

Culinary 191

Chapter 191: Pagoda Meat is Out of the Pot! No Appetite Because of the Hot Weather? Spicy and Sour Noodles to the Rescue!

It was indeed perfect for a bowl of hot and sour noodles in the heat of summer.

When the noodles in the pot were almost cooked, he lifted them out and quickly ran them under cold water. This cooled down the noodles to prevent burning the mouth when eating. Additionally, the sudden chill from the cold water caused the surface of the noodles to contract, giving them a more refreshing and smoother texture.

He then placed the chilled noodles into a bowl with the prepared sauce and sprinkled some roasted peanuts on top. An appetizing and delicious bowl of hot and sour noodles was ready.

"It's ready, you can eat now."

Lin Xu didn't have any specific Technique for making hot and sour noodles, but the dish was simple to make. Even without any particular Technique, Lin Xu felt that just by adding that little spoonful of lard, the dish had to be at least Excellent Level.

The others took their bowls of hot and sour noodles.

Chen Yan tried hers first and immediately exclaimed, "Ah, the flavor of these hot and sour noodles is really good—sour and spicy, but not overly so, which makes them very refreshing and satisfying to eat! Brother-in-law, I think even without this restaurant, you could make money just by operating a small shop that sells hot and sour noodles."

Lin Xu laughed. The hot and sour noodles tasted good because he was generous with the ingredients. Whether it was the vinegar, Chili Oil, or the lard, the quality of all was very high. Coupled with using premium handmade noodles, the flavor could hardly be anything less than superb.

But if he were to open a shop, the cost would be way too high. If he set the prices too low, he'd lose money; if he set them too high, nobody would buy. Better to just enjoy them as a treat for himself.

He stirred the bowl, picked up a chopstick full of noodles, blew on them, and then slurped them into his mouth.

Yep, the texture was indeed smooth.

The sour and spicy flavor was also very addictive.

A mouthful of noodles went down, and pores all over his body seemed to open up; the original languor of his appetite was instantly invigorated.

Truly a Divine Artifact for whetting the appetite!

After two more bites, he felt thoroughly refreshed. The irritability that came with the hot weather also settled down in that moment.

Exhilarating!

"Mr. Lin, your culinary skills are absolutely unmatched—much better than what you get at a typical restaurant! I'm really in awe of your talent in cooking," said Dou Wenjing. She had initially only intended to have a few bites and then find a place to eat after work. But upon tasting the hot and sour noodles made by Lin Xu, she immediately fell in love with their flavor and texture.

Lin Xu said with a smile, "Don't praise me too much. It's mainly because the recipe for hot and sour noodles is simple. If you wanted to eat Opening Water Chinese Cabbage, then I'd really be at a loss."

As they were talking, Wu Kexin, who was tasting the Pagoda Meat nearby, asked, "Lin, the steaming time for the Pagoda Meat is similar to that of the Pickled Pork, so why does it taste more tender than Pickled Pork? Did you improve your Technique?"

This question piqued the fans' curiosity as well. They began to speculate, some even listing chemical formulas.

Lin Xu replied with a smile, "It has nothing to do with my skills; it's just that metal conducts heat better than ceramic dishes. That's also why we use metal plates for steaming chicken with fermented black bean sauce in the restaurant; it speeds up the meat cooking time."

So that's why... Wu Kexin quietly made a note of it. In the future, if a similar situation arose, she could explain it methodically and show off a bit.

She took another two bites of the Pagoda Meat, then handed the rest over to her crew. "I'm not very hungry; you guys eat the rest. I'm going to eat my hot and sour noodles."

She hadn't planned on doing such a long live broadcast today. It was only because Lin Xu suggested it that she extended it until now and made the much-anticipated Pagoda Meat.

But what's the use of just making it? If I do it myself, I'll still mess it up.

Without Lin Xu's excellent Knife Skills, don't even think about making something like Pagoda Meat.

"We've tasted the Pagoda Meat, now let's begin tasting the hot and sour noodles made by Boss Lin. As usual, family members eat first."

Wu Kexin lifted a chopstick full of noodles toward the live stream camera. She waited for a stream of 'want to eat' comments to float by, then picked up another chopstickful and tasted it.

Mmm, the texture is really smooth. Amidst the sour and spicy flavor, there's a rich fragrance of lard and the numbing taste of Sichuan peppercorns, along with the flavors of cilantro, green onions, and minced garlic.

It's so satisfying to eat!

No wonder both Boss Chen and Boss Dou praised it as delicious.

This tangy and spicy taste really is incredibly satisfying.

She ate with such gusto, Red Oil from the chili peppers smearing her lips, which had the viewers in the live stream practically drooling.

"It looks really delicious."

"Although Boss Lin likes to cross boundaries, his skills are truly impeccable."

"I'm so hungry watching this; too bad my takeout won't arrive for another half an hour."

"I just ordered hot and sour noodles for takeout; I hope they're as good as Boss Lin's."

"Xinxin could totally be an endorser for hot and sour noodles! With the way she eats, even I, someone who doesn't usually like hot and sour noodles, am drooling."

"The person above, quickly retract your comment! If Panda Brother sees it, he might just arrange a sales live stream tonight."

"..."

While people in the store were slurping down their hot and sour noodles with gusto, the scene was quite different over at Madam Yu's courtyard on South Third Ring.

Shen Guofu, his wife, and daughter were enjoying the crystal sugar pork knuckles that had been stewing all afternoon, praising Madam Yu's culinary skills. Meanwhile, Madam Yu was intently looking at photos just sent by Shen Jiayue on her phone.

"Is this my grandson-in-law? He's quite handsome, like a movie star... Guofu, when are you planning to arrange Yueyue's and his engagement?"

Shen Guofu had just picked up a piece of pork knuckle skin when Shen Jiayue snatched it away. So, he simply picked up a slice of lean meat, put it in his mouth, and said, "We met his mother last time, but

they didn't bring up this matter, so we didn't either. It seems they plan to buy a house before getting engaged."

Madam Yu set down her phone and said, "They didn't mention it, so you just leave it unspoken? Engagement is a matter for both sides; you can't always wait for the man's family to initiate. They might even worry that you would refuse because they don't have a house."

"Alright, after he visits our home, I'll talk to his parents about the engagement."

Madam Yu, eating a mantou with some pickled tofu, said with a smile, "Last time, Yueyue brought me some Chicken Feet and other things, and they were delicious. My grandson-in-law's culinary skills are truly excellent. I wonder if he can make crystal sugar pork knuckles..."

Nearby, Shen Jiayue jumped in right away, "He can, he can make anything! Next time, I'll ask him to make you a crystal sugar pork knuckle dish, how about that? You're always eating what you make; it's time for you to try something from the younger generation!"

Madam Yu's face was full of smiles. "Then I'll look forward to it. My dear granddaughter really is such a filial child."

"Of course! I'm the most, most, most, most filial child in the whole world, right, Dad? Mom?"

Shen Guofu: "..."

Han Shuzhen: "..."

The couple exchanged a look and simultaneously looked up at the sky.

"The weather's nice today," Shen Guofu observed.

"Yes, yes, it's quite suitable for drying quilts..." Han Shuzhen chimed in.

Chapter 192: A Dish That Breaks the Senior Brother's Defense—Braised Eggplant!

As night fell, Lin Ji's Food welcomed its evening rush.

Perhaps because the news of the upcoming renovation had spread, there were more customers today than usual, making it more crowded. Even regulars like Yue Liyue and Professor Xu chose to get takeout instead.

Well, the closure is imminent. Better save the seats for those who came from afar. After all, it's not easy for them to make the trip.

"Boss Lin, how long will the renovation take?"

"Will there be a price increase in the new store?"

"Will it still be this crowded after reopening?"

"Will you be opening any branches later on?"

"..."

The customers were full of curiosity about the new store. They looked forward to a time when they wouldn't have to wait in line for a seat but also worried about possible price hikes and a decline in food quality after the reopening.

Regarding Lin Ji's Food, the customers' attitude was similar to that of fans of certain indie singers. It was a contradictory mindset, fearing their 'Bro' would suffer hardship, yet also worrying if 'Bro' started driving a luxury car. They were afraid that if the business expanded and flourished, it would become distant from its customers. Even worse, under the sway of capital, it might open numerous branches, ultimately resulting in a messy failure.

Lin Xu patiently said to them, "The renovation might take about a month, depending on the progress. Food prices might be slightly adjusted, but not by much. As for branches, there are no current plans, so everyone can rest assured."

While the customers in the store excitedly discussed its future, Lin Xu's recently uploaded video on how to make White Jade Lotus Root Strips was gaining exceptional popularity on the short video platform. Countless viewers flocked to it, eager to learn the recipe for this award-winning dish.

"Damn! Those knife skills are enough to scare anyone off."

"Calling for Mom won't solve this one; these knife skills are beyond my mom's capabilities."

"I was thinking of making this for my family this weekend, but given the knife skills required, it feels more likely my family would send me to the hospital."

"Just by looking at this presentation, I know it's something I can't afford."

"Looking forward to Dundun's tasting segment..."

"Don't get your hopes up. I just came back from Sister Xin's live broadcast, and Dundun didn't appear this time."

"Why isn't he on camera? Doesn't my Dundun deserve to eat a dish meant for honored guests?"

"Here's an interesting fact: Cats are carnivores; they don't eat vegetables."

The video had a high view count, and its popularity was still on the rise. In just a few hours, it climbed into the top ten of the food section's leaderboard.

Fans of other food content creators began tagging the creators they followed:

"Look at the great content I found for you!"

"How about making this in your next video? Other food creators can do it. I won't allow the one I follow not to know how!"

"This White Jade Lotus Root Strips dish is trending. Do you want to be one of this year's top hundred creators? If so, get moving and make a version next time that will blow them away!"

"Let the competition heat up!"

Suddenly, nearly every food content creator in the section was tagged, making them take notice of the White Jade Lotus Root Strips. When they first saw the dish's name, they thought they could attempt it to satisfy their fans and ride the wave of popularity. But after watching the method, many of them quickly abandoned the idea.

Can't do it, just can't. I make videos to earn a modest income to support my family, not to injure myself. It's simply not worth risking my hands for a few more views.

However, they were also curious about this new star in the food section who was capable of making such a labor-intensive dish. So, they started browsing Lin Xu's previous videos. They saw the dishes he had made before, met Dundun, and were introduced to a series of details about Lin Xu. This information included him having a rich and beautiful girlfriend, being an apprentice to a State Banquet master, and his small restaurant in Beijing always having a queue.

"Wow, what a great restaurant! I should go film a review there sometime."

However, after learning about Lin Ji's Food's history, they discovered that this restaurant, open for less than a month, was already closing for renovation.

"Other restaurants struggle to get on track in their first month. This guy's place, though, is doing so well after less than a month that they already have to expand!"

Discussions of all kinds were endless, and the video's popularity and view count continued to soar.

By the time Lin Xu finished work for the night, the video's view count had surpassed 500,000 and was marching towards 1,000,000. His account's follower count had also officially broken the 200,000 mark.

In just a few hours, his follower count had jumped by seventy to eighty thousand, which pleasantly surprised Lin Xu. The more followers he had, the easier it became to keep the topic of Lin Ji's Food trending. He was also getting closer to completing the main task, "Rise to Fame," with about ten days left before the deadline.

The topic of Lin Ji's Food officially reached second place in popularity tonight. Although there was still a significant gap behind Yanjing Food Sharing in first place, it wasn't insurmountable. Given the current momentum, the gap in popularity between the two topics could likely be closed in about a week.

However, making it into the top ten of the overall Yanjing Region rankings was a much bigger challenge. Lin Ji's Food had just broken into the top twenty, currently at eighteenth overall. It was still over a million points in popularity behind the tenth-place topic, #Chaoyang Residents Did It Again#.

Lin Xu sighed. It's a long road ahead!

He watched a video from his classmate Shen, showing his father-in-law flailing about on a dance machine for a while. Then, he bid good night to Little Yueyue, who was teetering on the edge of a scolding, turned off the lights, and went to sleep.

Chapter 193: A Dish That Breaks the Senior Brother's Defense—Braised Eggplant!

「Two days later.」

While Lin Xu was waiting for the designer Dou Wenjing had found to produce the blueprints, his senior, Xie Baomin, hurriedly pushed the door open and entered the shop.

"Junior Bro, when are you going to renovate this place? Many customers have started heading to Building Number Two to order your 'Family' dish. I had someone try making it, but the presentation fell far short of yours; I didn't have the nerve to serve it to customers... If you don't get back to work, the reputation of Building Number Two will suffer!"

Building Number Two originally didn't have much fame, its business incomparable to that of Building Number Ten. But ever since Lin Xu won the championship on behalf of Building Number Two, many customers who dined at Fishing Platform took a detour to Building Number Two to try something new, which greatly boosted its turnover. So Xie Baomin wanted to seize the opportunity and urged Lin Xu to go back to work as soon as possible. With the prestige of the cooking competition champion, he believed that the business in Building Number Two would reach new heights. Of course, the most important thing was finally not having to patiently explain to customers why the 'Family' dish wasn't available anymore.

"Director Liao of the Dining Department is really devious, announcing on the spot at the competition that Building Number Two would serve your dish. Now, customers are calling every day asking when the new dish will be available, and the front desk at Building Number Two doesn't know how to respond."

Lin Xu offered Xie Baomin a cup of Sour Plum Soup, saying, "Bro, don't worry. If there are no problems with the blueprints once they come out, I'll shut down for renovation right away... I'll be getting a salary for going to work, right?"

"Of course, you will! Could I, your senior, ever shortchange you?"

Lin Xu then asked, "What about the guys from the cart? They won't have anywhere to go and can't help much with the renovation. How about letting them join me at Fishing Platform?"

"No problem. As long as you're there, everything's easy to discuss!"

"Then could you arrange for someone to guide them in their cooking?"

Xie Baomin put down his cup of Sour Plum Soup and said, "Junior Bro, are you treating our Building Number Two as a training class?"

"I just want them to improve under your guidance, Bro. After all, you're the five-time champion of Fishing Platform. Let them bask in your glory too."

Xie Baomin smiled helplessly and said, "You're really good to your employees. Sure, they can come. The back kitchen in Building Number Two is quite idle; it's just right to find some work for those fellows."

After they finished discussing business matters, he turned to Lin Xu and asked, "Did you see the photo Master posted?"

"Saw it. He's actually living it up in Sanya. But to tell you the truth, Master is almost seventy, and he has kept his figure very well—he even has abs."

Yesterday evening, Master Gao posted a photo on his social media of himself shirtless, drinking beer by the sea. Against the sunset, this old man wearing sunglasses had a wide smile on his face, but what was most striking was his physique—tanned skin, solid muscles, and even a defined six-pack. Lin Xu couldn't help but feel a bit envious.

Xie Baomin said with a laugh, "The Sea King indeed. Health is always his priority. Master hasn't stopped exercising for years, and his body is better than that of many young people."

Tsk...

Could this be the reason why Leopard Print Lady can't keep away from Master?

But I can't use that nickname anymore.

Because after their trip, who knows? They might come back and directly hold a wedding, officially promoting her to the position of fifth wife.

Master, this old Sea King who leaves traces of romance everywhere...

Only a rich, leisurely, and resourceful woman like her could handle him.

The two brothers chatted for a while.

Lin Xu stood up and said, "Lunch will be ready soon. How about eating here?"

Xie Baomin nodded. "Alright," he said. "I'll make a home-style dish, and you guys can help me critique it."

Critique?

Lin Xu was somewhat surprised. You're a five-time champion at Fishing Platform with such high cooking skills! Who are we to critique your dishes?

He asked curiously, "Bro, have you taken on some kind of hospitality task?"

But home-style dishes... Foreign dignitaries don't often eat those, do they?

Xie Baomin said with a wry smile, "No hospitality task. Last night, my youngest son came home from his boarding middle school, and I personally cooked a whole table of dishes to treat him. I thought I was doing something nice for the kid, but he said my cooking was too fanciful and not as delicious as the school chef's. That got me so mad I couldn't sleep all night."

Lin Xu was flabbergasted.

I thought my student Shen was uniquely filial.

Turns out my Senior Brother's child is also this 'dutiful.'

A grand display of filial piety indeed.

Amused, he asked, "Which dish hit a nerve?"

Xie Baomin grumpily picked up an eggplant from the rack, one that had been set aside for the afternoon, and said, "Braised Eggplant! With such a spread—Glutinous Rice Chicken, Braised Lamb, Fried River Shrimp, and Sautéed Diced Pork—he actually said the Braised Eggplant from the school canteen tastes better! He even said my dishes weren't appetizing with rice."

Braised Eggplant?

That dish is indeed often seen in school canteens.

Back in his university days, Lin Xu had also loved eating Braised Eggplant. The batter-coated eggplants were first deep-fried, then stir-fried again in the wok, becoming soft and delicious. They had a mix of sweet and savory flavors, with a hint of tartness from tomatoes—it was extremely satisfying paired with rice.

Especially the sauce from this dish; when mixed with rice, it was incredibly fragrant.

Lin Xu hadn't expected it to be that dish.

He said with a smile, "You know, Bro, when I was in university, I particularly loved Braised Eggplant—it's unbeatable when mixed with rice. The only dishes that could rival it would be something like Minced Pork with Eggplant or Salted Fish and Eggplant Stew."

Xie Baomin perked up upon hearing this and declared, "Then help me critique it when it's done. Let's see if it's as tasty as the school canteen's version! I'm set on conquering this dish. If I can't make it better than the school chef, I'll resign tomorrow and find a job at a middle school!"

Chapter 194: A Dish That Breaks Senior Brother's Guard - Braised Eggplant!

TSK, TSK, TSK. Look how mad you've made Senior Brother; he's really lost his composure, Lin Xu said with a smile. "It's just a word from the boy, why take it so seriously?"

While comforting his senior brother, Lin Xu prepared to stealthily learn the technique.

Well, I still have a Superior Cooking Learning Card unused. Since Senior Brother is going to make this classic Braised Eggplant, I might as well learn it. Once the new restaurant is decorated and opened, this dish might become one of the signature dishes there. After all, Braised Eggplant, like Earth Three Fresh, has always been a must-order at family restaurants. It seems like you can find this dish everywhere.

However, the methods slightly vary by region. For example, when frying the aromatics after the eggplant, some places use tomato sauce, some use soybean sauce, and some even use Doubanjiang, or go without any sauce at all. Beyond that, the methods are pretty much the same.

Almost everywhere, the process involves frying the eggplant pieces in oil. Then, they are stewed in the pot to soak up the sweet, sour, and perhaps savory sauce with hints of umami, before being served. When eating, just cover the rice with it, or pour the sauce over the rice, and your appetite will instantly be aroused.

Xie Baomin kept mumbling to himself while preparing the ingredients. Clearly, this common dish was throwing off the composure of this State Banquet master.

After washing the eggplants, he was about to peel them when Lin Xu said, "In the school canteen, they make this dish with the peel on. Why don't you try that method?"

"Really? That would save me some trouble." Xie Baomin, eager to prove to his son that his cooking skills surpassed those of the school chefs, immediately chose to do the same upon hearing that the school chefs didn't peel the eggplants.

He placed the eggplant on the cutting board and chopped them into roll-cut pieces. The so-called roll-cut pieces involve cutting while rolling the ingredient so that the knife always cuts from the surface of the last cut. This method creates attractive, well-cooked pieces with more edges that better grasp batter and sauce.

After chopping the eggplant, Xie Baomin soaked them in a basin; this effectively removed any odd taste from the eggplants. During washing, some salt and white vinegar should be added to the basin. The salt provides a base flavor when frying the eggplant, and the white vinegar prevents the eggplant from oxidizing and changing color. After soaking for a while, he drained them.

He scattered some dry starch over the eggplants, shaking the basin a few times to evenly coat the cut surfaces of the pieces with the dry starch. The dry starch helps crisp the surface of the eggplants and also prevents them from absorbing too much oil during frying.

After all the eggplant pieces were coated with starch, Xie Baomin brought over two tomatoes, one green bell pepper, and one red bell pepper. After peeling the tomatoes, he chopped them into dice, which

makes it convenient for them to release their juice when stir-fried. Meanwhile, he cut the green and red peppers into diamond-shaped pieces, primarily for color coordination. He then prepared some chopped green onions and minced garlic. Now, all the ingredients needed for Braised Eggplant were ready.

Xie Baomin turned to ask, "Is there nothing else to prepare?"

This question indeed stumped me. I never worked part-time in the cafeteria during college, so I wasn't aware of the cooking process there. I only distinctly remember the unpeeled eggplants because occasionally I'd bite into a piece of tough old eggplant skin and have to spit it out, which rather affected the efficiency of my meal.

"It should be like that, I suppose. Why don't you just start cooking, and I'll know once I taste it."

Although I'm unfamiliar with the cooking method, the taste and texture when mixed with rice are unforgettable. I'll know if there's any discrepancy after a taste later.

Xie Baomin set up a wok and started cooking.

When frying eggplants, the oil should be hot so that it can crisp up the surface of the eggplants immediately. If the oil temperature is too low, the eggplant pieces will absorb oil like sponges. This is not only wasteful with oil, but the resulting Braised Eggplant will also be greasy and hard to swallow.

The oil was moderately hot. He scattered the dry starch-coated eggplant pieces into the wok to fry. When they were first added, he didn't stir them immediately because that could shake off the dry starch on the surface. He had to wait until they were slightly golden and crispy before stirring them with a spoon to turn them over. This made it easier to fry the eggplant pieces thoroughly while also preventing the side touching the oil from burning. When the eggplant skin began to wrinkle slightly and the surface turned a golden brown, he took the eggplant pieces out.

He then raised the temperature of the oil for a second fry. This step was to fry out the excess oil in the eggplant pieces, making the eggplant less greasy to eat. The second frying should not be too long; twenty to thirty seconds was enough. Before taking them out of the pan, he poured the chopped green and red peppers into the oil to briefly pass through, then lifted the wok and poured the oil and ingredients together into a large colander set over an oil drum. The oil drained into the drum and could be used again next time, while the ingredients drained in the colander.

Xie Baomin put the wok back on the stove. Without adding more oil, he used the residual oil in the pan to sauté the scallions and garlic until fragrant. Then, he quickly stir-fried the chopped tomatoes until they started to break down and release their juices, and added two spoonfuls of pork bone broth to the wok.

He began seasoning. He sequentially added light soy sauce, dark soy sauce, white sugar, and salt to the wok, stirring evenly to blend and allow the flavors to permeate. Then he added the soaked wood ear mushrooms. He cooked them briefly for two minutes to ensure the wood ear mushrooms were cooked through, then added the fried eggplant pieces and the green and red peppers, stir-frying over high heat.

During this moment, Lin Xu silently chanted in his mind: Use the Cooking Learning Card!

Instantaneously, a system prompt sounded in his mind: "Learning target: Xie Baomin. Current skill is: Anger. Do you want to learn?"

Lin Xu: ????? System, you're being naughty again!

While he was stunned, Xie Baomin had already finished reducing the sauce in the wok and was now at the workbench behind him, starting to plate the dish. After serving, he washed the wok.

Then the executive chef of Fishing Platform wiped his sweat with a towel and said to Lin Xu, "Junior Brother, try this and see if it's as good as what the school chefs make."

Lin Xu was regretting not having learned this dish. He put his thoughts aside and carefully observed the Braised Eggplant his senior brother had made in a state of anger. The lustrous red eggplant pieces were arranged on a clean white porcelain plate, adorned with green and red peppers and black wood ear mushrooms, looking quite tempting indeed. However, Lin Xu always felt it was somewhat different from the Braised Eggplant served in the large trays of the school cafeteria. But he couldn't pinpoint exactly what was different.

Just as he was about to taste it, Ma Zhiqiang suddenly remarked, "Chef Xie, this dish is too meticulous and exquisite. A dish like Braised Eggplant is more home-style; it tastes better when it's a bit more casual."

Exactly, too delicate. Lin Xu finally realized where the problem lay.

Xie Baomin furrowed his brows in confusion. Ever since he started learning to cook at Fishing Platform, exquisite presentation had always been the top requirement from his masters and leaders. Unexpectedly, being too exquisite turned out to be a drawback when making Braised Eggplant.

Could it be that I'm really not as skilled as the school chefs?

"Of course not," Lin Xu picked up a piece and tasted it. The flavor was still on point. If it were to be rated, it would at least be of Superior level. But this Braised Eggplant had the style of a high-end hotel, lacking the taste of home-style restaurants and cafeterias.

Recalling that Ma Zhiqiang excelled at large-pot cooking, he put down his chopsticks and said, "Zhiqiang, why don't you make a version? Let Senior Brother and me broaden our horizons."

Ma Zhiqiang didn't hesitate. He washed his hands and said, "Then I'll make a humble attempt in front of you two!"

Chapter 195: Boss Lin, My Grandpa is Here to Become Your Sworn Brother!

Ma Zhiqiang had a wealth of work experience.

Before becoming a freelance banquet worker in Beijing, taking whatever jobs came his way, he had run a small restaurant, joined a braised chicken rice chain, and contracted to run a school canteen window.

His work experience was almost comparable to Grandpa Gao's romantic history.

Now asked by his boss to make a canteen-style braised eggplant, he immediately got to work.

After washing the eggplants, he WHACK, WHACK, WHACKED them into rolling knife cuts with his cleaver. While chopping, he said, "In the canteen, the eggplant pieces are relatively larger because it makes the dish appear more voluminous and substantial."

Once chopped, he put the eggplant pieces in a basin, cracked an egg over them, and sprinkled them with salt. After mixing well, he added some flour. "Starch is too expensive," he explained, "and the paste it makes is too thin, so school canteens use flour. This makes the batter thicker. Not only does it make the pieces look bigger and improve the texture, but it also uses less oil for frying."

When it comes to flavor, cuisine offers endless possibilities. But when driven by cost, all accompaniments, ingredients, and seasonings are squeezed down as much as possible to guarantee enough profit.

That was exactly what Ma Zhiqiang was doing now.

In his words, "Actually, when making this in a school canteen, we don't even add eggs to the batter. We just sprinkle a little water on the eggplant pieces to ensure the flour sticks."

Once the eggplant pieces were prepared, he heated oil in a wok. While the oil was heating, he also prepared some tomatoes, Green and red peppers, and wood ear mushrooms.

These accompaniments were usually essential.

"In winter, when eggplants are more expensive, some onions are added to bulk up the dish," Ma Zhiqiang commented. "But in summer, eggplants are cheaper, so that's not necessary."

Lin Xu and Xie Baomin exchanged bewildered glances.

Indeed, every trick was used to save money.

One of the apprentice brothers, Lin Xu, had started his career at Fishing Platform, while the other, Xie Baomin, owned a restaurant whose business had boomed from the start. They had never experienced the plight of small restaurant owners who had to pinch every penny.

So, listening to Ma Zhiqiang's explanation, a sense of poignancy washed over them.

They always felt that people in the catering industry really had it rough.

Once the oil was hot, Ma Zhiqiang scattered the batter-coated eggplant pieces into the wok, frying them until the batter turned golden brown before removing them.

He didn't double-fry them. The main purpose of double-frying is to render out excess oil. However, these eggplant pieces were already encased in a thick batter. Retaining some oil actually made them more flavorful; expelling it would have diminished the aroma.

Watching Ma Zhiqiang's method, Xie Baomin finally realized the difference between his cooking and that of the school chefs.

"My methods are indeed too refined..." he murmured.

Ma Zhiqiang poured the oil out of the wok and began to stir-fry.

He stir-fried minced scallions and garlic in the wok until fragrant. Then, he added half a ladleful of tomato paste, frying it until aromatic before adding water. He seasoned the mixture with salt, sugar, Light Soy Sauce, Dark Soy Sauce, and also added Chicken Essence and Flavoring.

He then tossed in the wood ear mushrooms and tomato chunks.

Adding the tomatoes at this late stage wasn't to cook them down into a sauce; like the Green and red peppers, they were purely for garnish.

Once the liquid in the wok boiled, he gave it a couple of stirs, then tossed in the fried eggplant and the Green and red peppers. After they were added, he brought it to a rolling boil over high heat. Next, he thickened the sauce with a cornstarch slurry, simmering until it was viscous. A final drizzle of Seasoning Oil, and the dish was plated.

The braised eggplant made this way was intensely aromatic, with a thick, glossy sauce. The tomato paste imparted a beautiful red sheen to the eggplant. The tomato pieces largely retained their shape, and the peppers were tender-crisp.

Yes, this is the taste!

Lin Xu was instantly transported back to his university canteen days.

Without saying another word, he went to ladle himself a bowl of rice.

He spooned some sauce from Ma Zhiqiang's braised eggplant and added a few pieces of the slightly soft eggplant to his bowl, then eagerly took a mouthful with his rice.

In one second, he was back at the Finance University canteen.

Too bad the canteen ladies expertly wielding their serving ladles and the lines of students weren't here, or the sense of immersion would have been even stronger.

"Senior Brother, you should try this. This is the authentic canteen flavor," Lin Xu urged. "The Chicken Essence and Flavoring really make the taste pop—it's more robust and straightforward than your Pork Bone Broth."

Stock can also enhance umami, but it doesn't quite compare to specialized flavor enhancers.

Xie Baomin's mood finally lightened.

He smiled helplessly. "I was wondering what the difference was. So that's the secret... Thank you, Xiao Ma, for showing me what real school canteen food is like."

Ma Zhiqiang, having finished cleaning the wok, was now preparing lunch for everyone. "You're too kind, Chef Xie. It was nothing, really."

「Soon」

Lunch began.

Shen Jiayue also came to get her boxed lunch.

But seeing two dishes of braised eggplant on the table, she curiously asked, "Are eggplants cheap today? Why make two eggplant dishes?"

Lin Xu replied with a smile, "Today, Senior Brother had a culinary cook-off with a school canteen's head chef. That's why there are two braised eggplant dishes: one high-end hotel version and one school canteen version."

Shen Jiayue immediately reached for the portion Ma Zhiqiang had prepared. "In that case, I'll have the school canteen version!" she declared. "I still remember how the ladies in our university canteen always gave you a huge portion of braised eggplant. If I asked for some, they wouldn't give me as much. So stingy!"

A sweet smile graced her lips as she recalled her university days.

Ah, that was our youth! she thought. My youth had you in it, and your youth had me. How wonderful!

She tasted Ma Zhiqiang's version, then Xie Baomin's, and sincerely commented:

Chapter 196: Boss Lin, My Grandfather Is Here to Ask for Your Guidance!

"Senior Brother's cooking tastes even better; the eggplant skin stays crispy. Master Ma's version is more satisfying with rice because that's exactly how the school cafeteria prepares it."

Heh... You don't offend either side; you really are a master of diplomacy. If you spoke like this to your future in-laws, you wouldn't always be on the verge of getting beaten up... Lin Xu silently ridiculed his girlfriend for a moment before turning to Xie Baomin and asking, "Senior Brother, you can try again

when you get home tonight. If that doesn't work out, we can send Master Ma over. I refuse to believe he can't outperform a middle school cafeteria's head cook."

Xie Baomin had let go of his regret by then. At least, when he faced him using the Cooking Learning Card now, he wouldn't see any more angry Skill prompts.

He said with a smile, "It's not their fault; it's mine. I've always used the same methods at Fishing Platform for cooking at home. No wonder the kids don't like it. Compared to what Master Ma makes, my food lacks that homey touch."

Hotel cuisine generally lacks that homey feel. In contrast, some farmhouse restaurants are where you can find dishes with that kind of rustic charm.

Xie Baomin was also beginning to understand why his wife had been so happy when she took the kids camping on West Mountain the last time, especially after he'd said he wouldn't go. Perhaps it was because I lacked that homey touch?

He decided he'd have to change this flaw in the future and keep work and life separate: be a warm family pillar at home and a demanding executive chef at Fishing Platform.

Thinking of this, he said seriously to Lin Xu, "Junior Brother, thank you. You've made me understand the importance of separating work and life."

Lin Xu was bewildered. Why the sudden thanks? You're not planning to dance to 'Listen to Me Say Thank You,' are you?

Xie Baomin was so eager to head home and be open with his family about his shortcomings that he didn't even finish his meal. "I'm heading back first, Junior Brother. The employee meals in your restaurant could use some variety. Next time, I'll teach you how to make Zaozhuang Spicy Chicken; it's really good with rice..."

After Xie Baomin left, Lin Xu still couldn't figure out why his Senior Brother had thanked him.

But Zaozhuang Spicy Chicken... That dish sounds pretty good.

Since he hadn't learned to cook eggplant, mastering this chicken dish would be a good alternative. Once he learned to make Zaozhuang Spicy Chicken, the restaurant could offer at least one more way to prepare chicken, unlike now, where it was either steamed or dry-fried, which was quite limiting.

"Today, I told Uncle Tan about the upcoming renovations and restaurant closure. He immediately had Assistant Yuan start arranging a business trip. He said he couldn't bear to stay in Beijing a moment longer if he couldn't eat your food..." Shen Jiayue spoke about Tan Yajun's antics while eating.

Although Shen Guofu always proclaimed himself a 'little prince of gourmet food,' he wasn't nearly as picky as Tan Yajun. This explained why, the moment Tan Yajun mentioned in their group chat how good Lin Ji's food was, all his friends were immediately intrigued.

Lin Xu said, "When I start working at Fishing Platform, I can send him a lunch portion too."

"Alright, I'll tell Uncle Tan when I get back," Shen Jiayue replied. Then she added, "By the way, taking the subway to and from work isn't convenient for you, so Dad prepared a car. It was sent for a checkup and maintenance yesterday and was also thoroughly cleaned, inside and out. The company driver might deliver it this afternoon, so remember to accept it."

A commuter car? Hearing the term, Lin Xu's mind involuntarily conjured images of a mobility scooter for seniors. Aren't those banned on Beijing roads? Could it be something like a Hongguang Mini EV? That would be fine, actually. At least it'd be much better than taking the subway, since the station is quite far from Fishing Platform, and the walk from Fishing Platform's main gate to Building No. 2 also takes a long time.

「At two in the afternoon.」

After the lunch rush, Lin Xu was getting ready to go back to the residential complex behind the restaurant to take a nap.

A man, about twenty-five or twenty-six years old, pushed the door open and came in. "Boss Lin, Mr. Shen asked me to deliver a car to you..."

It's been delivered already?

An excited Lin Xu stepped outside and said with a smile, "Thank you for making the trip! Just give me the car keys... Huh? A Mercedes?"

Lin Xu was stunned the moment he saw the car key. It was actually a Mercedes key. Wasn't it supposed to be a commuter car? Could it be different from what I imagined?

He pushed the door open and stepped outside, only to see a white Mercedes G63—the legendary Mercedes G-Wagon—parked quietly in the parking spot by the entrance.

This is the 'commuter car' Shen Jiayue mentioned? Does she have some kind of misunderstanding about the word 'commuter'?

"The car has just been serviced, and the interior has been thoroughly cleaned. The gas tank is full, and the fuel card is in the compartment in front of the passenger seat..."

While Lin Xu was still dumbfounded, the driver continued to introduce the car.

When the driver finished, Lin Xu finally snapped back to reality. He took it for a test drive and felt it was excellent. It truly lived up to its reputation as a luxury car worth millions—it drove steadily and had impressive sound insulation.

After parking the car back in the spot, Lin Xu turned to the young man who delivered it and said, "Thank you for coming all this way in this heat. May I ask your name?"

The young man said, "My name is Zou Cheng. I'm Mr. Shen's driver, but he prefers to drive himself. So, I'm responsible for the company's vehicle maintenance, which includes taking them to the 4S shop for regular servicing."

Wow, what a great job! Just cruising around in luxury cars all day. Not many people get such a good gig, right?

Perhaps sensing Lin Xu's bewilderment, Zou Cheng said, "My sister is Mr. Shen's secretary, so I was lucky enough to get this job. If there's nothing else, Boss Lin, I'll head back. If you have any problems with the car, just give me a call. My mobile number is on the back of the fuel card."

Chapter 197: Boss Lin, my grandfather is here to seek an apprenticeship with you!

Before coming, his sister had specifically instructed him: "This Mr. Lin is President Shen's son-in-law, so be sure to speak politely. Don't proactively ask to add his WeChat unless he suggests it, to avoid causing annoyance. In short, you must treat Mr. Lin with the same respect you show President Shen."

Others might not know, but Secretary Zou was very clear on how much President Shen valued his son-in-law.

After Zou Cheng left, Lin Xu walked around the car a couple more times before taking the car keys and heading back to the shop.

Now he had a car, and not just any car, but a luxury vehicle many could only dream of.

However, Lin Xu didn't feel particularly happy. It's more satisfying to drive a car I earned with my own money. Driving someone else's car, even if it's my father-in-law's, feels somewhat alienating.

Just as he was thinking this, the system's notification chimed in his mind:

"The host has not lost himself in the wealth of material possessions, instead finding new determination. As a special reward, a premium special ingredient—Steamed Meat Powder—is awarded. Congratulations to the host."

Lin Xu: ?????

There are rewards for this too? And it's even the Technique for Steamed Meat Powder! Doesn't that mean I can now make dishes like Steamed Rice Flour Meat, Steamed Rice Flour Chicken, Steamed Rice Flour Ribs, and the like? Not bad at all. If only I had known, I would have refused my father-in-law's offer

of the shop last time to see if it would trigger a similar reward. Hmm, if that worked, it could be yet another way to game the system.

After the ordeal of receiving and test-driving the car, Lin Xu had completely missed his usual nap time.

Since I can't sleep, I might as well try making this Steamed Meat Powder. This afternoon, I'll start by steaming some pork belly to see how it tastes. If it's delicious, the shop will have another new dish on its menu. The steamer's utilization rate would also increase again. It's a pity the shop is closing soon; otherwise, I definitely would have added a couple of steamed dishes to boost the restaurant's turnover.

"Is that big G-Wagon outside your car, Boss? It's really beautiful!" a young employee exclaimed, looking out at the Mercedes G63 with eyes full of envy and longing.

Lin Xu smiled and said, "My father-in-law lent it to me. I'll return it to him once I'm no longer working at Fishing Platform."

He'd need a car for Fishing Platform. But after the new store opens, he would be living in the residential complex nearby, so there'd be no need for such an ostentatious vehicle. Besides not having many opportunities to drive it, he'd also have to constantly worry about it getting scratched.

Lin Xu put the car keys into the cash register drawer and casually ruffled Dundun's round, chubby head. There had been no lottery chances lately, so their father-son interactions had become much less frequent. He played with the little guy for a while before heading back to the kitchen.

First, he washed his hands, then took out regular rice and glutinous rice from the storage room. He put them into a basin in a one-to-one ratio, washed them twice, and then added water to soak. The rice for the Steamed Meat Powder needed to be thoroughly soaked first, then stir-fried until dry so the grains would crumble easily.

Just as he had started soaking the rice, Dou Wenjing came in with a man carrying a laptop bag.

"Mr. Lin, this is Chief Designer Zheng Xiaoguang from Jinghua Design Office. He's very skilled in designing high-end projects like upscale restaurants, hotels, and clubs. The preliminary sketches are ready. Please

take a look, and if you have any requests or requirements, let Mr. Zheng know so he can make adjustments."

It's ready so quickly? Lin Xu wiped his hands and stepped outside.

The designer, polite and refined, exchanged greetings with Lin Xu before taking out his laptop. He opened it and displayed the completed design drawings.

First was the kitchen.

"I designed the kitchen on the second floor," Zheng Xiaoguang explained. "The larger the area for casual diners on the first floor, the more customers it attracts. Conversely, if the kitchen and front desk occupy more than half of the first floor, it significantly reduces its appeal to casual diners."

As expected of someone skilled in designing restaurants and hotels; he truly understood the psyche of walk-in diners. Not all customers are leisurely—many are pressed for time during meals. Having to climb stairs to the second floor just for a bowl of noodles would be a hassle for those who prefer convenience; they might as well choose another place.

Zheng Xiaoguang continued to explain the design drawings as Lin Xu looked them over. For instance, considering the restaurant served many steamed dishes, he had specially designed a larger steaming room to ensure ample space in the future. Additionally, to facilitate serving, several small service elevators were planned. The waitstaff on the first and third floors would just need to wait in the service area, saving labor costs for dish delivery.

Furthermore, the kitchen was divided into different zones: a barbecue section, a cold dish section, a stir-fry section, and a pastry section. Finally, everyone won't have to work crammed together in a noisy crowd.

After inspecting the kitchen, they moved on to the private rooms on the third floor. There were over twenty private rooms designed, varying in size. The smaller ones could seat six or seven people, while the largest featured a big round table that could accommodate twenty-four.

Returning to the second floor, they noted that the kitchen occupied half the space, while the other half was designed with booths to offer diners some privacy.

As for the first floor, it housed the reception area and the space for casual diners. On each side of the reception desk, there was an elevator for guests. Next to these was a long, oversized aquarium. It could be divided into different sections to house various freshwater and seafood species, allowing customers to make their selections more visually.

After viewing the entire design plan, Lin Xu felt that the style and everything else were quite good and matched his own vision.

Having reviewed the interior design, the final part was the facade. The exterior wall was designed in a new Chinese style—modern yet unobtrusive, somewhat similar to the current store's style.

Pointing to the shop front, Zheng Xiaoguang said, "Our design firm collaborates with many calligraphers. We can have them inscribe the store's name at a low cost to make it appear more upscale. If the budget allows, we could even engage a disciple of Master Lishan, who has gained significant fame in recent years, to do the inscription."

Master Lishan's... disciple? Lin Xu couldn't help but chuckle. The store's logo name was personally inscribed by Master Lishan himself. If the facade were done by his disciple, wouldn't Geng Lele's grandfather tear the place down?

He said with a smile, "No need, we know other calligraphers."

Zheng Xiaoguang thought Lin Xu was worried about being scammed and was just about to try persuading him further. Just then, Geng Lele's voice piped up from the doorway, "Boss Lin, my grandpa's here to take you as his disciple!"

Zheng Xiaoguang turned around. He saw a girl in a high school uniform leading an old man dressed in practice clothes into the restaurant.

Upon seeing the old man's face, Zheng Xiaoguang was momentarily stunned. "Master... Master Lishan?"

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"Geng Lele, you skipped class again!"

Hearing the girl's voice, Lin Xu instinctively wanted to tease this queen of truancy. However, upon seeing Geng Lishan following behind her, he hurriedly stood up to greet him. "Mr. Lishan, what brings you here? Welcome, welcome! Your presence alone brings glory to my humble shop."

He had just been thinking about how he knew a calligrapher, and then one immediately appeared at his doorstep.

Geng Lishan held a rolled-up scroll. Seeing Lin Xu approach, he handed it over with a broad smile. "I heard from my Lele that your shop, young friend Lin, is undergoing renovations. So, I took the liberty of writing a new sign for your storefront. I hope you won't mind."

Not far away, Zheng Xiaoguang pinched his thigh. Damn, am I dreaming? Mr. Lishan, such a renowned calligrapher, personally wrote a storefront sign for the owner of Lin Ji's, and he even seems worried it might not be good enough... If word of this got out, his many admirers would go mad!

Upon hearing that the calligrapher had indeed prepared the sign, Lin Xu quickly accepted it with both hands. "We were just discussing the storefront sign, and Mr. Lishan, you've already brought it! Could you be a prescient immortal?"

"Hahaha, young friend Lin, you certainly have a way with words," Geng Lishan chuckled. "I'm just a gluttonous old man. It's your divine culinary skills that have truly opened these old eyes of mine."

The two exchanged cheerful flatteries, much to Zheng Xiaoguang's increased astonishment. I heard Mr. Lishan despises sycophants the most, but today... My worldview is truly shaken!

After the pleasantries concluded, Lin Xu, holding the scroll, tentatively asked, "Mr. Lishan, may we unroll it and have a look?"

He felt the information from his senior apprentice-brother was wrong. Such a kind and respectable old man, how could he be described as a cynical old grump? They said he hated people trying to curry favor, that he despised flattery. But the mutual praise just now felt as pleasant as a spring breeze; would an old grump really speak like that?

Geng Lishan waved his hand dismissively. "To say it's 'eye-opening' is an overstatement. Just see if it's to your liking. If not, I'll go back and rewrite it. That's about all this old bag of bones is good for."

Tch, such modesty. Lin Xu once again felt misled by his senior. If I'd known, I would have tried to get friendlier during the competition that day; we wouldn't be so distant now. Sigh! My senior really led me astray!

He untied the string securing the scroll and slowly unrolled it. Then he saw four bold, powerful characters: Lin Ji's Food.

These four characters weren't illegibly flamboyant, nor did they feature the showy techniques of some self-proclaimed street calligraphers. Yet, on closer inspection, one could feel a sense of dignified pride emanating from between the lines. Truly a master calligrapher. His skill really is extraordinary.

When he fully unrolled the scroll, he saw the inscription at the bottom: "Presented to my confidant, Mr. Lin Xu. Lishan."

Confidant? Old Sir, did we know each other before?

"Young friend Lin," Geng Lishan said, "like me, you disdain sycophancy and loathe grubbing for personal gain. We could be confidants. Would you, young friend Lin, do me the honor?"

Heavens! No wonder Lele mentioned wanting us to become sworn brothers earlier. So that was the reason.

Lin Xu replied with a smile, "Mr. Lishan, if you put it that way, I'm truly honored."

After exchanging a few more pleasantries, he showed the scroll to Zheng Xiaoguang. "Designer Zheng, would this work for the shop sign?"

"Yes, yes, absolutely perfect!" Zheng Xiaoguang exclaimed. "This is a treasure from Mr. Lishan, worth a fortune!" He then took out his digital camera, planning to photograph the calligraphy and incorporate it into the shop's design plans.

While Zheng Xiaoguang was busy, Geng Lishan took a look around the shop. Just then, Dundun stirred on the cash register, stretching lazily.

"What an adorable little cat!" Geng Lishan was immediately captivated.

Taking the opportunity, Geng Lele sidled up to Lin Xu. "My grandpa almost made you perform a blood oath ceremony—you know, becoming sworn brothers who vow not to be born on the same day, month, and year, but to die on the same day, month, and year. Luckily, I stopped him..."

Die on the same day? Lin Xu glanced at Geng Lishan, who was over seventy, and then at his twenty-two-year-old self. Heavens, I almost suffered an untimely death!

"He'd written another piece before, but it was too controversial," Geng Lele continued. "I was worried other calligraphers might come challenge you to a real-life showdown, so I made him rewrite it... So, how are you going to thank me?"

Lin Xu was speechless. There were even more complications?

He chuckled and said, "I'm about to make some Steamed Rice Flour Meat. How about I let you have an extra large portion for dinner?"

"Deal!"

After they finished reviewing the preliminary design sketches for the entire shop, the next step was to produce the renderings. Once every detail was confirmed to be satisfactory, Zheng Xiaoguang would develop the actual construction drawings for the construction team to begin. Before that, however, he

added some more details to the plans, such as making the kitchen sink larger to facilitate washing vegetables, ensuring ample reserved space for the dishwasher, and ensuring the drainpipe was clear to prevent clogging.

After noting down these and similar details, Zheng Xiaoguang slung his laptop bag over his shoulder and departed.

Meanwhile, Dou Wenjing planned to visit a job fair to recruit one or two clerks. They would handle basic administrative tasks for the company and help sort out its social security affairs.

After Lin Xu saw them off, he noticed Geng Lishan playing with Dundun and asked curiously, "Mr. Lishan, you like cats too?"

"Quite a bit," Geng Lishan replied. "I find cats the most enigmatic of creatures. Sometimes they're incredibly affectionate, and other times they treat their owners with utter disdain, as if they're the true masters of the house..."

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Geng Lishan cradled Dundun in his arms as if holding a baby.

Normally, Dundun disliked being held by people, but at this moment, he curled up obediently in Geng Lishan's arms, behaving very well, which greatly surprised Lin Xu.

Because usually, besides himself and his in-laws, others couldn't even think of holding Dundun like this, not even his classmate Shen. What happened today?

Unable to guess what Dundun was thinking, Lin Xu simply greeted Geng Lishan and headed off to the kitchen to get busy.

The design sketch was already out, and the renovation was urgent. He needed to prepare as many ingredients as possible. That way, he could meet the needs of more customers and earn more points.

Right, there will be no point income for the coming month, so now I have to save as much as possible, just in case I need to exchange anything for Skill Techniques, so I won't be caught off guard.

After an hour of soaking the Glutinous Rice and regular rice in the basin, Lin Xu checked and saw that the grains had visibly swelled up quite a bit. It was time to start stir-frying them.

He ladled the rice out of the basin to drain the water. Next, he set up a frying pan on the stove. With no oil in the pan, he directly started stir-frying the soaked rice grains.

"Lin, my young friend, what are you making?" Geng Lishan, curious, asked while standing outside the kitchen holding Dundun.

"I'm making some Steamed Meat Powder. I'll make some Steamed Rice Flour Meat later. Since a connoisseur like you has made the rare trip to my shop, I definitely need to prepare a new dish for you to test."

"Good, Steamed Rice Flour Meat sounds good. I'll be waiting then!"

Upon mentioning food, Geng Lishan immediately perked up. Originally, he thought it would be nice just to try some White Jade Lotus Root Strips today, but there was an unexpected surprise.

This young friend is really too polite.

「In the kitchen.」

Lin Xu kept stir-frying the rice grains in the pan over low heat. This was a process that truly tested one's patience. At first, when he started stir-frying, there was hardly any noticeable change in the rice grains. He only felt he was truly getting somewhere after the moisture in the grains was fried out and they started to feel light and fluffy.

After stir-frying for a while longer, once the surface of the rice grains started to turn slightly yellow and emitted a distinct aroma, he sequentially added a few bay leaves, a small piece of cinnamon, two pieces of Star Anise, some Sichuan peppercorns, and a pinch of fennel into the pan. He continued stir-frying

until the spices released their fragrance and the surface of the rice grains turned golden brown, then he turned off the heat and took the pan off the stove.

He spread the fried rice grains on a tray to cool down quickly, preventing the residual heat from scorching the grains or spices.

Once the temperature fell, he used a food processor to crush the rice grains and spices together. This step could also be done using a mortar to pound or a Stone Mill to grind. The aim was to process the rice grains into a granular powder to enhance the pleasure of eating the steamed meat.

After grinding, he had successfully made Steamed Meat Powder. This powder, whether used for steaming Pork Ribs, chicken pieces, or even beef or lamb, could produce a wonderfully exquisite texture and flavor. Furthermore, the Steamed Meat Powder could also be made in larger batches, sealed in bottles, and stored for a long time.

Next, Lin Xu sliced some pork belly. He began preparing the Steamed Rice Flour Meat. Not having the particular Skill for Steamed Rice Flour Meat, and to avoid errors, he specifically checked the dish's tutorial online.

Steamed Rice Flour Meat is a classic dish of Sichuan cuisine that is almost universally made and loved in the Sichuan and Chongqing regions. The method of cooking this dish is quite simple. First, marinate the meat slices, then coat them with Steamed Meat Powder and steam them. During steaming, they can be placed on sweet potatoes, pumpkins, or other suitable ingredients, which enhances the flavor. While marinating, some Doubanjiang can also be added. This aligns more with the dietary habits of the people in Sichuan and Chongqing.

Add Doubanjiang?

Thinking back to the last time Wei Qian was chopping Doubanjiang finely while preparing Fried Pork, Lin Xu scooped a spoonful of Doubanjiang onto the chopping board. Then he finely chopped it up as if mincing meat. This way, the flavor of the Doubanjiang would more easily infuse into the meat slices, and the texture would be better when eaten, without encountering chunks of Doubanjiang or chili skins.

He mixed the finely chopped Doubanjiang into the sliced pork belly. Then he added Light Soy Sauce, Dark Soy Sauce, salt, pepper powder, and some Scallion and Ginger, mixing everything well before setting it aside to marinate.

After marinating for about half an hour, Lin Xu picked out the Scallion and Ginger, then added the prepared Steamed Meat Powder. He mixed it again, ensuring the Steamed Meat Powder firmly adhered to the surfaces of the meat slices.

Next, he prepared two slightly larger steaming dishes. He took out an old pumpkin from the storage room, washed and cut it into large pieces, and laid them on the steaming dishes. Then he spread the pork belly coated with Steamed Meat Powder on top of the pumpkin.

Today, he prepared quite a lot of pork belly. He filled two large steaming dishes to the brim, just managing to fit all the pork belly on them.

He opened the cabinet door, placed both steaming dishes inside, and started the steaming process.

Hoping nothing will go wrong... As he closed the cabinet door, Lin Xu couldn't help but mutter to himself. Without Technique enhancement and rashly making this new dish, he felt somewhat less confident. However, the cooking method for this dish is relatively simple. Generally, any issues arise either from the flavor or the steaming time. As long as the seasoning isn't too salty and it's steamed for enough time, the chances of failure aren't very high.

「At 4:30 p.m.」

Just as dinner was nearly ready, Lin Xu was about to announce that it was time to eat.

Professor Xu and his wife, along with Old Man Zhou and Old Lady Liang, walked into the shop:

"Xu, let's take our meal to go today. I heard you're closing the shop for renovation. I've seen quite a few folks come here from the South Fourth Ring, changing subways multiple times. It sure isn't easy."

After Professor Xu finished speaking, he suddenly noticed an old man sitting in the corner who looked very familiar. He paused, then nudged Aunt Xue next to him.

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"Old Xue, isn't that Mr. Lishan?"

Aunt Xue was originally struggling with whether to pack black bean sauce pork ribs or black bean chicken pieces. Hearing her husband's voice, she instinctively looked up and blurted out, "Mr. Lishan? Is it really you, Mr. Lishan?"

When they first came to dine, they saw Geng Lishan's inscription. Therefore, they often came to eat during that period, hoping to meet Mr. Lishan. But they had never encountered this titan of the cultural circle; instead, they were captivated by the restaurant's dishes. They not only became devotees of Lin Ji's Food but also made friends with young people like Yue Liyue, and even followed Geng Lele to join the Meow Meow Sect, becoming one of the four Elders.

"You are... little Xue from the art gallery?"

Geng Lishan pondered for a long time before he remembered Aunt Xue's identity.

Meanwhile, Geng Lele, who was playing with her phone next to him, looked up upon seeing Aunt Xue and the others, and quickly stood up to greet them, "Haha, the four Elders of our Meow Meow Sect have arrived! Old man, since you and Dundun are so fated, you might as well join our Meow Meow Sect too. As the High Priest, I can at least arrange a minor lackey position for you."

Geng Lishan: "..."

Why is this girl so madcap wherever she goes? And yet, there are always people willing to join in her madness.

Aunt Xue and the others came over, smiling, and asked, "Mr. Lishan, what brings you here today?"

"I heard that young friend Lin's establishment is going to be renovated, so I specially wrote a piece of calligraphy for the shop sign and brought it over. Since you all are here too, let's sit together. My granddaughter hasn't been causing you any trouble, has she?"

"Lele is sensible and well-behaved. How could she possibly trouble us?"

They only found out a few days after the competition ended that Geng Lele was Mr. Lishan's granddaughter. Back then, they finally understood why the restaurant had Mr. Lishan's handwriting; they suspected it was Geng Lele who had coaxed her grandfather to write it. But now it seemed Mr. Lishan, hearing that the shop was closing for renovation, had actually come in person to deliver the calligraphy for the shop sign. He also referred to Boss Lin as "young friend Lin."

This relationship seemed quite extraordinary. Could it be a friendship that disregards age?

As they were chatting, Lin Xu came over with a large plate of Steamed Rice Flour Meat. "Everyone, try this Steamed Rice Flour Meat. It's my first time making it, and I'm always worried about getting the flavor right. You taste it first. I'll go make the White Jade Lotus Root Strips that Mr. Lishan likes."

White Jade Lotus Root Strips?

Professor Xu and the others felt a surge of delight. They had heard about the dish White Jade Lotus Root Strips a few days ago but never had the chance to try it. They didn't expect to get the opportunity today, thanks to Mr. Lishan.

But it's Mr. Lishan's favorite? Does Lin Xu often cook it for Mr. Lishan? No wonder he came in person to deliver the calligraphy for the shop sign. The two really do have a friendship that disregards age.

The server brought over bowls, chopsticks, and plates. Geng Lishan called out, then picked up a slice of pork belly, glistening with oil and covered with granules of Steamed Meat Powder. A rich aroma of meat and rice wafted from it, mingled with the sweet fragrance of pumpkin. It instantly whetted everyone's appetite.

"Hmm, this smells truly fragrant," Geng Lishan praised, then put the meat into his mouth.

The first sensation upon entering his mouth was the sticky texture of the Steamed Meat Powder, followed by the distinctive flavor of the pork belly. Chewing it, the meat within the Steamed Meat Powder was perfectly cooked; the fatty part melted richly in his mouth, while the lean meat was tender and juicy. Eaten alone, the meat slices might have felt a bit greasy. But paired with the outer layer of Steamed Meat Powder, everything became perfectly balanced. Especially the subtle spice notes in the Steamed Meat Powder, which made the meaty flavor even more intense and delicious.

"Delicious! This meat is steamed wonderfully. Everyone, hurry and try it. This flavor is fantastic! Young friend Lin's skills are truly exceptional, out of this world!"

Upon hearing this, Professor Xu and the others also picked up their chopsticks to taste it. The Steamed Rice Flour Meat was indeed superb. Thanks to the Steamed Meat Powder, the pork belly wasn't greasy at all. It was fragrant and delectable, as if opening the doors to a new world for them.

"I didn't like Steamed Rice Flour Meat before because I had a bad experience at a restaurant before I retired. The meat was gamey, and the powder was tough," Elder Zhou said with deep feeling. As a former management member of Beijing University, he was also a renowned food lover. "I didn't expect Boss Lin's version to be so delicious—fragrant, sticky, and the flavor is great."

Due to that single disappointing experience with gamey Steamed Rice Flour Meat, he had lost all interest in the dish. Only now did he realize how delicious it could be when prepared well.

"Not only is the meat delicious, but the pumpkin underneath is also amazing... Old Zhou, you should eat more pumpkin; it's good for your health," Elder Liang thoughtfully said, placing a piece of pumpkin on her husband's plate.

Elder Zhou only wanted to eat meat and had no interest in the pumpkin. However, worried about his wife's nagging if he didn't eat it, he picked it up and took a bite.

"Oh my, this pumpkin is actually delicious! It's sweet and glutinous, with a hint of meaty aroma. This combination is so good! Mr. Lishan, Professor Xu, you should all try it too."

While everyone was enjoying their meal, Lin Xu brought over the White Jade Lotus Root Strips and a few other side dishes, making Geng Lishan's eyes widen.

The White Jade Lotus Root Strips he had been craving since the competition! Finally, they were before him again.

He picked up a mouthful with his chopsticks and put it into his mouth. Mmm, still so crispy and delicious. This texture was truly unforgettable.

"Young friend Lin, you're the first person I've met who can make vegetarian dishes this tasty. It's absolutely brilliant, a dish I wouldn't trade for meat!"

Lin Xu said with a smile, "Then please eat more. Whenever you feel like having some, just come over, and I'll make it for you."

While the two chatted, Professor Xu and the others also tried the White Jade Lotus Root Strips. It had to be said, the flavor was indeed fantastic. No wonder Mr. Lishan was so fond of this dish. The texture, the flavor, and the presentation were all impeccable!

At this time, the staff also began eating their dinner. Lin Xu casually grabbed a pair of chopsticks and sat down at their table. Just as he was about to start eating, Shen Jiayue pushed the door open and walked in.

"I'm off work!" she announced. She first rushed to Dundun, giving his head a good rub, then ran over to Lin Xu. She was about to hug her beloved Xu Bao, whom she hadn't seen for several hours, when she suddenly noticed the Steamed Rice Flour Meat on the table.

The intended loving embrace immediately transformed into a yearning for the delicious food. "Wow, it's Steamed Rice Flour Meat! No wonder it smells so good."

After greeting everyone, she sat down next to Lin Xu, casually snatched his chopsticks, and began devouring the Steamed Rice Flour Meat in large mouthfuls, all while recounting amusing incidents from the audit firm.

"Uncle Tan heard we were going to have bento boxes again and canceled his business trip, so Assistant Yuan had to go cancel the plane tickets again..."

Lin Xu picked up a pair of chopsticks from another table and tasted the Steamed Rice Flour Meat he had made.

The flavor really is good. No wonder so many people like it. I'll have to find a way to improve it further. When the new restaurant opens, I can add it to the menu and make more money.

The new establishment had upgraded from a roadside stall to a large restaurant, requiring many more dishes.

During this month at Fishing Platform, I need to learn as much as possible and also poach as much talent as possible. Yes, for such a large restaurant, it's unrealistic for me to handle all the cooking alone. It's best to recruit a few chefs with signature dishes to support the kitchen.

Just as he thought of this, the system's notification sounded in Lin Xu's mind:

"The host is concerned about the operational status of the new restaurant's kitchen, triggering the side quest [Desperate for Talent]: Please invite five chefs recognized by the system to join Lin Ji's Food before the new restaurant opens. Upon completion, you will receive one Cuisine Upgrade Card, two Perfect Level Stir-fry Dish draws, and two Perfect Level Braised Dish draws."

Five chefs? And they have to be recognized by the system?

Lin Xu was somewhat surprised.

Getting five chefs is simple; with enough money, many would be willing to switch jobs. But being recognized by the system...

While he was pondering, a list appeared on the screen in his mind. It contained the names of all the chefs Lin Xu knew. However, only the names of his master Gao Peisheng, Senior Brother Xie Baomin, Mr. Guo Weidong, his nephew Guo Xinghai, and Wei Qian were illuminated.

This must mean they are recognized by the system, right? But this list is too... Including his retired master's name—isn't the system afraid of being strung up on a lamppost? Senior Brother Xie Baomin

and Guo Weidong both have jobs, so they're a no-go. And Guo Xinghai has already moved to Yangcheng; it's impossible to poach him. So, is the current priority to recruit Wei Qian? But he's just managed to establish himself at Fishing Platform. Would it really be appropriate to abruptly try and recruit him to Lin Ji?

As he was contemplating, Wei Qian pushed open the door and strode in. "Am I late? Every time I come here, it feels like coming home. It's not like Fishing Platform, which is so dull and lifeless it's irritating..."

Lin Xu: "!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

If you put it that way, I'm wide awake now!