the dough:* Place the flour in a large mixing bowl. In a small saucepan over medium heat, bring the milk to a simmer. Remove the pan from the heat; add the lard, sugar, and salt; and let cool until just warm to the touch. Add the yeast and whisk until the granules dissolve. Pour the milk mixture into the flour and stir with a wooden spoon until a shaggy dough forms. Scrape off the bits that are clinging to the spoon and begin kneading the dough by hand until all the floury bits have been incorporated. When a cohesive dough forms, turn it out onto a clean work surface and knead and crash the dough without adding additional flour until it is smooth and extensible, about 10 minutes. Round the dough into a ball and place the dough in a clean large bowl. Cover with plastic wrap and let rise at room temperature until nearly doubled in size, 45 minutes to 1 hour. Gently deflate the dough and knead it in the bowl for 5 minutes. Cover and let rise again until nearly doubled in size or until the imprint of a fingertip in the dough remains, about 40 minutes. Take care not to overproof the dough.

5. *Finish the char siu:* When the pork is done roasting, remove the broiler pan from the oven and turn on the broiler. Remove and discard the lengths of butcher's twine tied around the pork. In a small saucepan over medium heat, warm the maltose to a fluid state; stir in the food coloring, if using. Line a small baking sheet with foil. Brush the pork on all sides with the

maltose and transfer to the prepared baking sheet. Broil, turning the pork with tongs, until all sides are crisp and lacquered, 20 to 40 seconds per side. Remove from the oven and let cool slightly.

6. Make the filling: While the dough rises, cut the pork into ½-inch strips, and then into ½-inch cubes, trimming away excess fat but leaving some for flavor; you should have about 2 cups of cubed *char siu*. Place in a medium mixing bowl. In a small bowl or ramekin, whisk together the chicken broth and cornstarch. In a small saucepan, heat the reserved pork fat over medium-low heat. Add the shallots and five-spice powder and sauté gently until the shallot is softened, about 4 minutes. Whisk the chicken broth mixture to recombine, add it to the pan, and then whisk in the sweet soy sauce and rose wine. Turn down the heat to low, bring to a simmer, and cook for 20 seconds to thicken. Stir in the vinegar and grated ginger. Remove from the heat and let cool. Stir the sauce into the *char siu* along with the minced chile and scallions.

7. Form the buns: Gently deflate the dough and divide it into 12 pieces, each weighing 1.5 ounces. Without using flour, roll each piece into a tight ball using a cupping motion with your palm. Place the balls on a floured work surface, spacing them 2 inches apart, and cover lightly with plastic wrap. Let rise until spongy, 15 to 20 minutes. Working one piece at a time, flatten or roll each ball into a 5-inch round on a lightly floured work surface. Place the round in the palm of your non-dominant hand and spoon 1 ounce (2 tablespoons) of filling into the center. Pleat the dough edges with the fingers of your dominant hand, drawing the edges upward toward the center as you slowly rotate the bun in; cup your non-dominant hand to help the bun take shape. When all the edges have been pleated, gather them at the center, pushing down any filling that wants to poke out of the top, and pinch firmly to seal while twisting in the same direction as the pleats. Pinch the pleats between your fingers. Place the bun in a foil or paper muffin liner, set it in one section of a 10-inch double-stacked bamboo steamer, and cover with plastic wrap. When you have 6 buns in the steamer, set them aside, covered, and let rise until light and spongy, 10 to 15 minutes. Meanwhile, bring a few inches of water to a boil in a wok over medium-high heat and form the remaining 6 buns, placing them in the second section of the bamboo steamer. Cover the buns and let rise.

8. Steam the buns: When the first 6 buns are ready, remove the plastic wrap, cover with the bamboo steamer lid, and set the steamer over the simmering water in the wok. Increase the heat to high and steam vigorously until the buns are plump and the tops feel firm when pressed with a finger, 10 to 12 minutes. Carefully remove the steamer insert and let the buns cool while you steaming the remaining 6 buns; add more water to the wok, if necessary, before setting the steamer in place. Serve the buns warm.