

Culinary 161

Chapter 161: Entering the Top Ten! Finally, I Can Cook!

Lin Xu had never imagined that the skill of Whole Pig Slaughter would be used under these circumstances.

He held the previously sharpened kitchen knife in his hand.

First, he skillfully severed the meat on the pig's neck, cutting to where the spine met the skull, then chopped off at the joint, and the entire pig's head was detached.

Then, he continued down the spine to split the entire suckling pig into two halves.

Next, he began to handle the front legs.

After detaching the front legs, he chopped off the Pork Trotter at the joint, then sliced away the fascia surrounding the large leg bone joints, and thus the suckling pig's fore shank had been removed.

The entire process was as smooth as drifting clouds and flowing water.

「Below the stage」

Guo Weidong watched the remaining fifteen contestants, a smile gracing his features.

It's finally our Guo Family's turn to shine with our specialty dish! he thought. With my nephew's skills, they're all in for it... Wait a minute! What's with this young fellow from Building Two? How is his technique even more polished than my nephew's?

The smile froze on his face.

Where on earth did that scoundrel Xie Baomin dig up such a talent? he wondered. He's skilled in metalwork, knows to add fruit to dipping sauces, and now he's this proficient at breaking down whole pigs... My nephew's bid for a third consecutive championship is looking shaky!

「In the livestreaming room」

Fans finally witnessed Lin Xu's third foray into a new field.

"Here it comes, the familiar crossover!"

"Boss Lin is finally extending his reach into the pig butchering world!"

"Look how skilled he is! Did his family use to be butchers?"

"Boss Lin: From today on, I, Lin the Butcher, am the only meat monger in the entire market! Who agrees? Who objects?"

"Where are all those people who were always yelling about challenging Boss Lin to a knife fight? Come on out, take a few steps, and let Boss Lin show you how it's properly done."

"Exactly! Always clamoring for Boss Lin to draw his knife. Well, the knife's out now, so where are you all?"

"..."

No one had expected the scholarly-looking Boss Lin to break down pork so swiftly and fluidly.

Compared to him, the gap between the other contestants immediately became apparent.

In the third round of the competition, contestants were allowed to use their own kitchen knives. The staff had even provided a knife rack nearby, stocked with all sorts of kitchen knives, cleavers, boning knives, and more.

Even so, faced with a suckling pig lying on the cutting board, the contestants still felt at a loss as to where to begin.

Usually, the meat used in the kitchen was pre-cut; occasionally, they might have to trim a spine or ribs from a whole side of pork. But now, they had to break down an entire pig. Although this suckling pig was much smaller than the large, fattened pigs they usually encountered, it was still a pig. And it had to be broken down like one.

These contestants were already anxious. When they turned to see Lin Xu had nearly finished with half the pig, they could only lift their kitchen knives and start hacking away forcefully. But because they were chopping in the wrong places, the bones remained unmoved while their knives became blunted.

Among the competitors, Guo Xinghai's performance was relatively impressive.

He came from a family of Cantonese chefs and often handled suckling pigs for dishes like roasted suckling pig, so he was comparatively skilled at breaking them down. When he encountered joints, he knew to cut the fascia first. However, his overall fluidity still lagged behind Lin Xu's.

On the other hand, the chubby chef who had previously borrowed a pear from Lin Xu was also noteworthy. Wielding a small, sharp knife, he first removed the four Pork Trotters, followed by the four legs. From the remaining torso, he skillfully removed the ribs and then the spine. Finally, he sliced the meat from the pig's rump to its head. Although his method differed from the standard way of breaking down a pig, he managed to completely dismantle his pig just before Guo Xinghai finished.

The fans in the livestreaming room were stunned by this impressive display of skill.

"I thought only Boss Lin could be this stunning, but this chubby fellow is pretty amazing too!"

"Judging by his appearance, his family must be in the pig butchering business."

"Yo, the commenter above knows face reading?"

"Just a little."

"So, how can you tell this chubby chef's family is in the pig butchering business?"

"Because he's... fat!"

"Damn, what a reason... But seriously, thinking back, none of the butchers I've known since I was a kid were skinny."

「Yinzhou City.」

Within Longqi Mountain Scenic Area, the monitors hanging in the ticket hall were broadcasting the Fishing Platform cooking competition live.

Lin Hongqi looked up at his son's deft way of breaking down the suckling pig and couldn't help asking his wife, "Our boy in Beijing... was he really studying finance? Why do I get the feeling he spent four years working in a Beijing slaughterhouse? His technique is too professional."

Chen Meijuan shot her husband an exasperated look. "Our son is just naturally gifted. You can't cook yourself, yet you love to question other people's culinary skills."

Not at all annoyed by her remarks, Lin Hongqi said, "Well, since he's so good at butchering pigs, I'll buy a few large, fattened ones this Spring Festival. He can slaughter them, and we'll distribute the meat to the scenic area staff so everyone can have a great New Year!"

Business at the scenic area was booming, filling Lin Hongqi with energy every day. And so, almost without thinking, he had assigned his son the task of pig butchering for the New Year.

「Fishing Platform competition site.」

Lin Xu had neatly sorted all the pork into categories. After washing his hands, he stood by the side of the arena, slowly sipping a freshly brewed cup of Taiping Houkui tea.

"Bro, is your family also in the pig butchering business? You seem even more skilled at breaking down pork than I am," the chubby chef said. He had followed Lin Xu's example, organized the parts of his suckling pig, washed his hands, and come over for tea.

"Oh, I used to help out at our local slaughterhouse during summer holidays. Got used to it," Lin Xu lied, continuing to sip his tea.

"Thanks for letting me have that pear. My name is Wei Qian. Which building are you from, bro? How about we add each other on WeChat?"

The chubby chef's name was Wei Qian. At twenty-four, he was two years older than Lin Xu.

His family had been pig butchers, and he had learned to slaughter and bleed pigs at the age of eight. After starting junior high, he had to break down two pigs every afternoon after school before he could have dinner and do his homework.

For him, slaughtering live pigs and breaking down whole ones was as easy as drinking water.

Wei Qian had always taken great pride in this skill.

Until today, when he met someone for whom it seemed even easier than drinking water.

Lin Xu took out his phone and added him as a friend.

While they were chatting, Guo Xinghai also arrived.

"You two are insane, breaking down raw pigs so efficiently! Is your family in this line of business?"

Wei Qian answered for Lin Xu.

The three of them added each other as friends and chatted idly over their Taiping Houkui tea.

Before long, the third round of the competition ended.

Lin Xu once again scored full marks.

The chubby chef, Wei Qian, received 9.7 points.

And Guo Xinghai, the favorite to win and an expert in Cantonese cuisine, scored only 9.5 points.

Guo Weidong, who had previously been feeling smug about the round featuring suckling pig ingredients, was now completely deflated.

Before, he was just annoyed about potentially only getting second place. Now, even second place was out of reach!

After the elimination round, Lin Xu and seven others successfully advanced. The remaining contestants entered a revival match to compete for two spots in the top ten.

As he left the competition hall, Shen Jiayue approached with Dundun in her arms.

"Tired?" she asked. "I only realized today how many things you know."

"Not tired. These are just minor skills," Lin Xu replied, taking Dundun into his arms. He then pulled out his phone and contacted Song Tiantian and Niu Chuan separately to check on the restaurant.

After learning that everything was normal at the store, he hung up.

Holding Dundun, he headed to the lounge next to the banquet hall to rest for a while and grab a bite to eat. After the revival match ended, he would have to participate in the contest to narrow the top ten down to the top five.

Fortunately, they would be able to use stoves after the top-ten competition, allowing for a broader range of culinary challenges, unlike the current rounds centered around cutting boards.

Just as he sat down in the lounge, Wei Qian entered carrying a tray with a large plate of freshly roasted suckling pig and some other food.

"Come on, buddy, have some meat to fill you up," Wei Qian offered. "There are small pancakes here too. If you find it too greasy, you can wrap the meat in a pancake."

Lin Xu asked curiously, "You seem very familiar with this place. Where did you get this from?"

"I'm a chef from Building Number One; this is my turf, of course I know it well! Is this your cat? The little fellow is chubby and looks really lively."

Wei Qian, a naturally outgoing person, sat down and started chatting with Lin Xu while nibbling on the charcoal-roasted suckling pig.

The pork, marinated with garlic and various spices, was roasted over charcoal. Biting into a piece, the outer Pork Skin was delightfully crispy, while the meat inside was tender and juicy.

Moreover, due to the slow roasting over a low fire, the meat was practically falling off the bone.

"This isn't the pork we broke down, is it?" Lin Xu asked.

"No, this was marinated before the competition started. Does your cat eat this meat? Should I get some other kind for it?"

Lin Xu picked up a piece of the suckling pig's Pork Ribs and placed it in front of Dundun.

The little creature actually squatted down and began to eat, finishing two small pieces before leaping onto the windowsill. There, it gazed at the scenery outside while licking its paws and grooming its face.

While they were eating, Guo Xinghai walked in.

"What do you guys think the top-ten competition will be about later?"

That question...

Wei Qian said, "If we eliminate time-consuming dishes, those with complicated methods, and those that don't present well or showcase culinary skill, then the competition will likely feature some quick and straightforward dishes."

That reasoning was sound, but before the competition, who would have predicted the chief judge would ask them to demonstrate their Knife Skills with a blunted knife? Who would have guessed the third round would be Whole Pig Slaughter? Ever since Geng Lishan became the chief judge, everything had become difficult to predict.

When they were almost done eating, Wei Qian took the leftover meat back to the kitchen.

When he returned, his face bore a shocked expression. "I don't know if it's because of the competition or something else," he exclaimed, "but the restaurant in Building Number One has an occupancy rate of over sixty percent! That usually only happens on holidays."

The restaurant at Fishing Platform was different from Lin Ji's Food. Here, the average cost was two to three thousand yuan per person; people paid for the ambiance and prestige. If the occupancy rate reached sixty percent, a single meal service could generate revenue in the hundreds of thousands.

Lin Xu glanced at Dundun, still grooming itself on the windowsill.

Could they have been attracted by this little one? he wondered. Its reputation for attracting wealth is truly well-deserved!

After resting for about twenty minutes, Lin Xu and the others returned to the competition arena.

The results of the revival round were out, and the top ten contestants had been determined.

It was time to compete with real culinary skills.

The cutting boards at the competition site had been cleared away, and all contestants now stood before stoves. Next to each stove was a rack displaying various ingredients.

The chief judge, Geng Lishan, announced, "The top ten have been decided. Next is the on-stove cooking challenge. Contestants, please choose your main ingredient according to your ranking in the previous round. You may only select one. Please consider carefully."

Choose one main ingredient?

Lin Xu, who had ranked first in the previous round, approached the ingredients rack. He saw beef, sea bass, Carp, whole chicken, Pork Ribs, pork belly, Large Shrimp, and other items displayed.

Which one should I choose as the main ingredient for this round's test?

After a moment's thought, Lin Xu picked the lively sea bass.

Below the stage, upon seeing Lin Xu's choice, Guo Weidong instantly felt his nephew had a chance again.

He actually chose sea bass! Is he planning to make Steamed Sea Bass? Guo Weidong mused. Excellent! He's finally walked right into my nephew's strong suit!

However, just as he was feeling pleased, he recalled Lin Xu's previous achievements, and a thought couldn't help but surface: This young man... surely he isn't skilled in Cantonese cuisine as well?

Chapter 162: Steamed Sea Bass VS Boiled Large Shrimp!

Seeing Lin Xu had chosen sea bass, a sigh of relief washed over Shen Jiayue and the others in the audience. They had all tasted Lin Xu's Steamed Sea Bass before and knew how good it was. As long as he performed normally, this round should be in the bag.

"Senior Brother, can Lin Xu's Steamed Sea Bass win?" Shen Jiayue asked Xie Baomin, who stood next to her.

"It's hard to say. Guo Xinghai's cooking skills are also good. Once he gets a whole chicken, he can make his best dish, Plain Chicken. That's how our Building 2 has been losing to Building 10 these past two years," Xie Baomin said.

Upon hearing this, everyone prayed that the second-ranked chubby chef, Wei Qian, would choose the whole chicken. This would prevent Guo Xinghai from making his signature Plain Chicken, and Lin Xu's ranking for this round would be secure.

However, when it was Wei Qian's turn to pick ingredients, he didn't hesitate for a moment and chose the Pork Ribs from the rack, laughing that it was his favorite dish.

Shen Jiayue, Chen Yan, and Geng Lele were fuming in the audience. This isn't a buffet! Why pick what you like to eat?! That huge chicken, can't he see it?

Seeing Wei Qian choose Pork Ribs over the whole chicken, Guo Weidong, whose mood had been fluctuating, felt a new surge of hope. My nephew's Plain Chicken is exceptional. Just give him a chance to select a whole chicken, and he'll be unbeatable. He won the championship the past two years with this dish. Let's make it again this year. We have to beat that kid from Building 2 in one round!

Just when everyone thought Guo Xinghai would choose the whole chicken, he instead approached the rack, picked up the basket of still-living Large Shrimp, and carried it away.

This... Not only was the audience somewhat stunned, but even the elderly members of the consultant team were taken aback.

"This kid makes such good Plain Chicken; why isn't he making it this year?" one commented.

"What a pity! Such a great opportunity to score points," said another.

"Old Guo, isn't your grandson planning to take down Old Gao's apprentice this year?"

"Exactly! Your son has been defeated by him for five years straight. Can't your grandson pull off a threepeat at least?"

Old Master Gao glared. "If you bunch of old coots keep stoking the fire here, I'll throw all your walking sticks into the Goldfish Pond outside!"

The other elders immediately shut their mouths. If it were anyone else who said this, they would ignore it and might even argue back, citing their seniority. But Gao Peisheng, when furious, dared to do anything. No one dared to provoke him, or else this vindictive old man would definitely make them suffer a great embarrassment. He had a long history of such acts, and almost everyone had fallen victim to them at some point.

Old Master Gao ignored the old men, turning instead to a portly old man he had nearly tripped over earlier. "Old Cricket," he asked, "your grandson still has some tricks up his sleeve, right?"

The portly old man was Guo Xinghai's grandfather, Guo Jichang. He didn't hide anything. "After winning last year, our boy lived in Yangcheng with me all year. He hasn't made much Plain Chicken; instead, he's practiced Boiled Shrimp a lot. Today, he's probably going to make Boiled Large Shrimp."

HISS... Boiled Large Shrimp? That was also one of the signature dishes of Cantonese cuisine! Everyone had just thought he was throwing in the towel. It turned out that seeing Lin Xu choosing seafood ingredients, he had followed suit and picked the same type. This was a clear challenge!

After asking Guo Jichang, Old Master Gao looked at another old man with a slicked-back hairdo. "Old He," he asked, "is that chubby kid from your Building 1? I see he's been ranking quite high in these few rounds. Didn't you mentor him?"

The old man with the slicked-back hair shook his head. "I was going to, but that kid just loves to cook pork. He doesn't enjoy making other types of dishes and is quite stubborn. I mentored him for a while, then stopped."

Old Master Gao's interest was piqued. "Does he have an official position in your Building 1?"

"No, he's a contract worker. He's been at Building 1 for several years now. He was even chubbier when he first arrived; he only got a bit slimmer from all the work in the kitchen."

So that's how it is... Old Master Gao didn't ask further, continuing to watch the competition.

「In Wu Kexin's live broadcast room,」 the fans became excited when they saw Lin Xu had picked the sea bass.

"Aha! Boss Lin finally remembered this is a cooking competition!"

"He just released a cooking tutorial on Steamed Sea Bass, so he should be solid this round."

"Boss Lin making it to the top five is definitely no problem. Now it's just to see if he can win the championship."

"Exactly! Starting the top ten with such high-end dishes means the difficulty will surely increase for the top five and top three. Hopefully, Boss Lin can push harder and beat those high-and-mighty chefs from Fishing Platform!"

「At the competition venue,」 once all ten contestants had picked their ingredients, Geng Lishan announced, "Please prepare a dish using the ingredients at hand within thirty minutes. Any flavor profile is allowed. The timer starts now!"

The rack that had held the ingredients was moved aside and replaced by a larger one, filled with various condiments and side dishes that could be used in cooking. Lin Xu glanced at it. The rack was stocked not only with common items such as Scallion and Ginger, garlic, and spices, but even niche ingredients like caul fat were available.

He carried the sea bass to the sink next to the stove and began to gut and scale it. After cleaning it thoroughly, he marinated it briefly with Scallion and Ginger.

As he was doing this, he went to the ingredients rack to grab some caul fat, just as he encountered Wei Qian who was coming to get Crystal Sugar.

"Let me try your Steamed Sea Bass later," Wei Qian offered. "I'll save some of my sweet and sour Pork Ribs for you too."

Lin Xu acknowledged him and continued with his work. At a nearby stove, Guo Xinghai was also busily preparing.

Chapter 163: Steamed Sea Bass VS Boiled Large Shrimp!

The most crucial thing about cooking Boiled Large Shrimp is the control over the heat. A difference of even one degree in water temperature, higher or lower, can affect the outcome, so precise control is essential.

As for the other contestants, some were chopping pork belly, planning to cook Braised Pork Belly using a pressure cooker. Others were dicing chicken for Spicy Chicken, while some were preparing a carp to make Sweet and Sour Carp.

Half an hour wasn't particularly short, but it wasn't long either. A slight lapse in attention could mean running out of time. So, they had to race against the clock, unable to afford wasting a single second.

They couldn't afford to waste a single moment.

At the judges' table, the judges watched the contestants work while chatting softly among themselves.

"I heard that the contestant from Building Two isn't a chef there," one said.

"Yes, like Guo Xinghai, he's a hired consultant; it seems he runs a small diner outside," another added.

"A small diner chef could best a chef from the Fishing Platform? I don't believe it!"

"His mentor is Gao Peisheng, the former head chef at the Fishing Platform. You all know Gao Peisheng, right? His other disciple, Xie Baomin, is the current Executive Head Chef at Building Two."

"If that's the case, then it wouldn't be surprising if this contestant won the championship."

"What's this contestant's name?"

"His name is Lin Xu. He also makes food tutorials during his free time, and he's gained some fame online."

Popular online? Upon hearing this, Geng Lishan looked up the name on his phone. Soon, his search for 'Lin Xu' yielded plenty of results.

The online information about Lin Xu was very detailed: he is the owner of Lin Ji's Food, the owner of the internet-famous cat, Dundun, and he has a very beautiful girlfriend.

Lin Ji's Food? Geng Lishan searched the name again. When he saw the pictures of takeout boxes shared by netizens, he was completely stunned.

Isn't this the Lin Ji's Food that my granddaughter tricked me into writing the store name for? That owner often had my granddaughter bring him Chicken Feet, calling it something like a 'calligraphy fee.' I never expected to meet him here.

Looking at Lin Xu busy at the stove, Geng Lishan felt quite emotional.

Some people, though unrelated, shamelessly try to curry favor for their own benefit, while others, who clearly could have used their connections, never breathe a word about them. No wonder Lele said she came ahead with a friend. She must have come with Lin Xu, right? He surely knew from the start that I, Lele's grandfather, was the main judge. Yet, during our previous interactions, he never brought it up and even seemed to avoid such topics. He's as proud as I am!

For a moment, Geng Lishan felt as if he had found a kindred spirit.

He had always thought that his granddaughter getting him to write the name 'Lin Ji's Food' was at the store owner's instigation. That was why he never gave her the original calligraphy, despite her asking for it several times. But now it seems... I've really misjudged him, suspecting a noble man with my own petty heart! Such a proud person, how could he ask my granddaughter to do such a thing? When I get back, I'll give the original piece of calligraphy to this young Boss Lin... No! I'll write a new one myself, personally deliver it as a gift, and apologize for my previous misunderstanding! A proud man like myself shouldn't let such a misunderstanding stand!

For a moment, Geng Lishan felt a surge of scholarly pride. If it weren't for being at the competition site, surrounded by media and vloggers live-streaming, he might have gone down to greet Lin Xu right then and there.

Let's focus on the competition first. We can talk after it ends!

「Time swiftly passed.」

"Time's up!"

With the scorer's command, the ten contestants finished preparing their dishes.

A long table covered with a white tablecloth was set up in front of the judges' panel.

The staff arranged the ten completed dishes on the table one by one.

"Wow! It smells so good!"

"The presentation is also very exquisite."

"Every dish looks so tempting."

"Is there any rice? I really want to have a hearty meal with it."

In the audience, everyone was craning their necks toward the table, sniffing the drifting aroma.

The Steamed Sea Bass was intact, topped with hair-thin shreds of scallion and ginger, looking exquisite and tempting.

The bright red Boiled Large Shrimp were arranged in a circle on the plate, with a dipping sauce specially prepared by Guo Xinghai in the center.

The glossy Sweet and Sour Pork Ribs were coated in a thick sauce, the ribs stacked neatly, one on top of another—a sight that would delight any perfectionist.

As for the other contestants' dishes—the Sweet and Sour Carp shaped like a fish leaping over the dragon gate, neatly stacked squares of Braised Pork Belly, and the Spicy Chicken, a platter brimming with bright red chilies—all also looked extremely appealing.

"My mouth is watering helplessly, practically drooling!"

"The presentation alone is making me drool uncontrollably!"

"If I could eat that, I'd devour the plate too!"

"Can I have the sauce from that Braised Pork Belly? I want to mix it with rice, WAAAH..."

"Me too! I love eating it mixed with rice!"

"AAHHH! All ten of these dishes are my favorites! Did they read my mind before they started cooking?"

"Isn't there a possibility that you're just a foodie who isn't picky?"

In the live-stream room, as the ten dishes were sequentially brought to the table and Wu Kexin circled the table, capturing close-ups with her handheld gimbal, all the fans were practically drooling. They all expressed their eagerness to try the food.

At the judges' seats, after the close-ups were taken, Geng Lishan and the others stood up to taste and score.

As Lin Xu stood by the stove, waiting for the judges' comments, Wei Qian suddenly approached and handed him a small bowl. Taking it, Lin Xu saw it contained less than half a small bowl of richly fragrant Braised Pork Ribs.

These ribs were cut into small segments, slightly over an inch long, all straight-cut ribs. After being cooked, the meat had contracted towards the middle, exposing the ends of the bones.

Chapter 164: Steamed Sea Bass VS Boiled Large Shrimp!

Tsk... I forgot to save a piece of fish for Wei Qian, Lin Xu thought.

"Try my cooking," the chubby chef said, having returned to his stove. "After the judges have finished scoring, I'll try your fish."

Seeing that the audience and the live media were all gathered around the judges, Lin Xu picked up a Pork Rib, popped it into his mouth, and then gently pulled, the bone sliding out cleanly.

The Pork Ribs had a rich, sweet flavor. But they weren't greasy; instead, they had a refreshing quality. Lin Xu noticed half a somewhat squeezed lemon on Wei Qian's stove and understood the trick. Wei Qian must have squeezed some lemon juice into the pot just before it was ready. This added a touch of refreshing brightness that cut through any potential greasiness, perfectly complementing the sweet and

sour profile of the Pork Ribs. The amount of lemon was minimal, just enough to enhance without overpowering the rich aroma of the ribs or the classic sweet and sour sauce.

This technique is impressive, Lin Xu mused. I should try to learn it. No wonder he asked to borrow a snow pear in the second round; he must enjoy experimenting with fruit in his cooking.

He chewed gently. The sweet and sour sauce coating the outside, combined with the succulent meat juices, elevated the ribs' deliciousness to another level. Moreover, the meat was cooked to perfection—pleasantly chewy yet incredibly tender.

Wei Qian's cooking skills are truly impressive, Lin Xu thought, tasting another piece and finding it even more delicious. I definitely need to use a Cooking Learning Card to learn Wei Qian's rib recipe. These Pork Ribs could be a signature dish at any restaurant. Truly impressive.

While he was eating, Guo Xinghai came over.

"Is this Wei Qian's work? May I try a bite? I'll trade you some of my Boiled Shrimp for it."

With that, he handed over a small bowl. Inside was a small dish containing dipping sauce for Boiled Shrimp. Underneath the small dish were several bright red Large Shrimps.

Why is everyone coming over to feed me? Lin Xu wondered. He handed his small bowl to Guo Xinghai, and they made the exchange.

Lin Xu set the small dish on the stove and began peeling the Large Shrimps from his new bowl. Meanwhile, Guo Xinghai popped a rib into his mouth.

"Hmm, Wei Qian's Pork Ribs are really good," Guo Xinghai remarked. "No wonder he chose this ingredient; these ribs have practically reached a level of perfection." He then urged Lin Xu, "Quick, try the Boiled Shrimp I made. See whose cooking is better, mine or Wei Qian's."

I'm not a food critic... Lin Xu thought. And these aren't even the same type of food. How am I supposed to compare them?

He twisted off a shrimp head, peeled away the shell, and revealed the whole shrimp. The vein had been removed before cooking, so Lin Xu dipped it directly into the sauce and put the entire shrimp into his mouth.

The first sensation was the savory saltiness of the dipping sauce, mingled with a subtle, spicy kick from ginger. As he chewed gently, his teeth met the tender resistance of the perfectly cooked shrimp. The natural sweetness of the shrimp then bloomed in his mouth, beautifully balancing the sauce's saltiness. This interplay enriched the overall umami, while the ginger's lingering spice continued to dance on his taste buds.

Delicious!

Previously, Lin Xu hadn't understood why people from Guangdong always described seafood as "sweet." But tasting this shrimp, he finally grasped the meaning of sweetness in Cantonese cuisine. This "sweetness" wasn't derived from sugar. Instead, it was a unique, lingering aftertaste that develops when seafood is exceptionally fresh—a sensation on the palate that closely resembles sweetness. That was why people from Guangdong habitually referred to it as "sweet."

"Well? Not bad, right?" Guo Xinghai hadn't left. He stood next to Lin Xu, munching on Pork Ribs, his face full of expectation as he waited for the expert's verdict on his dish.

Lin Xu gave him a thumbs-up. "Perfect! This is the tastiest Boiled Large Shrimp I've ever had in my life."

This wasn't mere flattery; the flavor of these Boiled Large Shrimps was truly excellent. Achieving this level of Boiled Large Shrimp depended on flawless ingredients, masterful heat control, and, crucially, that seemingly simple dipping sauce. Only the perfect synergy of these elements could create such an impeccable flavor.

"I really want to try the Steamed Sea Bass you made," Guo Xinghai continued. "I'm sure it's also superb."

Lin Xu chuckled, and they chatted quietly.

At this moment, everyone in the venue and those watching the live broadcast were focused on the center of the arena. The judges had begun tasting the Steamed Sea Bass prepared by Lin Xu. This was the moment everyone had been waiting for. They all wanted to know what kind of evaluation Lin Xu's dishes, previously featured in his cooking tutorials, would receive from true culinary experts.

The judges took turns tasting it with their chopsticks. As soon as the fish entered their mouths, the expressions on their faces changed significantly.

"This fish is unbelievably succulent!"

"The heat control was exquisite; the flesh is cooked perfectly, yet the bones retained the translucent hue of being just barely cooked through—a testament to rare precision."

"The fish is delicate and clean-tasting, yet carried a unique, rich fragrance from lard. This dish is absolute perfection."

"I agree, it's exceptional. From the presentation and cooking precision to the seasoning, every aspect is masterfully handled."

"Mr. Lishan, what are your thoughts?"

Geng Lishan pondered for a long moment before giving his evaluation: "I feel I'm not qualified to judge this fish."

This wasn't merely a judgment of a dish; it was a profound acknowledgment, a meeting of minds between two proud, exceptional talents.

His comment not only set the live broadcast's chat ablaze but also captivated the audience in the venue.

How delicious must this fish be for Judge Lishan to say such a thing? After all, he was a renowned gourmet in Beijing, celebrated for many years. A fish that could make such a distinguished gourmet feel inadequate... It was almost unbelievable!

Once all the dishes had been evaluated, the scoring began.

Thanks to Geng Lishan's comment, Lin Xu's Steamed Sea Bass undoubtedly received a perfect score.

Guo Xinghai's Boiled Large Shrimp also scored an impressive 9.7. His shrimp were perfect, but points were deducted because they required peeling. Indeed, in culinary competitions, actions required during tasting, such as peeling, deboning, or skinning, are grounds for point deductions.

Wei Qian's sweet and sour Pork Ribs received 9.6 points, missing a higher score by a mere 0.1.

The chefs who prepared Braised Pork Belly and Sweet and Sour Carp both received scores of 9.4.

The chefs from Fishing Platform, all possessing unquestionable skill, consistently scored above nine.

After the scoring, Guo Xinghai, Wei Qian, and the other chefs immediately rushed over to taste Lin Xu's Steamed Sea Bass. They wanted to see if Mr. Lishan had exaggerated, and also to understand the gap between their skills and Lin Xu's.

After tasting it, all the chefs were thoroughly convinced.

Sitting in the audience, Guo Weidong saw his nephew give Lin Xu a thumbs-up. He knew their chances of winning had become very slim.

That damn Xie Baomin, Guo Weidong fumed internally. How can his luck be so good?

He couldn't help but turn his head, bracing himself for that irritatingly smug middle finger, but instead, he saw Xie Baomin approaching him.

"Weidong," Xie Baomin said, "how about we grab a drink somewhere tonight? My treat."

"The competition isn't over yet," Guo Weidong retorted stubbornly. "It's not decided who's treating whom."

"I must say, I quite like that rebellious spirit of yours," Xie Baomin chuckled. "Alright then, let's wait until the competition ends. Whoever takes first place pays!"

Guo Weidong said nothing more, instead turning his gaze back to the competition venue.

The battle for the top five was about to begin!

Chapter 165: Thunderbolt Out of the Blue? Lin Xu's Ultimate Comeback!

「The competition venue.」

「After a short break.」

Geng Lishan announced that the top-five championship battle was about to begin. Very soon, the ingredients on the rack were updated. Lin Xu noticed that whether it was Scallion and Ginger or other ingredients, they were all individually wrapped in bags. Three jugs of cooking oil and ingredients like pork were placed on the top shelf.

"All contestants must choose their desired ingredients and seasonings in order, selecting only one item at a time. The first-place contestant will pick first in the first round, the second-place contestant in the second round, the third-place contestant in the third round, and so forth. A total of five rounds will be held. After these five rounds, you will use your chosen ingredients to create one dish. There are no restrictions on flavor."

Only five ingredients?

Everyone stared intently at the ingredients on the rack, calculating how to pick appropriately.

「After the competition started.」

Lin Xu walked up to the rack and first grabbed a jug of cooking oil. No matter what dish was being cooked, cooking oil was an indispensable ingredient. There were only three jugs of oil on the rack, so grabbing one quickly was vital. Otherwise, he would have to cook without oil or hope to get pork in the next round to render lard from Pork Fat.

Seeing this, Guo Xinghai and Wei Qian also chose cooking oil. The remaining two contestants each grabbed one of the two remaining pieces of pork, clearly having also thought of rendering lard.

「After the first round of picking.」

Guo Xinghai, the second-place contestant overall, started the second round of choices. He had initially wanted to take Pork Ribs, but when he saw only four packs of salt on the rack, he unhesitatingly grabbed one. Seeing this, Wei Qian and the two contestants after him also each picked a pack of salt.

Lin Xu: "..."

How am I supposed to choose now?

「Below the stage.」

Shen Jiayue's heart leaped into her throat. She was about to badmouth the person who set the questions, but then she remembered it was Lele's grandfather. Swallowing her complaints, she turned to Xie Baomin, who was sitting nearby, and asked, "Senior Brother, what should Xu Bao do now? Could he be eliminated?"

Without salt, cooking became mere wishful thinking.

Xie Baomin was also surprised that the top-five competition would feature such a challenge. "In this situation, he can only make desserts. Fortunately, Junior Brother is quite knowledgeable about them. His previous dishes like Shakima and Almond Tofu were all pretty good."

But good as they might be, in a culinary competition, if desserts weren't specifically required, recklessly preparing them wouldn't earn high scores. After all, savory dishes were mainstream, and sweet dishes had far too many limitations.

「In front of the rack.」

Lin Xu also knew savory dishes were out of his reach.

But for dessert...

He saw there was only one pack of White Sugar on the rack, weighing approximately one to one-and-a-half kilograms, and immediately grabbed it.

Right, I'd better secure the sugar quickly, lest even desserts become impossible later.

After he took the White Sugar, a hint of regret flashed across everyone's faces, from the judges' panel to the advisory group. Pitting desserts against savory dishes was undoubtedly like a mantis trying to stop a chariot—futile. Many people even began to grumble softly about the person who had set the challenge. "A culinary competition should just let people cook their dishes. Why bother with all these unnecessary twists?" they muttered.

"Old Master Gao, what should we do now?" Old He from Building One took the initiative to ask.

Old Master Gao smiled wryly. "What can we do? Just keep cooking and take it one step at a time. He's still young; it's normal to face some setbacks. Life can't always be smooth sailing."

But despite saying that, he still hoped his disciple could prove himself with a dessert. Such immense talent! It would be such a pity for him to stop at the top five!

「In the online live broadcast room.」

The fans were no longer in the mood to joke.

"Can Mr. Lin make it through this round with a dessert dish?"

"It's risky. In all culinary competitions, there's never been a precedent for a dessert ultimately beating a savory dish."

"What a shame... He's so talented!"

"Yeah, waking up just after four every morning, working himself to the bone, yet he still remembers to shoot a vlog every other day to teach us how to cook."

"I've posted in the Lin Ji's Food online topic, hoping everyone will cheer for Mr. Lin!"

"Go for it, Demon King! No matter what place you get, you're always our culinary champion!"

"That's right! You'll always be the culinary champion in our hearts!"

"..."

「The competition venue.」

「After the second round of choices.」

Wei Qian, the third-place contestant, began the third round of picking. He selected a piece of loin meat. The next two contestants took beef and chicken wings, respectively. When it was Lin Xu's turn, he glanced at the minced meat among the meat ingredients, then promptly carried away an old pumpkin from the rack. It was the only ingredient there suitable for a dessert.

"This could work... At least he can make candied pumpkin with it, so he won't score zero," Xie Baomin muttered under his breath.

Seeing Guo Weidong looking over again, he irritably raised both middle fingers.

I'm in no mood to be exchanging suggestive glances with you right now!

The picking continued. Guo Xinghai chose the minced meat.

「Then the fourth round of picking officially began.」

Lin Xu got salted duck egg yolks, which gave Shen Jiayue a slight sense of relief.

At least he can make egg yolk baked pumpkin now!

When the fifth round of picking arrived, Lin Xu stood before the rack, pondering for a long time before selecting a pack of glutinous rice flour.

"Why did he choose glutinous rice flour? The dish egg yolk baked pumpkin doesn't even use it," one of the elders in the advisory group remarked. They could usually guess most of the dishes the contestants were planning just by looking at the ingredients.

They were no longer paying much attention to Lin Xu.

Chapter 166: Thunderbolt Out of The Blue? Lin Xu's Extreme Turnaround! _2

Instead, they focused their attention on Guo Xinghai, who had chosen meat filling and loofah. If they weren't mistaken, this "Mr. Guo" was probably planning to make Stuffed Loofah.

「The five rounds of selection ended.」

Everyone stood at their respective stoves and began to busily prepare.

At the main judges' table, Geng Lishan looked at Lin Xu apologetically. He truly hadn't expected the competition format he designed to end up harming his friend. But it was too late; the rules had already been set, and there wasn't enough time to change them. The competition had to go on as planned.

At his stove, Lin Xu, with a composed expression, poured a third of the white sugar he had obtained into the pot. He then added a bowl of water and set it on the stove to start cooking. While boiling, he stirred the contents with a spoon. This not only sped up the melting of the sugar but also distributed the heat evenly, preventing the sugar from sticking and burning at the bottom of the pot.

Soon, all the sugar in the pot had melted. He continued to stir. When the surface of the sugar water in the pot began to turn slightly yellow and the mixture thickened, he turned off the heat and brought over a large empty pot. He poured the cooked syrup into it, placed it on the ground, and quickly spun the pot, using the centrifugal force of the spinning iron pot to rapidly evaporate the water in the syrup.

"What is he doing?"

"It looks like he's making sugar."

"Sugar?"

"Kitchen candy, scallion candy, melon candy, and other similar sugar products are all made this way."

"I know these kinds of candies, but this is a culinary competition. Can he score high with just sugar?"

"That'll be tough!"

「In the audience」

Hearing the whispers of the people around her, Shen Jiayue hugged Dundun, nearly in tears.

Chen Yan comforted her, saying, "Now, now, your brother-in-law is so amazing. Maybe he can make it through this round of competition too?"

Geng Lele, with her cheeks propped in her hands, sighed heavily. When her grandfather had asked for her opinion on the rules, she had casually mentioned having the contestants select the ingredients. She never expected her grandfather to actually implement it. Sorry, Boss Lin!

The sugar syrup in the iron pot quickly began to thicken.

Feeling that there was still a little too much moisture, he set the pot aside and aimed a fan at it. Then he took another pot, cleaned and dried it, poured in the glutinous rice flour, and set it over a low flame to heat.

What Lin Xu was about to make was the Perfect Level Snack he had been rewarded with for making Shakima—Dragon Beard Candy. He planned to use the Dragon Beard Candy as a garnish, presenting the egg yolk baked pumpkin in a new and creative form.

As for whether he would succeed or not, he couldn't say for certain. Anyway, he would just do his best.

While making Dragon Beard Candy, the maltose could easily cool down during the pulling process, causing the sugar strands to snap. Therefore, he had to use the heated glutinous rice flour to maintain the temperature. During the pulling process, he let the sugar strands constantly roll over the warm glutinous rice flour. This not only maintained the temperature but also prevented the sugar strands from sticking together.

After the glutinous rice flour was heated, he carried the pot and poured its contents into a deeper tray. Then he took out the maltose, which had been mostly dried by the fan.

"Wow! Isn't he worried about getting burned? That sugar must be at least sixty or seventy degrees, right?"

"Heat or cold doesn't bother him; you can tell he's an old hand at cooking. Too bad we won't see him in the next round."

"It really is a pity."

"Indeed, but isn't that always the case with competitions?"

"Yes, that's the allure of competitions—always full of suspense and uncertainty."

"..."

Lin Xu rolled the maltose in his hand into a long strip, then connected the two ends and pinched them tightly together. He then carefully expanded the loop. After enlarging it, he coated it with the warmed glutinous rice flour from the tray and gave it a twist to form a figure-eight loop. Finally, he folded it again, grabbed both ends, stretched it out, and continued the folding process. This repeated pulling made the sugar strands finer and finer, and the originally golden maltose turned white.

"Holy cow! Is Boss Lin going all out?"

"Isn't that Dragon Beard Candy, as fine as hair? I bought a box at a tourist spot once, and it tasted pretty good."

"Boss Lin hasn't given up yet!"

"He definitely won't give up. Let's hope for a miracle in this competition!"

"Come on, Boss Lin, we won't give up either!"

"Damn it, let's keep posting and rooting for Boss Lin!"

"Me too! If I don't do something, I'll feel like I owe him for all the previous teasing."

"..."

Although fans often joked about Lin Xu, at this moment, they truly hoped he could create a miracle. They weren't asking for the miracle to be spectacular—just enough to get him into the next round of the competition.

Finally, Lin Xu transformed the original block of golden, still slightly hot maltose into a cluster of strands finer than hair.

After all that hard work, he cut the Dragon Beard Candy, took a large bowl, and slowly wound the candy into it. Starting at the bottom of the bowl, he wound it in circles upwards, all the way to the rim, tucking in any excess candy and setting it aside to cool.

Then he picked up the pumpkin he had chosen earlier. First, he peeled it. Next, he cut half of the pumpkin into uneven strips, while the other half was scooped into round balls with a melon baller.

Once both preparations were complete, he heated oil in a pan. When the oil was hot, he deep-fried the pumpkin strips until their outsides were crispy and then removed them. He then did the same with the pumpkin balls, frying them until they too were crispy.

"Brother, what is Lin Xu doing?"

Shen Jiayue had originally thought Lin Xu would make egg yolk baked pumpkin. But after he spent so much time making Dragon Beard Candy and was now deep-frying pumpkin balls, she couldn't understand what he was doing at all.

Chapter 167: Thunderbolt Out of The Blue? Lin Xu's Extreme Turnaround! _3

Xie Baomin was also somewhat surprised.

However, seeing his junior brother bustling around enthusiastically and occasionally flashing a confident smile, he said to Shen Jiayue, "Perhaps Junior Brother is preparing a new dish. Don't worry, Jiayue. With his talent, he won't give in."

"Yes, I'm not worried. No matter what rank he gets, he's still the culinary king in my eyes!"

Over at the consultant group, a group of elderly gentlemen were also stunned.

"Old Gao, what on earth is your disciple doing?"

How would Old Gao know? But seeing Lin Xu not giving up or feeling sorry for himself made him very happy.

"No matter what he's doing, it's better than doing nothing, right? After all, he has just as many ingredients as anyone else. Though he has no salt, others don't have sugar either."

Each person had five types of ingredients—no more, no less, perfectly fair.

In Old Gao's view, this was actually quite equitable. This competition was testing the chefs' culinary skills under extreme conditions. Perhaps this really might allow his disciple to find a breakthrough.

"Old Gao, seeing how excited you are, if your disciple really gets through this round, are you going to give him a special reward?"

Old Gao said nonchalantly, "Win or lose, I'll give him a shop. If he wins, it's a reward; if he loses, it's encouragement."

「At the cooking station」

Lin Xu was still busy.

After frying all the pumpkin strips and pumpkin balls, he poured the oil out of the wok.

Next, he added half of the remaining white sugar into the wok, poured in half a bowl of clear water, and simmered it on low heat, stirring slowly and continuously with a spoon.

He continued stirring even after the sugar in the wok had melted. He waited until the sugar thickened and turned dark brown, then turned off the heat. This was how caramel was made. It wasn't overly sweet but possessed a delightful caramel aroma.

After turning off the heat, he stirred for a moment longer to allow the wok's temperature to drop slightly. Then, he added the fried pumpkin strips and tossed them quickly, ensuring they were thoroughly coated with caramel.

Once evenly coated, he took a large plate, placed the caramel-coated pumpkin strips in the center, and then, using his hands, carefully arranged them into a tousled, nest-like shape with a depression in the middle.

After arranging them, Lin Xu switched to another pot. He steamed the salted duck egg yolks he had obtained earlier and then flattened them with a knife.

Then, he poured oil into the wok. Without waiting for the oil to heat up, he added the salted duck egg yolks and stir-fried them. When the mixture started bubbling, he added three small spoonfuls of white sugar to neutralize the saltiness of the egg yolks.

Finally, he added the fried pumpkin balls to the wok. He stir-fried them on low heat, allowing the egg yolk paste to evenly coat the pumpkin balls.

He then removed them from the wok.

By this time, the caramel-coated pumpkin strips had also cooled enough to handle.

Lin Xu took out the almost-set Dragon Beard Candy from the bowl and carefully placed it in the depression in the center of the pumpkin strips. It was surprisingly the perfect size, resembling a bird's nest perched on a pile of dry twigs.

Then, he carefully arranged the egg yolk-coated pumpkin balls inside the nest.

This uniquely styled dish, which ingeniously combined three items—Caramelized Pumpkin, egg yolk baked pumpkin, and Dragon Beard Candy (a snack)—was complete.

"Damn! Boss Lin really went all out this time!"

"What is this dish? I've never heard of it before. Did he create it?"

"It must be his creation. In the nest is the egg yolk baked pumpkin, and below it is the Caramelized Pumpkin; these are different components."

"Holy moly! Is this Boss Lin at full power?"

"I thought he was just fooling around in the first three rounds, but it looks like he was fooling around in all four!"

"Thank the organizers for pushing Boss Lin to his full potential!"

"So grateful! Otherwise, when would we ever get to see this dish?"

"..."

The fans in the live broadcast room felt like they were on a roller coaster. From initially seeing the championship within reach, to the bolt from the blue of having no salt, and now to this dramatic turnaround, everyone's emotions had undergone huge ups and downs.

The audience at the scene was also captivated by the dish Lin Xu had made.

"Ah! It looks so tempting!"

"I have absolutely no resistance to caramel; I really want to try it."

"I'd like to try those egg yolk baked pumpkin balls."

"Everyone else seems to be almost done too. Shouldn't they start the judging now?"

By now, Guo Xinghai's Stuffed Loofah, Wei Qian's Smooth Sautéed Pork Loin, and the other two contestants' Braised Chicken Wings and Stir-Fried Beef were all completed.

It was once again time for the judges to taste and score, and for the audience to salivate uncontrollably.

Geng Lishan stepped down from the judges' panel. Looking at Lin Xu, he inquired, "An original dish? I haven't seen this method before."

Lin Xu nodded. "You could say it's an original dish. It's actually just a combination of several dishes."

Everyone knew it was a combination of several dishes. But while some people could combine dishes to make them look appealing and beautiful, others ended up with a total mess. Lin Xu's creation belonged to the former category.

Geng Lishan then asked, "Have you thought of a name for this dish?"

A judge nearby immediately chimed in enthusiastically, "Since it looks like a bird's nest, why not call it Bird's Nest?"

Another judge remarked, "The name 'Bird's Nest' is too common. How about just 'Nest'? That has more artistic conception."

"I also think 'Nest' is good. It has a poetic feel and is thoughtful."

While they were discussing, Lin Xu said with a smile, "Whether it's called a bird's nest or Bird's Nest, it's a home for the bird. So, I think it should be called 'Home'."

Home?

Geng Lishan stared, dumbfounded, at the dish on the plate. He felt the name was incredibly apt.

It wasn't just because of its beautiful symbolism; the bird's nest, crafted from Thousand-layer Cake, also represented the tenderest part of everyone's heart—the part that holds family, children, and all that a person cherishes.

What a great name!

He had previously lamented that contemporary chefs lacked depth and cultural substance in their cooking. But now, this young fellow before him had thoroughly proven him wrong—a metaphorical slap in the face. This dish was spot on in terms of depth, cultural significance, and even symbolism. One could say this was the best dish he had encountered in recent years.

This young fellow is truly remarkable!

However, Geng Lishan didn't know that while Lin Xu was creating this dish just moments ago, he had wrestled with numerous ideas, exhausted countless brain cells, and also spent 200,000 System Points.

[Excellent Level Plating Technique: Exchange Price 100,000 points]

[Excellent Level Caramelizing Technique: Exchange Price 100,000 points]

Today, he had already spent 400,000 points. He had squandered all the points saved after acquiring the Heartless Iron Hand, and now he didn't even have 5,000 points left in the System.

It was like being back to square one!

Just as he was lamenting how quickly points were spent, a notification from the System rang in Lin Xu's mind:

"The Host has utilized his mastered techniques to create the Perfect Level dish 'Home,' earning a one-time Perfect Level Dish Exchange Reward. The Host can now exchange for a dish from his memory. Exchange immediately?"

A dish from his memory? Which one should he exchange?

Lin Xu thought for a moment, then suddenly remembered a dish his senior brother had made back at the shop...

This is the one!

Chapter 168: Advance to the Finals! Make a Meaningful Dish!

"Would you like to exchange for the Perfect Level White Jade Lotus Root Strips?"

"Yes!"

"Exchange successful. Congratulations on obtaining the Perfect Level White Jade Lotus Root Strips. As this dish was created by your master Gao Peisheng, you are additionally rewarded with a Superior Cooking Learning Card."

Haha! It actually succeeded?

Last time Xie Baomin cooked White Jade Lotus Root Strips, I used a Cooking Learning Card to learn it. However, my knife skills weren't yet at the Superior level, so the attempt failed.

I'd thought I would fail again this time, but to my surprise, I succeeded in one go and even received an extra Superior Cooking Learning Card!

What is a surprise? This is a surprise!

At this moment, spending two hundred thousand points doesn't feel unjust at all. Two Perfect Level dishes and a Superior Cooking Learning Card... what more could I want?

As he was deep in thought, Wu Kexin was sneakily using her phone to take several close-ups of the dishes on the table, then posted them on her social media account:

"Under the condition of only having five ingredients, Boss Lin created this original dish 'Home'. Here's a close-up, welcome to taste!"

Very soon, the likes and comments began to surge.

"Wow! I thought Boss Lin was about to exit in gloom, and I missed the drama! Guys, let's head back, Boss Lin is going to win!"

"Heading back right now! Got to give Boss Lin a round of donations."

"This dish looks so expensive that I can't afford it!"

"Me neither, but that doesn't matter. What's important is to cheer for Boss Lin!"

"Here it comes! How could I miss the storyline where Boss Lin turns the tables?"

"Hope the judges will go easy!"

"..."

「At the competition site,」

The judges began their tasting.

First was the Stuffed Loofah by Guo Xinghai. This steamed dish was aesthetically pleasing with its emerald green loofah filled with meat stuffing, garnished with minced garlic on top. The rich aroma of meat, mixed with the fresh scent of loofah, immediately made one's mouth water.

When Guo Xinghai prepared this dish, he faced significant difficulties. He had no Light Soy Sauce or Scallion and Ginger. For marinating the meat, he could only dissolve table salt in water to use as a substitute for Scallion and Ginger water and Light Soy Sauce. Then, he pounded the meat until it became sticky and glutinous.

Normally, when stuffing the loofah, a layer of starch would be smeared on the inner wall to prevent the filling from slipping out after steaming. But he hadn't managed to grab any starch. So, using a small knife, he had to meticulously carve the inner wall of the loofah, making it as uneven as possible to help the meat stuffing adhere. Luckily, he had managed to grab some garlic. Using cooking oil and table salt, he made a simple garlic paste, which added a subtle garlic aroma to the Stuffed Loofah.

Guo Xinghai then said to Lin Xu with a smile, "If only I could replace the cooking oil with Light Soy Sauce, the taste of this dish would probably be better."

Wei Qian, who was next to him, asked, "Then how would you make the golden and silver garlic?"

"I could pick the fat from the meat stuffing and render it out."

Tsk. It seemed Guo Xinghai wasn't very satisfied with his Stuffed Loofah.

The judges tasted it and gave a high appraisal of the Stuffed Loofah.

"Made with only salt for seasoning, it's incredible how perfectly this Stuffed Loofah's flavor and color turned out. Truly, the culinary skill is no simple feat."

"Yes, the natural umami of the pork and the fresh fragrance of the loofah combine wonderfully."

"The steaming is just right."

"The golden and silver garlic is a brilliant touch; the garlic aroma truly elevates both the savoriness of the meat and the freshness of the loofah."

The Stuffed Loofah received unanimous praise from the judges.

Then they started tasting the Scallion Exploded Pork Loin prepared by Wei Qian.

Upon getting the pork loin, he initially planned to make smooth-sautéed pork loin. But without egg white and starch, it just wouldn't smooth out. Fortunately, he managed to get scallions in the fifth round, so he opted for this Scallion Exploded Pork Loin.

The dish smelled good, but its major flaw was the absence of Dark Soy Sauce, which meant that the pork loin couldn't be properly colored. The pale white pork slices mixed with the white parts of the scallions were somewhat lacking in presentation.

"I should have swapped the fresh ginger for Dark Soy Sauce. That way, the color would be better, and it would add a bit of sauce flavor. Unlike now; although I added ginger, it's completely overshadowed by the scallions, making almost no difference," Wei Qian said, looking regretful. He felt he hadn't showcased his full capabilities.

However, the judges tasted it and found it quite good. The scallion and meat flavors combined well.

After tasting all the savory dishes, the judges began sampling Lin Xu's original creation. Everyone initially thought this dish was just for show, but after tasting, they discovered it had a variety of textures, and each flavor was distinct.

First were the egg yolk baked pumpkin balls. This dish beautifully interwove sweet and savory notes, with a rich egg yolk aroma. And as they ate, they could also savor the distinctly dense and sandy texture of the salted egg yolk.

After finishing the egg yolk baked pumpkin balls, the judges then tried the Caramelized Pumpkin pieces beneath, which represented "dry tree branches." The deep-fried pumpkin strips, coated in dark brown caramel, were fragrant and sweet, while the soft pumpkin within provided a contrasting texture.

Next, they curiously tasted those strands of Dragon Beard Candy, finer than hair. These melted in the mouth, delivering a sweet taste with a subtle fragrance of glutinous rice flour.

This single dish, offering three distinct textures and flavors along with such an appealing presentation, left the judges thoroughly impressed and satisfied.

After finishing the tasting, the scoring began. This was the part that netizens were most interested in. After all, Lin Xu had played his ace. If he were to be eliminated after this, it would truly be a great injustice.

Chapter 169: Advancing to the Finals! Make a Meaningful Dish! _2

In the end, Lin Xu once again obtained a perfect score with an original dish that was impeccable in both appearance and taste.

Guo Xinghai, who lacked Light Soy Sauce and other seasonings, also scored 9.6.

Wei Qian, whose dish's presentation lost significant points, scored 9.4.

As for the other two contestants, they scored 9.2 and 9.1 respectively.

After the scores were announced, the audience, both on-site and watching the live broadcast, were all very excited. They had witnessed the birth of a new dish under extreme conditions and Lin Xu's efforts to turn the tables with all his might.

"When will Fishing Platform add this new dish to the menu? I'll be the first to order it!"

"I want to try it too, no matter the cost."

"Count me in! The presentation is so good, it's worth it just for the photos."

"..."

Many in the audience were members of Fishing Platform, specially invited today to witness the cooking competition. Now, enticed by Lin Xu's dish, they were eager to taste it.

Hearing the discussions, Liao Jinming, the head of Fishing Platform's Dining Department seated in the front row, sighed helplessly. When he first saw Lin Xu's original dish, he too was very tempted and wanted to introduce it across the various halls as soon as possible. But after discussing it with a few people, he realized there were not many at Fishing Platform who could make this dish. This was because not only did the dish require expert preparation of egg yolk baked pumpkin and Caramelized Pumpkin, but it also needed someone skilled in making Dragon Beard Candy and proficient at plating. Apart from the pastry chefs, very few others could manage it. After all, not everyone could cross into other domains as easily as Lin Xu did.

However, since the customers liked it, Liao Jinming could only say, "Rest assured, everyone, we will introduce Mr. Lin Xu's newly created dish at Building No. 2 as soon as possible. We also welcome everyone to Building No. 2 to try our other dishes."

Hmm, Lin Xu is a consultant hired by Building No. 2. Let Xie Baomin from Building No. 2 worry about this matter then, he thought. Director Liao, with a skillful maneuver, kicked the ball into Xie Baomin's court, who was sitting in the audience munching on melon seeds.

Lin Xu was chatting with Wei Qian and Guo Xinghai when suddenly the system notification sounded in his mind:

"Host has conquered the leaders of Fishing Platform with his culinary skills, completing the side quest 'Make a Name at the State Guesthouse,' and earned one Perfect Level Red Braised category dish lottery draw. Would you like to draw it immediately?"

Damn! Being acknowledged by the leaders of Fishing Platform is equivalent to making a name at the State Guesthouse! Lin Xu was pleasantly surprised. He had thought the task would only be completed after the competition was over. Since the lucky draw expert, Dundun, wasn't by his side at the moment, he'd suppress the urge to draw immediately. He planned to embrace Dundun and draw after the competition ended. The dishes rewarded by the system were actually quite good. However, some weren't suitable for introducing at the restaurant, while others could help it make a lot of money. To avoid wasting a good draw, he had to rely on Dundun.

After the scores came out, the last two contestants were eliminated, ranking fourth and fifth respectively. Lin Xu, Guo Xinghai, and Wei Qian advanced to the final round to compete for champion, runner-up, and third place.

On the consultants' side, ever since Lin Xu had presented his dish, Grandpa Gao's smile hadn't faded.

"Old Gao, this kid really makes you proud, doesn't he?"

"His skills are indeed impressive. Even for us, under such conditions, we might not have been able to come up with such a dish to break the deadlock."

Combining two dishes wasn't difficult, nor was making Dragon Beard Candy. The hard part was figuring out how to bring them all together. These old masters really wanted to ask Lin Xu what his thought process had been at that time. With such limited time and ingredients, to come up with such a brilliant idea was truly admirable!

"The younger generation is indeed formidable!"

Below the stage, upon hearing the scores, Shen Jiayue excitedly hugged Dundun and kissed him several times. The little guy was so annoyed that he jumped straight into Geng Lele's arms.

"You're my Xu Bao's son, so you're my son! What's wrong with a few kisses from your mother? How dare you hide!" Shen Jiayue, dissatisfied, tugged at Dundun's ear.

Chen Yan, standing beside her, said, "He probably thinks of you as a stepmother; that's why he avoids you, making me, his aunt, also disliked by him."

Shen Jiayue thought, What in the world? You're always roughhandling him, and now you're blaming me?

Soon, the final round was about to begin. After the ingredients on the shelf were replaced, Geng Lishan announced, "The requirements for the final round are very simple: within forty minutes, create one dish."

There are no restrictions on taste, type, ingredients, or techniques. Contestants, please give it your all and leave no regrets. The competition starts now!"

This announcement made everyone breathe a sigh of relief. Finally, they could let loose and cook whatever they wanted.

After the competition started, Wei Qian, who enjoyed cooking pork, first picked a piece of Belly Meat from the pig's hindquarter and selected Doubanjiang, chili, and other seasonings and ingredients. It looked as though he intended to make Sichuan cuisine's signature dish, Fried Pork.

When it was Guo Xinghai's turn to pick, he glanced at the Pork Large Intestine, the squab, and several kinds of fresh seafood, but in the end, he chose a piece of pork and a pineapple.

"Old Guo, is your grandson preparing to make Gulao Meat?" Grandpa Gao asked curiously. "Among Cantonese cuisine, there are many dishes that can score high. Why did the kid choose such a relatively home-style dish?"

Guo Jichang laughed and said, "When this kid first learned cooking with me, the very first dish he learned was Gulao Meat. Choosing to make this dish now shows he hasn't forgotten his original aspiration."

So it was such a meaningful dish.

Chapter 170: Advance to the Finals! Make a Meaningful Dish! _3

It looks like this final will be even more exciting.

"Old Gao, what will your disciple choose to make?"

This question really stumped him. His disciple knew a lot of dishes. Just picking one could earn him a good score. He thought Lin Xu should make the Sweet and Sour Pork Loin, which tends to score well. This dish looks good, tastes good, and is relatively easy to present. Of course, stir-fried beef wasn't bad either, and it suited this kind of occasion.

However, as he was deep in thought, he saw Lin Xu take a Lotus Root from the shelf, along with White Vinegar, white Soy Sauce, and other seasonings.

This is...

"No way, Old Gao? Is your disciple going to make a cold dish?"

"This must be a joke, right? He just barely made it through the dessert round because the other contestants were too restricted. Now, when other contestants are preparing hot dishes, your disciple isn't planning to win with a cold dish, is he?"

"This kid is really making me anxious!"

Someone quipped, "Old Guo, you can start smiling now. Your grandson's triple crown is about to become a reality!"

The group fell silent for a moment.

Grandpa Gao, however, paid no attention to these comments. His eyes sparkled with joy as he watched the stage, tears faintly visible.

"Good kid, such a good kid!" he murmured.

Meanwhile, below the stage, Xie Baomin's face unconsciously broke into a relieved smile when he saw the ingredients and seasonings Lin Xu had picked.

Shen Jiayue, not understanding, asked, "Senior Brother, Xu Bao chose Lotus Root. What dish is he planning to make?"

It always feels like others choose meat ingredients, while our Xu Bao only took a Lotus Root. We're losing momentum right from the start,

she thought.

Xie Baomin said, "My Junior Brother is preparing to make the White Jade Lotus Root Strips, the dish our master made famous at the Fishing Platform years ago! I can't believe it. I only made it in front of him once, and he actually learned it."

"Years ago, our master, then in his twenties, was transferred from a state-owned restaurant to serve as a chef at the Fishing Platform State Guesthouse. There, he created the White Jade Lotus Root Strips and became famous overnight. And, at a cooking contest several years ago, I also won the championship of the middle-aged group cooking contest with this dish, defeating Guo Weidong's Braised Abalone with Sea Cucumber, thus starting my journey to five consecutive championships."

Now, my Junior Brother has also chosen this dish, as if by tacit understanding. Master must be thrilled, right? If I weren't worried about being seen as a fool, I'd stand up and cheer for Lin Xu right now! Xie Baomin thought.

White Jade Lotus Root Strips? Shen Jiayue and Chen Yan exchanged a look. They had both tasted this dish. They still remembered its ultimate crispiness and flavor vividly. If it's this dish... he might actually win this competition!

"Brother-in-law will definitely win!" Chen Yan declared. "After all, haven't I always said that good-looking people tend to have good luck?"

Next to her, Geng Lele blinked. "You? Who's 'I'?"

Chen Yan pointed at herself. "Me!"

「In the live broadcast chat」

Netizens were fiercely debating Lin Xu's choice.

"He won the last round by taking an unconventional approach. Is he going to do it again this round?"

"Cold dishes usually get marked down in cooking competitions."

"Then how did Plain Chicken win last year? Isn't that a cold dish too?"

"You don't really expect Lotus Root to taste like Plain Chicken, do you?"

"I just believe Boss Lin can win the championship, no matter the dish."

"I believe in him too. With his incredible culinary skills, even if he likes to mess around sometimes, he knows when to be serious."

The discussion raged on.

Amidst these doubts and expectations, Lin Xu calmly began to peel the Lotus Root. After peeling it, he placed the Lotus Root in water mixed with White Vinegar and washed it twice to prevent oxidation and discoloration.

Then, he picked up his cleaver and began slicing it thinly. Lotus Root is porous, so cutting it into uniform, thin slices required tremendous effort. This was because whenever the blade encountered one of the many holes, it could easily slip, causing the knife edge to veer off course. If not for the support of his Perfect Level Technique, Lin Xu would have cut his hand several times already.

「At the judges' table」

Geng Lishan watched Lin Xu slicing the Lotus Root, a puzzled expression on his face. With so many ingredients like chicken, duck, Fish, and other meats available, why did he choose Lotus Root? Is he planning to use a cold dish to defeat hot, savory dishes? I really don't understand this young friend's choice.

A fellow judge whispered, "Throughout the entire history of modern cuisine, Lotus Root dishes have one particularly famous anecdote. A cold Lotus Root dish once captivated the Prime Minister of Japan during his visit to China. He was so intrigued that he never forgot it, even mentioning it in his memoirs..."

This remark startled Geng Lishan, and he suddenly recalled that well-known story. It seems that dish was from the kitchens of the Fishing Platform State Guesthouse. This young friend... could he be attempting to replicate that very dish?

Geng Lishan had once listed several great regrets in his life, and that legendary cold Lotus Root dish from culinary lore was among them. He didn't even know its name, but after hearing the tale, he had never forgotten it.

"I've also heard of that dish," another judge chimed in. "It's called White Jade Lotus Root Strips. Leaders from several countries specifically requested it before their visits, and I hear it's a specialty of Building Two."

White Jade Lotus Root Strips? A specialty of Building Two? Geng Lishan's breath caught in his throat. Lin Xu is representing Building Two in this competition. Could he... could he really be planning to make the White Jade Lotus Root Strips?

「With the consultant group」

Seeing Lin Xu slice the Lotus Root into thin strips, the smiles on the faces of the old master chefs gradually vanished.

"Old Gao, this kid isn't planning to make White Jade Lotus Root Strips, is he?" one asked.

"Seems like it. Look at that smug expression on Old Gao's face."

"Damn it! Then what's the point of competing? Even I... no, not just me, it seems like all of us have been bested by this dish before..."

Meanwhile, in the audience, Xie Baomin was watching his Junior Brother slice vegetables when he suddenly realized Guo Weidong had sat down beside him at some point.

"Old Xie, your Junior Brother is going to make White Jade Lotus Root Strips, isn't he?" Guo Weidong asked.

Xie Baomin smiled. "Probably. With the ingredients and seasonings he's chosen, what else could he make?"

Guo Weidong pressed, "That dish demands such high Knife Skills. Could he have mastered it at such a young age?"

"Weidong, cooking isn't just about effort; it's also about talent. Just because you can't do it doesn't mean others can't... So, what are we drinking tonight? I'll get the alcohol ready in advance."

Guo Weidong sighed. "You should tell me where we're eating first..."

Xie Baomin pointed towards the stage. "My Junior Brother's restaurant. I'll have him personally cook for you. How does that sound?"

"Deal. I'll bring Xinghai along tonight to properly taste the champion's skills."

If it were any other dish, my nephew's Gulao Meat might still have a chance, Guo Weidong thought. But with White Jade Lotus Root Strips on the table, there's basically no chance of turning things around. After all, this is a dish served to VIPs—perfect in appearance, taste, and texture.

「Half an hour later」

When Lin Xu had neatly arranged the finished White Jade Lotus Root Strips on the plate, the system's alert sounded again:

"Host has recreated Master Gao Peisheng's original dish, triggering the Mentorship Quest 'Inheritance': Please learn three or more Perfect Level original dishes from Master Gao Peisheng within one year. Upon completion, receive two draws for the Perfect Level Lost Dish lottery and one draw for the Perfect Level Cooking Technique lottery."

Lin Xu was speechless for a moment. So Master has more than one original dish, huh? What am I waiting for then? Learn, learn, learn!

Just as he was psyching himself up, the competition time ended.

Staff members brought the contestants' finished dishes to the judges' table.

The judges stood up.

The scoring began!