

Culinary 231

Chapter 231: Spicy Crayfish! Senior Brother, Is This What You Called An Inseparable Friendship?

"I just found out these cucumber slices are actually pretty good—sour and sweet with a bit of spice, perfect with crawfish. You all should try them."

Geng Lele popped a chilled cucumber slice into her mouth.

She was instantly captivated by the crisp texture and the complex flavor—sour, sweet, and subtly spicy.

Hearing this, the others gave them a try too.

They were full of praise for the cucumber slices Lin Xu had prepared.

While they were eating, Dou Wenjing's phone, which was on the low cabinet by the sofa, suddenly rang.

It startled Dundun, who was next to her, munching on some treats.

Dou Wenjing got up, glanced at her phone, took off her disposable gloves, silenced the call, and went back to eating.

"Why didn't you answer? Boyfriend?" Chen Yan asked, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

Dou Wenjing shook her head. "I don't have a boyfriend. It's my cousin. He had a failed blind date back home and now he's insisting on coming to Beijing to find me. I've refused, but he keeps calling every day."

Hearing Dou Wenjing didn't have a boyfriend, Chen Yan, who was also single, immediately brightened. "Come on, Dou Wenjing," she said, raising her glass. "A toast to us single women!"

"Count me in, count me in!" Zeng Xiaoqi also raised her drink.

Geng Lele joined the fun, but Shen Jiayue and Wu Kexin abstained.

It made sense for Shen Jiayue not to join in; after all, she was practically the proprietress.

But Wu Kexin not joining...

"OOH... no wonder Panda has been peeling for ages but hardly eaten anything! So there *is* something going on!" everyone teased good-naturedly.

Panda and Wu Kexin looked slightly embarrassed.

When they had nearly finished eating, Lin Xu cooked some noodles and tossed them in the leftover crawfish broth.

The aroma was so enticing that everyone, despite being nearly full, had a small bowl of noodles, leaving them all pleasantly stuffed with rounded bellies.

After they had eaten and drunk their fill, Chen Yan started assigning tasks. "I'll take Lele home. Panda, you and your Xinxin take Dou Wenjing and Reporter Zeng home. As for Yueyue, you stay and help my brother-in-law clean up... Oh my goodness, I'm so stuffed!"

After everyone had left, Lin Xu grabbed a trash can, collected the crawfish shells from the table, and then wiped the table clean.

Meanwhile, Shen Jiayue carefully packed the remaining few dozen crawfish into a large takeaway container, planning to take them home.

Hmph. The same way you kicked me out is the same way you'll have to invite me back. Otherwise, you won't get a single bite of these crawfish.

Once Shen Jiayue finished packing the crawfish, Lin Xu reminded her, "Add some broth to the crawfish. That way, it'll taste even better when you eat it later, and it'll stay warm longer. If it's not enough, have your nanny cook some noodles to mix in; it'll be delicious."

"Got it!"

Lin Xu carried the tray to the kitchen.

He planned to keep the crawfish broth. Cooking some noodles in it tomorrow morning would taste absolutely amazing!

After cleaning up, they went downstairs hand in hand, one carrying the packed food containers and the other the bag of trash.

"I really want to be with you every day." As they exited the elevator, Shen Jiayue leaned her head on Lin Xu's shoulder. How wonderful it would be if, after getting married, they could be this inseparable every day, even when just going downstairs to throw out the trash hand in hand.

"We will be," Lin Xu said. "Just give me a little more time. Once I buy a place, I'll marry you."

"An apartment isn't necessary!" Shen Baobao was already getting impatient.

Lin Xu gently pinched her porcelain-smooth cheek. "A princess always has a castle; my Princess Shen naturally deserves one too."

WOW!!!! Xu Bao, you're so good to me!

Deeply moved, Shen Jiayue instantly threw her arms around Lin Xu's neck and planted a kiss on his lips.

Lin Xu was startled by her sudden action.

Why is it always so... impulsive?

With one hand holding the trash bag and the other arm holding Shen Baobao tightly, he reciprocated her kiss.

"WOW! They're kissing!"

"HAHA! Definitely worth the wait."

"That looks so romantic..."

"But what's the fun in this for us singles?"

Just as Lin Xu and Shen Baobao were kissing downstairs, a burst of voices came from the nearby holly bushes.

Turning their heads, they saw it was the women from earlier.

These women had claimed they wanted to go home early, but they had actually stuck around, hoping to witness some drama. After watching, however, their sense of loneliness only intensified.

Right, what fun is there for a bunch of us singles? Plus, we got bitten by mosquitoes and now we have several big welts.

A moment ago, Shen Baobao had been brave and bold with her kiss.

But now, realizing everyone was watching, she instantly buried her face in Lin Xu's chest like an ostrich, the takeaway container in her hand tilting precariously.

Luckily, it was a leak-proof, sealed container; otherwise, her parents would have been eating crawfish out of a plastic bag when she got home.

"Alright, alright, no need to be shy." Lin Xu patted Shen Baobao's back, finally coaxing her out of her ostrich-like state.

The sight made the group of singles envious all over again.

"I want that kind of sweet romance too!"

"I told you guys we shouldn't wait here for the show, but you wouldn't listen."

"You were the one who kept suggesting we all wait and watch!"

The group walked together to the edge of the residential complex.

Lin Xu watched as everyone went their separate ways, then shuffled back upstairs in his slippers, planning to tidy up the kitchen, take a shower, and then lie in bed to chat with Shen Baobao.

「Morning.」

After waking up, Lin Xu cooked a bowl of noodles in the leftover crawfish broth.

The flavor was still intensely savory and fragrant with a spicy kick.

Eating it even reminded him of the first kiss he'd received last night.

Yes, they had kissed after eating crawfish last night, so both their mouths had been full of that spicy flavor. Eating these noodles now, he couldn't help but recall that enchanting scene from the previous evening.

After eating his fill, he took out the winter melon and pumpkin strips that had been soaking in the refrigerator.

Both the winter melon and pumpkin strips had become firm and crisp; this meant they were properly soaked. From this point on, no matter how they were prepared, their crispness would remain.

He poured out the limewater from the basin and rinsed the winter melon and pumpkin strips repeatedly with fresh water to remove as much of the lime taste as possible; otherwise, the candied winter melon wouldn't taste good. After rinsing them several times, he soaked them again in fresh water and put them back in the refrigerator's crisper drawer. Only by soaking them thoroughly could the lime taste be completely eliminated, ensuring the candied winter melon would be even more delicious.

After finishing these tasks, it was almost time for work.

Lin Xu got dressed, picked up Dundun, and drove to the Fishing Platform.

Another day's vacation, huh.

Not long after arriving at the Fishing Platform, just as he was about to check the aquaculture area for any dead fish, shrimp, or crabs, his Senior Brother Xie Baomin suddenly approached him.

"Junior Brother, weren't you planning to go to Building Six? Come on, I'll take you over there now."

Today? Well, I might as well, since there's nothing much going on here anyway.

With the mindset of clearing a new map for rewards, Lin Xu followed Xie Baomin to Building Six.

It was an edifice with a distinct Jiangnan architectural style; there were even goldfish and water lilies at the entrance, evoking the elegance and charm of a classical Jiangnan garden.

The two of them, senior and junior brother, chatted and laughed as they walked into the main entrance of Building Six.

The receptionist, a young woman in a qipao, smiled and greeted Xie Baomin.

Looks like Senior Brother comes here often; even the receptionist knows him.

Lin Xu followed Xie Baomin to the kitchen, where a group of people were bustling about.

Xie Baomin called out, "Zhenhua, I've come to see you!"

As soon as the words were out, a stern-faced, middle-aged chef among the group shot a cold glance in their direction. "Xie Baomin, you still dare to show your face here?"

Lin Xu: "..."

Senior Brother, is this what you meant by an inseparable friendship?

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As Qiu Zhenhua coldly shouted, the chefs who were busy nearby immediately stopped their work and quietly watched the two uninvited guests at the kitchen door.

It gave Lin Xu quite a scare.

Oh crap!

Are they about to start a fight?

Should I help them by holding down Senior Brother later? It might make the fight go smoother.

"Zhenhua, I haven't seen you in a few days. Why are you so fired up?"

Xie Baomin walked over with a smile, not caring about the stares from the chefs. Instead, he even bumped shoulders with the scholarly-looking Qiu Zhenhua, who wore gold-rimmed glasses.

"How's your consideration of the matter I discussed with you coming along?"

"Quit joking around with me. Don't even think about it! Building Number Six might not match you in cooking competitions, but don't you dare look down on us!"

Qiu Zhenhua impatiently pushed Xie Baomin away and waved his hand at the surrounding chefs. "Get back to your work."

The chefs then resumed their tasks.

Lin Xu looked around. Although the chefs preparing ingredients had all sorts of items ready, the staff working on pastry were noticeably more numerous.

Mixing dough, kneading dough, chopping fillings, and so on—everyone was incredibly busy.

As expected from chefs specializing in Suzhou-style cuisine; the variety of pastry is endless.

But what is Senior Brother really here for?

Just to see the look on Head Chef Qiu's face?

"Zhenhua, let me introduce you. This is my junior brother, Lin Xu. He recently started working at Building Number Two."

Qiu Zhenhua glanced at Lin Xu and then said, "I know. During the competition, your master pretended to sell his personal information and tricked my eldest uncle out of one thousand yuan."

Lin Xu and Xie Baomin were momentarily stunned.

The two martial brothers exchanged glances.

There wasn't much surprise on their faces.

Because that was indeed their master's style.

Xie Baomin had originally intended to use his junior brother as a bargaining chip. However, since their master had already used Lin Xu to swindle Old Man Qiu out of a thousand yuan, it was best not to bring his junior brother up for now, lest it stir up unpleasant memories for Qiu Zhenhua.

He whispered, "Zhenhua, my proposal is excellent. Let's have a talent exchange. You send a few Pastry Chefs to Building Number Two, and we'll send a few chefs specializing in stir-fry to Building Number Six. If we team up like this, won't we crush the competition?"

No sooner had he finished speaking than Qiu Zhenhua coldly said, "Xie Baomin, don't think that just because you beat me a few times in past cooking competitions, you can look down on Building Number Six's chefs. When it comes to stir-fry, we are not weaker than any other building!"

"Alright, alright, you're not weak. It's just that we're stronger, then, isn't it?"

"You..."

Lin Xu found it rather surprising that his Senior Brother hadn't been beaten up at the Fishing Platform with that way of speaking.

During the previous competition, he thought Guo Weidong from Building Number Ten was very ostentatious and high-profile. He hadn't expected his own Senior Brother to be no pushover either. His skill at provoking enmity definitely ranked in the top three at the Fishing Platform.

However, after listening for a while, Lin Xu somewhat understood the conflict between the two.

His Senior Brother, Xie Baomin, felt that although Building Number Two was unbeatable when it came to stir-fry, it was a bit weak in the pastry department. Conversely, Building Number Six was strong in pastry, but its stir-fry was lacking. Therefore, he wanted the two buildings to exchange a few chefs to compensate for each other's weaknesses.

This way, guests at Building Number Two could enjoy delicious Crab Buns, and guests at Building Number Six could savor a richer variety of delicious dishes.

This should have been a good thing.

But Qiu Zhenhua felt that Xie Baomin was looking down on Building Number Six's stir-fry skills.

So, the matter had always been deadlocked.

Of course, this was also partly his Senior Brother's fault. During the middle-aged group competitions back then, he had knocked Qiu Zhenhua out in the semi-finals several times in a row.

It would be strange if Qiu Zhenhua showed him a pleasant face after that.

Seeing Qiu Zhenhua's stiff attitude, Xie Baomin couldn't help but sigh. "Then how about this: let's just have an exchange between our two buildings."

"We have nothing worthwhile to exchange. Your pastry department's Pastry Chefs can't even compare to the old ladies from the alleys. What benefit would an exchange bring us?"

At the mention of Building Number Six's strong suit, Qiu Zhenhua finally puffed up with some pride.

However, he didn't realize he had fallen right into Xie Yinbi's trap.

"Ha? So you look down on Building Number Two's pastry, do you? Well, well, Qiuqiu, how about we have a little competition then?"

Qiu Zhenhua smiled faintly. "With your level of pastry skill, is there even a need to compete? Make a soup dumpling with thirty-two pleats first, then we'll talk."

TSK...

Now Lin Xu finally understood why his Senior Brother had brought him here.

They were here to show off and put Qiu Zhenhua in his place.

Indeed.

Xie Baomin pointed to a nearby rolled-out bun wrapper and said to Lin Xu, "Junior Brother, make him a soup dumpling so he can see. What's so mysterious about pastry? If I hadn't thought steaming buns was unpromising back then and skipped learning pastry, what significance would Building Number Six even hold today?"

A smile played on his face.

After such a long buildup, it was finally time to close the net.

Qiu Zhenhua looked at Lin Xu in astonishment.

He knew Lin Xu was an excellent cook; otherwise, he wouldn't have won the cooking competition.

But savory cooking and pastry have always been two separate paths of culinary development.

There was no reason that being good at savory cooking meant one would also excel at pastry.

However, since Xie Baomin had said so, this Chef Lin must indeed have some skill.

He pointed to the rolled wrappers nearby and said, "Please enlighten us, Chef Lin."

Lin Xu smiled and said, "I am here to learn from Head Chef Qiu."

He first went to wash his hands, then approached the work surface. He picked up a rolled wrapper, cradling it in his hand, and then used a flat-headed spatula to scoop some crab filling into it.

Once the filling was in, he pinched the edges of the wrapper, skillfully and swiftly pleating it.

Each pleat he made was perfectly uniform, as if measured with a ruler.

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Once the bun's skin was completely pinched tight, and the number of pleats had reached exactly thirty-two, each one uniform in width and matching in length, even those with obsessive-compulsive disorder found it satisfying.

Just like that, a plump and round Crab Soup Dumpling with an even shape was ready.

Lin Xu placed the dumpling on the board, then stepped aside.

Well, since his senior brother wanted to show off, he might as well play along.

Qiu Zhenhua came over and looked down seriously at the Crab Bun Lin Xu had made,

"It seems I underestimated Master Lin. That pastry craftsmanship is impeccable, even better than the masters here who have been making them for years."

Xie Baomin then leaned in, smiling as he said,

"But still not quite up to your level. Your skills in this area truly are the best. How about we collaborate, Qiuqiu? Why don't you come over and try our Crab Buns in a couple of days, what do you think?"

"Alright, I'll come over and have a look when the time comes."

Qiu Zhenhua hadn't expected Lin Xu's skills to be so remarkable, and now he was quite curious about the taste of the filling made by someone capable of crafting such well-made Crab Buns. If he's only good at wrapping, that's nothing much. But if the filling is also good, then we really must cooperate with Building Two. Otherwise, if Building Two starts selling Crab Buns, our side will suffer an even greater loss!

Having achieved his goal, Xie Baomin took his leave immediately.

He was worried that if he didn't leave now, Qiu Zhenhua might ask for that thousand yuan on behalf of his father.

「After the two brothers left the sixth building.」

Lin Xu curiously asked,

"Can Building Two serve Crab Buns?"

He had heard from Wei Qian that the dishes from each building weren't allowed to be exchanged; otherwise, the restaurants in all eighteen buildings would end up with identical menus, losing their own unique features.

Xie Baomin replied with a smile,

"No, they can't. But if you're a little creative, it's no problem. For example, for a table that spends over 20,000, you could offer a surprise complimentary dish. This surprise could be Crab Soup Dumplings or even roast suckling pig."

After the economic reforms, to increase revenue, every building was coming up with its own strategies.

For instance, Building Ten often served dishes that weren't listed on the menu to attract customers.

Other buildings had similar tactics.

Wait a minute... Roast suckling pig? Could it be that senior brother intended not only to cooperate with Building Six but also sought to establish some connection with Building Ten?

Indeed, after leaving the sixth building, Xie Baomin didn't return to Building Two. Instead, he strolled over to the tenth building, which was adorned with banana trees and other southern plants.

TSK TSK.

True to the kind of disciple trained by his master, he surely knew how to play his cards.

"Dongdong, I've come to visit you!"

Xie Baomin made his way to the tenth building's kitchen, a familiar route for him, and upon entering, ran into Guo Weidong carrying a cup of brewed tea.

Guo Weidong glared at him impatiently,

"Scram! Call me that again, and I'll flip out on you."

But Xie Baomin still shamelessly closed in,

"Why are you angry? I want to propose a deal with you."

"Can I refuse it?"

Guo Weidong wasn't particularly interested.

And his intuition told him that Xie Baomin, with his unsolicited kindness, must be up to no good.

"Just hear me out, okay? I want to learn how to make your roast suckling pig here. Could you or the head chef here teach me?"

Guo Weidong was utterly bewildered.

This is our Cantonese signature dish. If we teach you, what will we have left to sell?

He wanted to refuse without even thinking about it.

Lin Xu also thought one would have to be insane to agree to such a request from senior brother. It made no sense at all.

However, Xie Baomin's next statement made Guo Weidong reconsider.

"I'll trade you my master's original Qingshui Furong recipe!"

Lin Xu was slightly confused.

He didn't know what dish that was.

But Guo Weidong appeared quite surprised, spilling the tea he was carrying,

"Really? You're actually willing to share Qingshui Furong?"

"What's there to be hesitant about? It's all for work..."

After sizing up Xie Baomin and ensuring it wasn't a joke, Guo Weidong nodded and said,

"Okay, I agree!"

Once the deal was settled, Xie Baomin reverted to his usual playful demeanor,

"Then we're off, Dongdong. I'll come by again when I have time to share a cup of tea."

「After leaving the tenth building.」

Lin Xu could no longer contain his curiosity,

"Senior brother, what exactly is Qingshui Furong? Why is Chef Guo willing to exchange his roast suckling pig just to learn it? Is the dish that impressive?"

As they walked, Xie Baomin explained,

"Qingshui Furong is a dish our master adapted from Furong Chicken Slices. He reportedly created it to win over our first master's wife. Since the old man is out there living it up, I'll teach you when I have some time. However, I can't guarantee you'll master it, as this dish is much trickier than White Jade Lotus Root Strips."

Is that so? My Perfect Level culinary study card disagrees! Lucky that I didn't use that study card on the day we made Zaozhuang spicy chicken. Otherwise, I'd be in real trouble now. A dish that's even more difficult than White Jade Lotus Root Strips, just thinking about it is thrilling!

「The two returned to Building Two.」

It was nearly noon by then.

Several pre-orders for today's lunch dishes were already posted in front of Lin Xu's stove. There was finally some work to do.

But before getting busy, he went over to chat with Qin Wei by a nearby stove.

If he wanted to poach someone, it was essential to occasionally build rapport and forge a bond. That way, when it came time to poach, they would fall right into his lap. As they were talking,

「Lunch service began.」

Today's lunch was prepared by the head chef of the stir-fry section, Cheng JianShe.

The dishes included stir-fried river shrimp, Sauce Explosion meat cubes, oyster sauce with lettuce, and minced pork with tofu skin, along with a soup of pork ribs with radish.

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The meal consisted of four dishes and a soup—a mix of meat and vegetables—and was quite well-balanced.

Lin Xu saw Qin Wei dish up some food and go to a corner to eat. He was about to join him when Cheng JianShe spoke up,

"Master Lin, the chefs who went to help out at your restaurant all praise your cooking skills. How about you cook dinner tonight? What do you think?"

Me, cook?

Lin Xu had just been wondering what to do with himself that afternoon to pass the time.

Upon hearing this, he immediately replied,

"Sure, no problem. Just make sure you steam plenty of rice so there's enough for everyone."

Cheng JianShe burst into laughter when he heard this.

"Master Lin is quite confident, eh? But our chefs and servers here have tasted all sorts of fine food; their appetites are pretty consistent. You just focus on preparing the dishes."

"Alright."

Lin Xu sat down and, while eating, thought about what to cook for dinner.

Let's start with a popular classic: Braised Pork Belly. I saw some high-quality chilled pork belly in the cold storage yesterday, and it would be a real shame not to make Braised Pork Belly with it.

Braised Pork Belly has a sweet and savory flavor, and some people might not like it.

He gave it some thought and decided to prepare Boiled Fish as well.

Yes, I've had my eye on those plump Grass Carp in the aquatic section for a while now.

But Boiled Fish isn't universally popular either, as it's served in a soupy, oily broth that tends to splatter Red Oil and soup everywhere when eaten.

Then, I'll also make dry-fried green beans. Adding some minced meat while stir-frying should make them incredibly fragrant. Plus, without any sauce or liquid, it would be a relatively 'clean' dish to eat.

That made three dishes, all containing some meat. For the last one, he'd go with a simple Boiled Chinese Broccoli to help keep costs down and avoid going over budget for a single meal.

As for the soup? Naturally, it had to be the old standby: Nori Egg Drop Soup.

Not only does it taste good, but it's also low-cost; there was no reason not to choose it.

After deciding on the four dishes and one soup, Lin Xu continued with his meal.

Cheng JianShe's fried tofu skin was very well made. It must have been fried in warm oil and then soaked in warm water, making it soft and tender without being mushy. Paired with minced meat, it was truly delicious and went perfectly with rice.

After a few more bites, seeing Qin Wei still eating alone in the corner, Lin Xu put some food in his own bowl and carried it over to chat with him.

「After lunch」

Customers started showing up at the restaurant.

The kitchen was bustling with activity.

But this level of activity was a walk in the park compared to the kitchen at Lin Ji's Food. For Lin Xu, it felt almost like a vacation; he didn't even break a sweat before the lunch rush ended.

「After the noon rush had passed」

Lin Xu went to check on Dundun at the front counter and also brought over some steamed beef tenderloin.

His 'son,' working here at such a young age, naturally deserved some good food.

With a new toy, the relationship between father and son had been restored. When Dundun saw Lin Xu, it even took the initiative to rub its large head against Lin Xu's hand.

Its crafty little eyes, however, were glued to the steamed beef tenderloin in the disposable plate.

Clearly, the little guy had smelled the meat.

As soon as Lin Xu placed the plate on the counter, Dundun immediately came over, wiggling its chubby little rear, and started gobbling down the food.

"Boss Lin, everyone who ordered today praised your cooking," Shu Yun said. "Since they couldn't find you for a photo, they took turns posing with Dundun and left satisfied."

Oh, really? Lin Xu raised his hand and rubbed Dundun's head. This little guy has sacrificed so much for the family, he thought.

But Dundun was solely focused on eating. Such affectionate gestures were merely an unwelcome distraction, so it shook its head dismissively, nudged the plate forward with its snout, and moved aside to continue eating.

Lin Xu was speechless. Can't you at least pretend to be cooperative in front of others?

After watching Dundun for a while, Lin Xu waited until the little fellow had finished his meat, then noticed Shu Yun secretly eating some snacks nearby.

"Didn't you just have lunch? Weren't you full?"

"I'm allergic to shrimp, and I don't like fried tofu skin, so I only had a little rice with some lettuce," Shu Yun explained.

Lin Xu said with a smile, "Don't eat too much. This afternoon, I'll let you taste my cooking."

Shu Yun's eyes immediately lit up. "You're cooking this afternoon, Boss Lin? Oh, that's wonderful! I watch your videos every day and have been craving your food for ages. I'm definitely going to eat a lot this afternoon!"

After playing with Dundun for a while, Lin Xu returned to the kitchen to start preparing dinner.

He took several jin of pork belly from the cold storage and began to sear the skin.

After a flurry of preparation, the pork was simmering away in a casserole.

Next, he prepared some knife-cut chilies to use for the Boiled Fish.

「Four thirty in the afternoon」

Dinner in the Fishing Platform's kitchen began.

As the employees gradually arrived at the small dining area for their meal, they were stunned by the sight of the dishes on the table.

Braised Pork Belly, Boiled Fish, dry-fried green beans, Boiled Chinese Broccoli, and a Nori Egg Drop Soup radiating a rich, savory aroma... Tonight's staff dinner was unbelievably lavish!

"Let's eat, let's eat!"

Everyone grabbed a bowl, dished up a large helping of rice for themselves, and then eagerly sat down to eat.

"Mmm, this Braised Pork Belly is perfect! So fragrant and not at all greasy."

"This Boiled Fish is amazing—so smooth and tender! And the best part? No Sichuan peppercorns! It really hits the spot."

"Wow, these dry-fried green beans! Stir-fried with minced meat, they're unbelievably fragrant and delicious!"

"This Boiled Chinese Broccoli is so authentic. I think it's even better than what they serve at Building Number Ten."

"Master Lin's culinary skills are truly impeccable."

"I dished out a large bowl thinking it'd be enough, but I'm definitely going back for more rice."

"Me too! I'll need another bowl later. These dishes are just too good with rice!"

"..."

Everyone was eating and chattering excitedly, filled with admiration for Lin Xu's culinary prowess.

He hadn't even won a championship yet, but no wonder Lin Ji's Food was so bustling with customers.

His talent was truly exceptional.

After trying everything, they couldn't even decide which dish was the best; every single one was incredibly delicious. Even the humble Nori Egg Drop Soup was outstanding.

「While they were eating」

Cheng JianShe, having finished his tasks, came to the small dining room to eat. He glanced casually at the dishes on the table. Wow, Master Lin's repertoire is certainly extensive! Four dishes, four different cooking methods, featuring fish and meat, a full spread of meat and vegetable options. Impressive, truly impressive!

He marveled inwardly at how formidable the younger generation was. Just as he picked up his bowl to get some rice, he discovered that the large steamer tray, which should have been full of rice, was now completely empty.

What's going on? Where's the rice? Where did that whole huge tray of rice disappear to?

「At the restaurant's front counter」

Shu Yun was enjoying a large bowl of rice, eating with gusto as she paired it with the dishes she had brought for herself.

She picked up a piece of Braised Pork Belly, glistening with rich, thick sauce, and placed it on her rice. Gently mashing it with her chopsticks, she mixed it into the rice and savored a large mouthful of the combined meat and grains.

Oh my goodness! Could this possibly be any more delicious?

Just as she was savoring her meal, a few customers with dinner reservations arrived early.

Shu Yun quickly set down her bowl and chopsticks to greet them.

"Hello, Mr. Jin! Your reserved Table Number Nine is by the window. You can enjoy the summer scenery outside while you dine," she said, preparing to lead the customers to their table.

However, the group didn't budge. Instead, sniffing the air appreciatively, they asked,

"What smells so incredibly fragrant? Is that Braised Pork Belly?"

As they spoke, their eyes fell upon the dishes on the counter—the glistening, jiggly pieces of pork looked utterly irresistible.

Mr. Jin was a regular. He looked at Shu Yun curiously and asked,

"Manager Shu, are you serving Braised Pork Belly now?"

Shu Yun shook her head. "No, this is our staff meal."

"Whoa! Your staff meals are this extravagant..."

Mr. Jin gazed wistfully at the Braised Pork Belly on the counter, the dishes he had previously ordered suddenly seeming far less appealing.

After a moment's thought, he asked, "Manager Shu, would it be possible to buy a portion of that Braised Pork Belly?"

Staff meals can't be sold... Shu Yun mused. Just as she was about to refuse, Mr. Jin declared,

"I'll pay two thousand for it!"

Shu Yun instantly swallowed the refusal on the tip of her tongue. "Of course, no problem!"

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Shu Yun led Mr. Jin and the others to Table Nine, poured tea for each of them, and then hurried toward the small dining area where the employees were eating.

The Braised Pork Belly couldn't be cooked on the spot, and a customer was willing to pay a high price for it. Her only option was to snatch the Braised Pork Belly meant for the employee meal.

「Inside the small dining area.」

Cheng JianShe, unable to find any rice for himself, had no choice but to take some rice prepared for the customers. After serving himself a bowl, he sat down and eagerly tasted a piece of the Braised Pork Belly.

Mmm, this Braised Pork Belly is truly authentic. No wonder all the rice for the employee meal was gone. With this Braised Pork Belly, one could definitely eat an extra bowl of rice.

Thinking about rice reminded him of what he had said at lunch, and he couldn't help but smile bitterly.

I had thought Master Lin was just a young man boasting, but it turned out I was the one with limited experience. Truly, a young hero has emerged. Back when I was in my twenties, I was still just a kitchen helper who could only chop. But Master Lin is already capable of managing things on his own, his skills no less than those of the head chef in charge of the signature dishes. Perhaps this is a matter of talent!

Cheng JianShe was filled with deep emotion.

After he had two more pieces, the Braised Pork Belly on his table was all gone. But no worries, there was still some in the insulated pot nearby, set aside for employees who arrived late. Cheng JianShe planned to help himself to some.

However, just as he walked over with his plate, he saw Shu Yun, the front desk manager, hastily approaching and taking away all the remaining Braised Pork Belly from the insulated pot...

What's going on? I've barely started eating!!!!

Cheng JianShe asked, somewhat displeased, "Manager Shu, what is the meaning of this?"

Everyone knows today's Braised Pork Belly is delicious, but for you to take away the whole pot like this is simply outrageous, isn't it? Why don't you just dump the rice in there too while you're at it?

At the next table, Xie Baomin, who was praising Lin Xu's skills, also looked over, "What happened, Little Shu?"

Shu Yun explained, "It's like this, Mr. Xie. One of our regular customers, Mr. Jin, saw the Braised Pork Belly in my bowl and thought it looked good. He offered to buy a portion for two thousand yuan just to try it..."

Xie Baomin had been a bit displeased at first. You, a front desk manager, suddenly came over and took the dish reserved for the employees. You're not giving me, the executive chef, any consideration, are you?

However, upon hearing that someone was willing to pay two thousand yuan for Braised Pork Belly, he immediately picked up the plate of Braised Pork Belly in front of him and offered it. "Here, here! I haven't touched this plate yet. Take it away too!"

Phew... I was just worrying about how to increase the restaurant's revenue, and now a customer willing to pay a high price for Braised Pork Belly shows up. What's there to hesitate about?

Lin Xu, on the other hand, was inwardly astonished. A whole side of pork wouldn't cost two thousand yuan, yet someone is willing to spend so much on just a few pieces of Braised Pork Belly...

He looked at the servings of Braised Pork Belly on several tables and felt a twinge of heartache. All this food for tonight's staff meal... if sold, it would probably fetch over ten thousand yuan! No wonder Senior Brother got so excited upon hearing the price. But is it really necessary to sell the Braised Pork Belly that the employees are currently eating? That wouldn't sound good if word got out.

He said to Xie Baomin, "Senior Brother, put that down. There's still more Braised Pork Belly in the pot."

He had deliberately prepared extra Braised Pork Belly today, intending for Shen Baobao to take some home. But now that a customer wanted to buy it, they naturally had to prioritize sales for the restaurant. After all, this concerned his senior brother's performance.

When Xie Baomin heard there was more, he put his plate down, but then he immediately asked, "Is there much left? Is it enough for a portion?"

"Absolutely enough!"

The Braised Pork Belly I set aside for Shen Baobao's entire family? Of course that's enough for one portion! Are you underestimating my father-in-law's appetite for meat or something?

Assured there was more Braised Pork Belly available, Shu Yun was also relieved. She put the insulated pot back in its place and then said to Lin Xu, "Thank you, Boss Lin. I'll go ask the customer when they'd like to eat, and then I'll have a waiter notify you to plate it."

After saying that, she hurried back to the front desk. She needed to communicate with the customer and also finish the rice she had left.

Mmm, such delicious food should not be wasted! The chefs in the back kitchen take turns cooking, and there's no telling when it will be Boss Lin's turn again. So, I have to eat as much as possible today, even if it means jumping rope a little longer after work.

After everyone had eaten their fill, according to the kitchen rules, the chef responsible for cooking also needed to tidy up the tables and utensils. However, just as Lin Xu was about to start, Cheng JianShe, his stomach a bit rounder, came over. "Master Lin, don't you still have to serve the Braised Pork Belly to the customer? Hurry up and get ready for that. I'll handle these small tasks. I was careless at noon. Next time it's your turn to cook, I'll definitely steam more rice."

Since the customer outside might want the meat at any moment, Lin Xu didn't stand on ceremony. He wiped his hands with a towel and went to his stove.

It wasn't long before a waiter came to notify him to serve the Braised Pork Belly.

Lin Xu lifted the lid of the clay pot. He carefully arranged the Braised Pork Belly on a plate with chopsticks, skin side up. The succulent, red pieces quivered, looking tempting enough to take a bite. Considering the amount left, he arranged them in a four-by-four grid in the dish, each piece touching the others.

Once arranged, he poured the sauce from the clay pot over the meat, which not only made the meat's color more glossy and vibrant but also made the aroma richer. The presentation immediately went up a notch.

Such gorgeous meat didn't need any additional garnish; it would only be superfluous. Lin Xu handed the plate to the food runner to be served.

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Soon, the Braised Pork Belly was served at Mr. Jin's table.

"Wow! This presentation is truly worthy of the Fishing Platform—even the staff meals are this exceptional."

The group, who had been discussing business, suddenly found their appetites whetted. They immediately stopped talking about business and started eating!

"This pork is delicious! The sweetness is perfect, and the texture is just right—not too soft, yet not tough to chew. Fantastic!"

"It's indeed delicious. I didn't expect Building Two to have such hidden culinary treasures."

"It's all thanks to Old Jin's keen eye. Otherwise, we wouldn't have gotten to enjoy this amazing Braised Pork Belly."

The group was full of praise for the Braised Pork Belly.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Xie Baomin found Lin Xu, and they were also discussing the dish.

"Junior Brother, since the Braised Pork Belly you made is so popular, why don't we just add it to the surprise menu of Building Two? What do you think?"

Lin Xu had no objections. After all, making Braised Pork Belly wasn't troublesome. It just involved frying the meat and then braising it in a clay pot with caramelized sugar, and it wouldn't interfere with his vacation time this month.

"Sure, Senior Brother, I have no problem with that."

"You're putting in a lot of effort, Junior Brother. I'll add a little extra to your paycheck at the end of the month."

More money? he thought. Then there's definitely no problem!

But why a surprise menu? Lin Xu wondered.

He asked curiously, "Can't this dish just be added as a new item directly?"

Xie Baomin shook his head. "Getting a new dish officially on the Fishing Platform's menu is quite challenging. Not only do head chefs from each building need to taste it, but it also has to win the approval of more than half of them."

Oh... Now I understand, Lin Xu thought. Given how quickly you alienate people, Senior Brother, I suppose even if we served the Jade Emperor's favorite dish, not many head chefs would agree to add it. After all, who would want to miss such an opportunity to kick someone when they're down! But you do know how to exploit loopholes. Create a surprise menu. It's not officially a new addition, but it doesn't hinder sales. And other head chefs really can't find any fault with that.

「Before long,」

All staff of Building Two received notification that Braised Pork Belly was officially listed on the surprise menu, to be prominently promoted by the front desk.

However, this didn't concern Lin Xu much anymore. After he finished work, he went home.

First, he took the soaked Winter Melon strips and pumpkin strips out of the refrigerator to change the water. He then washed them repeatedly before continuing to soak them in fresh water in the refrigerator.

Even if it's food-grade, it's best not to consume lime, he mused. Not only does it taste bad, but it can also harm the stomach, so it should be removed as completely as possible.

To achieve this, he changed the water every two hours. He continued this until late at night, then, after changing the water one last time, he went to bed.

「The next morning,」

He washed the Winter Melon strips and pumpkin strips, which had soaked overnight, several more times. Then he boiled a pot of water on the stove and placed the Winter Melon strips in it to cook.

After cooking, the Winter Melon strips turned completely translucent. As they simmered in the pot with a gentle BLUB-BLUB, they looked like strips of Jade.

After about ten minutes, he used a slotted spoon to lift the Winter Melon strips out and immediately submerged them in cool, previously boiled water to continue soaking.

After boiling, they mustn't touch raw water again, or the resulting Winter Melon candy could easily rot and spoil, he reminded himself. They have to be soaked in cool, boiled water. This eliminates the possibility of spoilage.

After cooking the Winter Melon, he cooked the pumpkin strips in the same manner and soaked them in cool, boiled water as well. He then placed both soaking ingredients back into the refrigerator to chill.

Then, carrying Dundun, he went to work.

「After work in the afternoon,」

He took the Winter Melon strips and pumpkin strips out, placed them in a clean, oil-free bamboo basket, and used a fan to dry their surfaces.

Next is the sugaring process, he thought. This step can't have any moisture or oil, as it would affect the final quality.

Once the surface moisture had dried, Lin Xu brought out a deep, small basin. He wiped it thoroughly clean with a paper towel, then laid a layer of Winter Melon strips at the bottom. After that, he sprinkled a layer of White Sugar, then added another layer of Winter Melon strips.

He continued this process—a layer of Winter Melon strips followed by a layer of sugar—until all the Winter Melon strips were used. He then topped it off with more White Sugar to seal it, covered the basin with plastic wrap, and placed it back in the refrigerator.

The pumpkin strips were also prepared with the same layering method of ingredient and sugar, then sealed and stored in the refrigerator.

「Two days later, on Friday afternoon.」

After 48 hours of maceration, Lin Xu took the two basins out of the refrigerator.

He removed the plastic wrap and could see that the White Sugar had melted, creating a layer of sugar syrup at the bottom of each basin.

Time for the final step—stir-frying for frosting, he thought.

Lin Xu placed a slightly larger iron wok on the stove. He then poured the Winter Melon strips and the syrup from the basin into the wok and began to stir-fry them slowly over medium-low heat.

This step aimed to evaporate the excess water from the Winter Melon strips while also allowing the sugar to penetrate them.

Soon, the syrup in the wok started to boil and became increasingly thick. He continued to stir, ensuring the syrup evenly coated the surface of the Winter Melon strips. As the syrup thickened further, the coating on the strips also grew thicker.

Finally, when the water in the syrup had evaporated, the syrup transformed from a thick, transparent state into a dry layer of white frost.

Lin Xu stirred a few more times, then poured the frost-covered Winter Melon strips onto a large tray to cool.

This step is identical to making 'sand-stirred' and 'frost-coated' dishes, utilizing the principle that syrup crystallizes into a white solid during stir-frying, Lin Xu mused.

The frost-coated Winter Melon strips looked even more enticing.

He picked one up and took a bite. The outer layer of white frost had a fine, sandy texture, while the Winter Melon inside remained crisp and appeared semi-translucent when bitten into.

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Chewing twice, his mouth was filled with the light freshness of Winter Melon and the sweetness of sugar.

It's like tasting nature in a single bite. Delicious!

However, the Winter Melon candy wasn't completely cooled yet. Lin Xu took advantage of this time and dumped the pumpkin strips into the pot, frying them in the same way until they were frosted.

The fried pumpkin strips were a golden color.

When placed side by side with the Winter Melon candy for comparison, they looked like exquisite pieces of shaded gold and silver.

He pinched a strip and put it in his mouth. With a gentle bite, the rich, sweet flavor of pumpkin instantly filled his mouth, tasting even better than the Winter Melon candy.

No sooner had he finished one strip than the system's notification rang out in his mind:

"Host has successfully made Perfect Level Pumpkin candy using the method for Perfect Level Winter Melon candy, completing the Hidden task 'Learning by Analogy.' Reward: one Perfect Level dish learning card. Congratulations to the host."

What? Another Perfect Level dish learning card? Doesn't that mean I can secretly learn a few things when Guo Weidong teaches one of the senior brothers how to roast suckling pig later on? TSK TSK TSK... The system really plans to let me rack up rewards in this Fishing Platform instance.

By now, it had already turned dark outside.

He placed the cooled candied Winter Melon strips and candied pumpkin strips into two separate glass jars, carried them downstairs, and entered Uncle Yu's supermarket.

"Uncle, I've finished making the Winter Melon candy and pumpkin strips. I brought some over for you to taste."

"My, these candies look so pretty!"

Uncle Yu leaned over, unabashedly twisted open the jar, and began to taste. "Mmm, delicious, delicious! The Winter Melon flavor is very rich, and it's nice and crunchy, just like the old-fashioned Winter Melon candy I ate when I was young. It's a pity that the ones sold on the streets now are machine-made and don't taste as good."

After tasting the Winter Melon candy, he tried the pumpkin strips and was equally full of praise.

"Boss Lin, with your skill in making Winter Melon candy, you wouldn't starve even if you didn't open a restaurant. If you started a store selling old-fashioned candies, wouldn't the neighbors go crazy buying them?"

Though the words were spoken casually, Lin Xu took them to heart. He suddenly remembered the previous task that asked him to invest in opening a store.

Could it really be for this Winter Melon candy? But this kind of product would have low sales. People would only eat a strip or two a day, and even then, they'd have to monitor their blood sugar regularly. One wrong move and they could become a 'little sugar person.' Although the candy held sentimental value, opening a store for it would likely lose money. Best to save the trouble.

「The next morning.」

Lin Xu went to Cao Ji for a bowl of lamb soup and two crispy pancakes, then drove to work at the Fishing Platform with Dundun in tow.

Dundun had now gotten used to riding in the car. Every time he got in, he obediently lay on the passenger-side dashboard. Occasionally, when they encountered a street-cleaning truck and needed to activate the windshield wipers, the little guy's head would sway along with them.

Once the car entered the Fishing Platform complex, Lin Xu parked at the entrance of Building No. 2. Carrying Dundun, he got out and headed into the restaurant.

"Dundun, did you miss me today?"

Shu Yun bent down to hug the little guy, then turned to Lin Xu and said, "I received three phone calls this morning for Braised Pork Belly. Boss Lin, your Braised Pork Belly is becoming more and more famous. A lot of people come here specifically for it."

Lin Xu replied with a smile, "It's all thanks to your marketing efforts."

Ever since they decided to serve Braised Pork Belly at the restaurant, Shu Yun had Lin Xu prepare a serving. Then, she set up the lighting and used a digital camera to carefully take a series of high-quality photos of the dish. Whenever customers came in to order, she would bring out a tablet to show them the photos. The visual effects of the tablet were already good, and coupled with her decent photography skills, the glossy chunks of meat and their trembling appearance instantly shattered the customers' defenses.

The fame of the Braised Pork Belly spread rapidly as a result.

After they exchanged some business-related compliments, Lin Xu headed to the kitchen. He first wiped down the stove and re-washed the utensils before starting on the day's prep work.

Now, he could sell seven or eight servings of Braised Pork Belly per meal, so Lin Xu had to prepare in advance. He scorched the pork skin with a blowtorch and then scrubbed it clean with warm water. Next, he chopped the meat into four-centimeter cubes, rinsed them, and put them into the pot to sauté.

While he was busy, Xie Baomin strolled over casually.

"Junior brother, this afternoon, Qiu Zhenhua from Building No. 6 will come to our Building No. 2 to watch you make Crab Buns. Once you're done with the pork, start preparing. If you need help, just call someone over. Anyway, everyone is just idling around."

Oh? Doesn't this mean the task to upgrade the Crab Buns is about to be completed?

Lin Xu didn't actually need help; he could manage it all on his own and even had time to chat with the fish and shrimp in the aquatics area. But thinking of this as an opportunity to build relationships, he said, "Then let Master Qin give me a hand. I really am a bit swamped all by myself."

"Okay!" Xie Baomin agreed and then called out to Qin Wei, who wasn't far away, "Xiao Qin, don't cook today. Come help my junior brother. He needs someone to give him a hand over here."

Qin Wei looked somewhat surprised, but he nodded anyway and walked over after putting down what he was doing.

"Master Qin, you know how to simmer aspic, right?"

Qin Wei nodded.

"What about chicken aspic?"

Qin Wei nodded again.

"Then, how about you watch me simmer it later? Point out anything that's not quite right."

Qin Wei was bewildered. So the help you need is just for me to watch you work?

Although he was inwardly surprised, he still ended up nodding.

And so, the two of them busied themselves, one working and the other observing, until the afternoon.

At three in the afternoon, Lin Xu finished preparing the crab filling. Out of boredom, he and Qin Wei then started playing with the leftover crab shells, assembling them into new crab figures as if they were Lego bricks.

While they were playing, Xie Baomin brought Qiu Zhenhua to the kitchen.

"Qiuqiu, although my junior brother can make Crab Buns and does it quite well, there's still a difference compared to yours. You'll have to give him some guidance later; don't hold anything back."

Qiu Zhenhua rolled his eyes at him. "Do you think I'm like you?"

"What's wrong with me? I never hold anything back. If you don't believe me, let me go to Building No. 6 to guide your chefs, and you'll see if I keep any secrets."

Xie Baomin's words made Qiu Zhenhua look like his scheme had succeeded. "Then later, I'll teach your junior brother with all my heart. In return, you make that Qingshui Furong dish from your master to broaden my horizons, how about that?"

"Deal!"

Xie Baomin shouted to Lin Xu, "Junior brother, are you all prepared? Show Qiuqiu what you've got; he's waiting to teach you!"

"Alright!"

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Finally, I can get started! Lin Xu inwardly sighed with relief.

The dough had rested sufficiently, and the chicken soup aspic, pork filling, and crab roe filling were all prepared. He was just waiting for Qiu Zhenhua to arrive to trigger the upgrade reward from the State Banquet Master's guidance.

He and Qin Wei brought the prepared fillings and the dough from the cold storage.

Under Qiu Zhenhua's watchful gaze, Lin Xu began mixing the fillings.

After blending the fillings, he took out the dough, kneaded it into a long roll, and then divided it into small, individual portions. Next, he used a small rolling pin, tapered at both ends, to roll each portion out into a thin wrapper.

He held a wrapper in his palm, added the filling, and expertly shaped it into a Crab Soup Dumpling.

The entire process flowed smoothly, earning continuous nods of approval from Qiu Zhenhua.

This level of proficiency is about on par with the chefs in Building No. 6. It's a good thing I came. Otherwise, if that fellow Xie Baomin secretly sold these in his shop, Building No. 6 might actually lose customers.

While Lin Xu was wrapping the dumplings, he kept waiting for Qiu Zhenhua to offer guidance and trigger the system upgrade.

Yet, even after he had filled an entire steamer tray, the expert hadn't uttered a single word.

With no other choice, Lin Xu handed the tray to Qin Wei, who was beside him.

"Master Qin, put these in the steamer. Steam for six minutes, then let them rest for another two minutes."

Having completed his tasks, Lin Xu thought it was good to give Qin Wei something to do. This would help them get along better and make it easier to poach him eventually.

After Qin Wei left, just as Lin Xu was preparing to wrap another steamer tray, the hitherto silent Qiu Zhenhua suddenly spoke.

"The chicken soup aspic is indeed good. However, when you make the aspic, the flavorful compounds evaporate with the steam, which is a bit wasteful."

Is it finally starting? Lin Xu asked, "Then what should I do, Chef Qiu?"

"That's easily remedied. When you're simmering the chicken soup, you can add the Pork Skin directly into the pot. This way, by the time the chicken soup is ready, the Pork Skin will have completely melted. Once it's cooked, filter it and then refrigerate. The resulting aspic will be pure chicken soup aspic, delicious and free of sediment."

Wow! It can be done like that? After hearing Qiu Zhenhua's words, Lin Xu felt a sense of sudden enlightenment.

Before long, the Crab Buns were steamed and ready.

When Lin Xu took them out of the steamer, Qiu Zhenhua felt even more affirmed that his visit was the right decision; these Crab Buns were indeed up to par for selling.

If Xie Baomin were to start selling them in Building No. 2, they might actually become a bestseller.

"Chef Qiu, please give them a taste and your assessment."

Lin Xu skillfully transferred a soup dumpling, which looked like a delicate water-filled balloon, from the steamer tray to a plate. This deftness made Qiu Zhenhua look at him in a new light.

He's even this skilled at plating, and his hands don't seem to fear the heat! It seems Chef Lin has practiced a lot in private. What a pity he's Xie Baomin's junior apprentice brother. Otherwise, I'd poach him for Building No. 6, no matter the cost.

Taking the plate, Qiu Zhenhua didn't eat immediately. Instead, he gently tapped the wrapper a few times with his finger, then lifted the bun by its pleated top and gave it a little shake.

Then he said, "You've done a fine job with this dough. The ratio of cooked dough to raw dough is 7:3, right? I suggest you increase the proportion of raw dough, making it 6:4. That will improve the elasticity of the wrapper."

What is a master? This is it. Just by touching the wrapper, he could discern the dough's ratio and suggest improvements! Truly worthy of being a State Banquet Master!

After commenting on the wrapper, Qiu Zhenhua used his chopsticks to gently pierce it, tasted the broth, and then said, "The roe from June Hairy Crabs is different from that of the Hairy Crabs in September. June Hairy Crab roe is semi-liquid and has a more concentrated umami flavor. Therefore, you should slightly increase the proportion of meat filling to achieve a more harmonious savory profile."

Before Qiu Zhenhua arrived, Lin Xu had thought his Crab Buns were quite good. But after Qiu Zhenhua's pointers, Lin Xu realized that whether it was the wrapper or the filling, there was still a considerable gap when compared to a professional.

This is the gap! As he was marveling at this, the system's notification sounded in his mind:

"Host has listened to the guidance of the State Banquet Master. The Excellent Level Crab Soup Dumpling Technique has been upgraded to the Superior Crab Soup Dumpling Technique. Congratulations to the Host."

"Host visited Building No. 6 and, under Qiu Zhenhua's guidance, upgraded the Excellent Level Crab Bun Technique to Superior. Side quest [Soup Dumpling Upgrade] completed. Awarded: Dish Upgrade Card (Soup Dumplings). Congratulations to the Host."

Two consecutive notifications made Lin Xu breathe a sigh of relief.

Finally, it's completed. But where should I use this Dish Upgrade Card for soup dumplings? Should I use it directly on the Crab Soup Dumplings to get Perfect Level Crab Buns and help Senior Brother make a killing? Or should I upgrade the Shengjian Soup Dumplings and introduce them as a new item in the restaurant later? He hadn't planned to feature Crab Soup Dumplings. They were too seasonal, Northerners weren't particularly fond of such soupy dumplings, and they could easily scald a customer's mouth. Comparatively, Shengjian Soup Dumplings were a better option. However, Lin Xu decided to wait before choosing which one to upgrade. What if he learned to make Xiaolongbao soup dumplings later? That would be even more suitable than Shengjian Soup Dumplings. Yes, I'll save it.

With that thought, he dismissed his musings and sincerely thanked Qiu Zhenhua, "Thank you so much for your guidance, Chef Qiu. Without your advice, I might have never understood where the difference between my skills and yours lay."

Such a humble young man! How did he end up as that scoundrel Xie Baomin's junior apprentice brother? Qiu Zhenhua sighed inwardly with regret. The more he looked at Lin Xu, the stronger his desire to recruit such talent became. If Eldest Uncle knew about this, he'd probably be so happy he'd eat an extra bowl of Eel Noodles, wouldn't he?

Thinking this, he smiled and said,

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"Master Lin is so young and already proficient in both pastry and cooking. His talent truly aroused envy."

After he finished speaking, he turned to Xie Baomin. "The Crab Bun instruction is complete. Is it time for you to fulfill your promise now?"

Xie Baomin laughed. "Compliment me a bit more, will you? Hearing you praise my Junior Brother, I don't know why, but it just feels so exhilarating."

Qiu Zhenhua was speechless. How did I end up knowing such a bastard!

Lin Xu said from the side, "Senior Brother, I also want to witness Master's Qingshui Furong."

Upon hearing his Junior Brother's interest, Xie Baomin finally grew interested. "Alright then. Since we have time today and the stock has just been prepared in the simmering room, I'll show you how this dish is made."

He first went to the simmering room and brought back half a pot of stock.

This stock was made from two whole chickens, two whole ducks, two pig's hocks, and an entire Jinhua Ham. The broth was a rich white color, and even before it was brought over, its thick fragrance filled the entire room.

Qiu Zhenhua exclaimed from the side, "As the saying goes, 'No chicken for flavor, no duck for fragrance, no hock for richness, no ham for the perfect soup.' The aroma really is exceptional; you've put in a lot of effort."

To bring the stock to this level would take at least five or six hours.

And before simmering, many preparations were necessary.

For example, the ham had to be cut into large pieces and soaked in hot water for over half an hour. This leaches out the excess salt and removes the cured taste from the meat.

Moreover, the pig's hocks had to be cut open close to the bone, exposing it to allow the aroma to disperse more thoroughly.

The chickens and ducks also needed to be halved, making them half-chickens and half-ducks.

In addition, the duck heads, chicken heads, and the tips of the claws needed to be chopped off.

The simmering process itself also had many intricacies.

During simmering, scallions were added to the pot but had to be removed after an hour. If scallions boil for too long, they can produce an unpleasant odor, affecting the stock's quality.

Xie Baomin strained the stock through a fine cheesecloth, removing the remnants of bones and meat.

Then he poured the stock into a soup pot.

Instead of continuing to work on the stock, he took out some duck breast, pork loin, and chicken breast, and also prepared some scallion and ginger water.

"Junior Brother, the Qingshui Furong dish, much like boiled bok choy, requires turning the rich stock into a crystal-clear soup. This enhances its visual appeal and makes it look more attractive," Xie Baomin explained, while deftly trimming the sinews and membranes from the chicken and duck breasts with a kitchen knife.

"To make this dish, one must not only apply the core principles of Kung Fu dishes like boiled bok choy and Furong Chicken Slices but also use sophisticated plating techniques to create a truly astounding Qingshui Furong."

"The 'Qingshui' naturally refers to Clear Soup."

"And the 'Furong' refers to lotus flowers made in the style of Furong Chicken Slices."

After listening to Xie Baomin's description, Lin Xu was utterly shocked.

Boiled bok choy and Furong Chicken Slices were challenging enough on their own, yet Master had combined the two. Indeed, not just anyone could be the Sea King.

Lin Xu glanced at the pot of rich stock, then back at the busy Xie Baomin, and asked curiously, "What are you doing with all this? Is this meat going to be used in the dish?"

Qiu Zhenhua shook his head from the side. "No, he's clearing the broth. By turning this meat into a meat mousse and adding it to the stock, the proteins will adsorb the impurities, transforming the rich stock into Clear Soup."

Clearing the broth?

That was beyond Lin Xu's area of expertise.

Until this point, he had only encountered home-style dishes and hadn't experienced high-end cuisine.

So upon hearing this term, he felt as if he were lost in a desert of knowledge.

Seeing his curiosity, Qiu Zhenhua continued, "Indeed, many dishes include this step. Besides boiled bok choy, dishes like Chicken Bean Curd, Clear Soup with Bird's Nest, and Braised Meatballs also use Clear Soup to enhance their visual appeal."

Jot it down, jot it down! If I casually mention this while shooting a video later, won't it make me seem quite sophisticated? Lin Xu wished he could pull out a notebook.

At that moment, Xie Baomin cut the trimmed duck breast into small pieces. He then put them into a food processor with some scallion and ginger water, grinding them into a Duck Meat Mousse.

As he operated the food processor, he said, "In the past, we had to chop it with knives, meticulously picking out the sinews as we went. Just this amount of meat would take at least an hour to prepare properly. I'm grateful for the convenience technology has brought us!"

Qiu Zhenhua also chimed in, "Yes, thinking back to our younger days, preparing the meat mousse for clearing the broth used to make our arms ache. Now it's so much easier; a few minutes with a food processor, and it's done."

You two aren't very traditional, are you... Lin Xu thought, then curiously asked, "Is the meat mousse from the food processor the same as one chopped by knife? Is it not as good as the hand-chopped version?"

Xie Baomin smiled. "The finer the meat mousse, the better. There's no comparison between one chopped by knife and one made by a food processor. You can take a shortcut with the food processor for this step, but later, when making Furong Chicken Slices, you won't be able to do the same."

As they spoke, the rosy-hued Duck Meat Mousse was ready.

Xie Baomin poured it into a small bowl and then prepared the Pork Meatball and Chicken Meatball.

After the Duck Meat Mousse, Pork Meatball, and Chicken Meatball were ready, he placed the soup pot on the stove to begin clearing the broth.

While the stock was heating, Xie Baomin covered a strainer with a fine white cloth, securing it around the handle to create a makeshift filter.

When the stock in the pot reached a near-boiling state, he poured in the Duck Meat Mousse.

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After pouring it in, he stirred it twice with a spoon, allowing the meat mousse to fully mix with the stock.

"There's a technique to skimming the stock as well. First, add the darker meat mousse, then the lighter meat mousse; this way, the effect will be better," Qiu Zhenhua explained from the side, afraid Lin Xu wouldn't understand. When skimming the stock, the stock in the pot must not boil. Otherwise, the meat mousse will fly around in the pot, failing to absorb the impurities.

Very quickly, clumps of red meat mince floated to the surface of the stock. Xie Baomin carefully scooped the Duck Meat Mousse from the surface with a spoon. After almost completely skimming it, he placed a strainer covered with a white cloth into the pot to filter out the scattered meat mousse. The stock in the pot had noticeably lightened, but it was not clear enough yet.

Xie Baomin picked up the prepared Pork Meatball, pouring half of it into the pot. He stirred it a few times, allowing the Pork Meatball to reach the bottom of the pot, then patiently waited for the clumps of meat to rise to the surface of the stock.

Lin Xu watched and couldn't help but marvel. Using so many ingredients to make a stock, and now using meat repeatedly to filter out its impurities—this type of dish really isn't something just anyone can afford.

Xie Baomin continued skimming the stock. By the fourth pass, the stock in the pot was essentially clear as water, only slightly tinged with a tea color. The stock was now ready to be used for making "Boiled Cabbage in Clear Soup." But Xie Baomin still stubbornly added the remaining Chicken Meatball and skimmed it once more. After this round, the tea color in the stock had almost completely disappeared, but the savory flavor had inevitably diminished a bit as well.

After cleaning out the residue in the pot, Xie Baomin wrapped the filtered meat solids in a white cloth. He tied it securely at the diagonals to ensure there were no gaps and then, using a cotton rope, hung it back into the Clear Soup.

"This step is called 'reviving the stock,' which allows the savory flavor from the meat solids to return to the stock," Qiu Zhenhua explained. He might not know how to make Qingshui Furong, but he was very familiar with these steps. He had done them all: from preparing the initial stock, to skimming the stock to clarify it, and now reviving the stock. Back when he followed his elder uncle, he had also endured countless hardships. He had thought he could stand out at Fishing Platform, but it turned out that everyone there was exceptionally talented. He considered his culinary skills excellent, yet at Fishing Platform, he barely ranked third.

"Alright, the Clear Soup is ready. Now it's time to make the Furong... Qiuqiu, are you busy? If not, you can head back first. There aren't many steps left."

Just as Qiu Zhenhua was lost in thought, he heard Xie Baomin's words and his nose nearly twitched with anger. "Cut the crap! We're about to reach the most crucial part of this dish, and you're asking me to leave? Hurry up, hurry up! I'm eager to taste it."

What a joke! I've been diligently guiding your junior brother, and here you are, trying to pull a fast one on me. What did I do in a past life to deserve knowing a jerk like you—blow up a few nursing homes?

"I was just worried you'd be tired from standing," Xie Baomin mumbled shamelessly, then moved the stockpot aside to start working on the other half of the dish.

Hmph, the Clear Soup was already demanding enough, and the Furong part was proving to be just as challenging. Because this step could not use a food processor, it required pure manual operation. The whole process was not only complicated but also extremely exhausting, both physically and mentally.

Xie Baomin picked up two pieces of Chicken Breast and sighed, "Looks like I'm really going at it with Chicken Breast today." With that, he took a knife and continued to remove the sinew from the Chicken Breast. What he was about to make, Furong Chicken Slices, was a very classic dish that also took a lot of time, epitomized by the saying "eating chicken without seeing the chicken."

He removed the sinew from the Chicken Breast. Then, holding the knife at a 45-degree angle, he scraped the Chicken Breast, extracting the chicken paste. The reason for scraping is that Chicken Breast has too much fascia; only this method can completely remove it from the meat.

"Can't a food processor be used?" Lin Xu asked curiously.

Xie Baomin shook his head. "No. It still needs to be filtered through a fine-mesh sieve. If a food processor is used, the shredded fascia in the meat will completely clog the mesh, making filtration impossible." Every few scrapes, he would pick out a small strand of fascia from the chicken paste.

Once all the Chicken Breast was scraped into a paste, Xie Baomin brought a piece of clean Pork Skin and laid it on the cutting board. He then placed the scraped chicken paste on top and gently pounded it with the back of his knife. Pounding not only breaks down the chicken fibers but also enhances the meat's texture. The reason for pounding on Pork Skin was to prevent wood splinters from the cutting board from mixing into the chicken paste, which would mar its appearance. Indeed, this Furong Chicken Slices dish required the meat to be tender, white, and free of impurities. Any tiny flaw would ultimately affect its final presentation.

After finely pounding the chicken paste twice with the back of the knife, Xie Baomin transferred it to a basin. He then added ginger-infused water to dilute the paste into a smooth Chicken Meatball consistency. "The flavor of scallions is too strong and would easily overpower other tastes, so just adding some ginger-infused water is enough." After speaking, he took a fine-mesh sieve and began filtering the Chicken Meatball mixture. This not only filtered out any remaining fascia but also made the texture of the Chicken Meatball mixture finer.

After filtering, he added some salt, then cracked eight Egg Whites into it, slowly stirring the mixture with a whisk in the basin. "Don't stir too quickly. Stirring too fast can cause the Egg Whites to froth up. Then you wouldn't be able to make Furong Chicken Slices, only Chicken Bean Curd."

The preparation for Chicken Bean Curd and Furong Chicken Slices is quite similar. The only difference is that Chicken Bean Curd requires the Egg Whites to be beaten into a fine, frothy foam so that it can solidify on the surface of the stock like bean curd. Furong Chicken Slices, however, require the opposite. The Egg Whites must not be frothed up; otherwise, they can't be deep-fried. Hmm, the current batter needs to be fried into chicken slices in oil. If the Egg Whites were frothed, this Chicken Meatball mixture would float on the oil's surface and couldn't be formed into slices.

Before long, the Egg Whites in the basin seemed to disappear, incorporated into a white batter. However, the Egg Whites weren't fully broken down yet; one could still feel their distinct presence with a gentle lift of a chopstick. It needed to be beaten further.

"Let me take over for a while." Seeing Xie Baomin sweating, Qiu Zhenhua immediately stepped in to replace him. This job seemed simple but was actually very tiring because it required continuous beating but not too fast. It had to be done slowly and steadily.

Finally, when the Egg Whites were completely broken down, it was time to move on to the next step. Xie Baomin heated a wok on the stove, added cold oil, then slowly swirled the wok to allow the oil to coat its surface. When it started smoking, he poured the oil out. Then he added fresh cold oil and coated the wok again in the same manner. This thoroughly seasoned the bottom of the wok, making it non-stick.

After completing these preparations, Xie Baomin added some lard to the wok and began frying the chicken slices.

"Frying with lard? Won't it be too greasy, Senior Brother?" Lin Xu watched with some surprise.

Xie Baomin smiled. "Lard doesn't cause browning easily, so the fried chicken slices will remain snow-white. As for greasiness, there will be a specific step later to remove excess oil."

Soon, the oil temperature rose to about 30% heat (low heat). Xie Baomin scooped up a spoonful of the Chicken Meatball mixture and began frying the chicken slices!