

Culinary 241

Chapter 241: The Lotus Flower Rises from the Clear Water! So Beautiful! Use the Cooking Learning Card!

Xie Baomin carefully poured the Chicken Meatball from the spoon into the pot. While pouring, he slowly moved the spoon, turning the Chicken Meatball into long, strip-shaped slices. After pouring them in, there was no need to tend to them. Once the surface set, the chicken slices would slowly float up from the bottom of the pot.

"Frying with lukewarm oil maximizes the tenderness and smoothness of the chicken slices," he explained. "It also ensures that the cooked chicken slices maintain a pale and tender appearance without dehydrating or changing color."

Although this demonstration was intended to broaden Qiu Zhenhua's horizons, Xie Baomin still felt the need to explain the key points since his junior brother was present. Otherwise, if his junior brother watched for a long time without understanding, all of today's efforts would be wasted.

Qiu Zhenhua added from the side, "Although lukewarm oil frying isn't a conventional cooking method, it's necessary in many cases. For example, dried tofu skin can be fried in warm oil before soaking to improve its texture and flavor."

As soon as dried tofu skin was mentioned, Lin Xu immediately remembered the minced meat with dried tofu skin that Cheng JianShe had made a few days ago.

It tasted really good; I'll have to try making it when I get the chance.

Hmm, even though I don't have the related Technique, I should still try.

Besides, triggering the related Skill is quite simple. I just have to persuade my dear Shen Baobao to say she wants to eat it.

This is also a good opportunity to test the actual effectiveness of fleecing the System.

After Xie Baomin had filled the bottom of the pot with the Chicken Meatball mixture, he stopped and waited patiently for it to take shape and turn into several slices.

Soon, the first of the Chicken Meatball to enter the pot floated to the surface. It hadn't seemed like much when it went into the pot, but now that it had set, it looked snow-white, like a cloud bobbing up and down in the oil.

"So beautiful!" Lin Xu couldn't help but exclaim in admiration. He had never imagined that ordinary chicken could be made to look so exquisite.

Before long, the other chicken slices in the pot had also set and floated up.

Qiu Zhenhua asked, "Old Xie, should we start taking them out now?"

He had learned how to make Furong Chicken Slices and thought it might be time to remove them from the pot.

But Xie Baomin shook his head gently. "If we were making Furong Chicken Slices, we should indeed take them out now. But for Qingshui Furong, these chicken slices need to stand up in the serving dish, so they need to be fried a little longer."

Stand up? Lin Xu looked at the chicken slices, which were as soft as Lactone Tofu. He found the dish increasingly fascinating. They're so tender and soft. To make them stand up, wouldn't you need half a box of toothpicks to support them?

He had wanted to ask, but then a thought struck him. Since this is Master's original creation, and one he made to impress his first Master's wife, he definitely wouldn't resort to such a clumsy method as using toothpicks.

Well, I'll just keep watching. Let's see how Master managed to win over his first wife.

After frying for a while longer, when the chicken slices no longer felt quite so delicate, Xie Baomin brought over a basin of hot water. He then carefully fished the chicken slices out of the pot with a strainer and placed them directly into the hot water.

As soon as they were submerged, shimmering oil blossoms appeared on the surface of the hot water.

Lin Xu suddenly understood. No wonder Senior Brother wasn't worried about the lard making the dish greasy; there's a de-greasing step! Soaking them like this will draw out even the heaviest grease.

Soon, Xie Baomin started frying another batch.

After all the chicken slices were fried, he fished out the ones soaking in hot water, drained them lightly, and placed them in a bamboo basket. Then he said, "Next is the test of Knife Skills. Keep your eyes peeled, Junior Brother. This dish isn't something one can make often."

With that, he gingerly picked up a chicken slice and placed it on the chopping board. First, he cut off a superfluous piece at one end to create a straight edge. Then, using the tip of his knife, he drew a slightly curved line along this straight edge, extending it to the middle of the opposite end.

This is... Lin Xu was still wondering when he saw his Senior Brother make a similar cut on the other side. When the trimmed pieces were removed, the snow-white chicken slice now resembled a petal.

"Old Xie, your Knife Skills are impressive!" Although Jiangsu cuisine emphasized knife work and presentation, Qiu Zhenhua couldn't help but exclaim in admiration upon seeing Xie Baomin's craftsmanship.

It's not easy to cut this kind of tender fried Chicken Meatball, especially into curved edges. One careless move could tear a whole piece. But Xie Baomin handled it with apparent ease, his breathing remaining steady.

This is the gap between us, Qiu Zhenhua mused as Xie Baomin continued to carve the petals. These petals were not all the same size; they became progressively smaller, and their lengths also seemed to shorten.

Hmm? Is there going to be another new development? Lin Xu wondered.

After fifteen petals were ready, Xie Baomin used his cleaver to cut some long, thin strips from the remaining chicken.

Once all the chicken pieces were processed, he brought over a ceramic cup that was wide at the mouth and narrow at the base, placing it beside the chopping board. He then picked up the largest petal and carefully placed it inside the cup, leaving about one-third of it outside. He bent this protruding end so it draped over the rim of the cup. He then placed another large petal into the cup in the same manner, again leaving one-third of it outside.

After all five of the largest petals were arranged, they formed a complete circle inside the cup.

Next, Xie Baomin began to place slightly smaller petals into the cup, inserting them into the gaps between the petals of the outermost layer, still leaving a portion of each petal outside.

After three layers of petals were thus arranged, only a small space remained in the center of the cup.

"I get it now! You're using the cup as a mold to invert the entire flower into a bowl, and the extra one-third of the petals left outside will form the base of the flower, right, Old Xie?" Qiu Zhenhua rubbed his hands together, his voice tinged with excitement. This technique is incredible! Who else would think of using a cup-inversion method to arrange these soft chicken slices into such a shape?

Master Gao is truly formidable! No wonder he could dominate my uncle's generation their entire lives. With such imagination, one can't help but admire him.

Xie Baomin smiled, picked up a chopstick, and said, "As expected of an opponent who could reach the semi-finals with me. You figured it out so quickly."

Qiu Zhenhua was speechless. Master Gao has such amazing culinary skills; how did he end up with such a jerk for an apprentice? If you mention the semi-finals again, I'll lose it!

Xie Baomin didn't add more petals to the cup. Instead, he inserted the chopstick and gently pushed the existing petals towards the sides, slightly enlarging the space in the center. Then, he picked up the previously cut strips and began to carefully tuck them into this central space. This time, he inserted them less deeply, leaving a full half of their length protruding.

After filling the center, he used the chopstick again to gently press the strips outwards, then continued to add more until the space was tightly packed.

When he was certain there were no more gaps, he took a small white soup bowl and placed it upside down over the mouth of the cup. Then, with a quick movement, he flipped the entire assembly over. The cup was now inverted in the center of the white porcelain bowl.

He gently lifted the ceramic cup, revealing a white floral bud now standing in the white porcelain bowl.

Lin Xu watched in amazement. "What comes next? Do you pour soup over it, like with that famous boiled cabbage dish?"

Xie Baomin shook his head. "That wouldn't work. It took so much effort to make it stand; pouring soup directly on it would make it collapse immediately."

He took a piece of cotton thread, wound it around the midpoint of the floral bud, and then gave it a gentle tug.

Lin Xu was confused. "What's this for?"

Qiu Zhenhua speculated, "It's probably to create a kind of notch with the cotton thread at the point where the petals should open, making it easier for them to bend downwards."

Xie Baomin looked at him in surprise. "Wow, you're really something, Qiuqiu! To think you could figure that out. That's why I've always believed your culinary skills should be better than Mr. Zhongguo's. Don't you agree?"

Qiu Zhenhua ignored him, feeling an urge to grab the cleaver from the cutting board and give Xie Baomin a couple of whacks. You damn dog, you're really getting a kick out of this, aren't you?

Meanwhile, Lin Xu couldn't help but scoff internally. Calling him 'Dongdong' to his face, but using a nickname behind his back. And 'Mr. Zhongguo' is probably a nickname Senior Brother came up with himself. Tsk, tsk, tsk. Senior Brother, is it really appropriate for you to be such a scumbag?

Tossing the cotton thread aside, Xie Baomin brought over the Clear Soup he had prepared earlier. First, he removed the Chicken Meatball that was suspended by a string to clarify the soup and set it aside. Then, he reheated the soup pot, but not to a boil, stopping when it reached about seventy degrees Celsius.

He carefully ladled the crystal-clear broth, as clear as boiled water, into a teapot. Then, holding the teapot, he said to Lin Xu, Qin Wei, and Qiu Zhenhua, "If you want to shoot a short video, get ready now! The most spectacular moment of this dish is about to arrive!"

"You know, I actually was planning to film it," Qiu Zhenhua said, taking out his phone.

Qin Wei also obediently took out his phone, opened the camera app, and aimed it at the white porcelain bowl on the table.

Only Lin Xu didn't move. Although he also wanted to film it, activating the Cooking Learning Card was more important.

Yes, this is such a great learning opportunity. And with two Perfect Level Cooking Learning Cards in hand, I absolutely have to learn this dish!

"Aren't you going to film, Junior Brother?"

Lin Xu replied coolly, "I plan to learn this dish and then film myself making it."

"Quite confident, aren't you, Junior Brother? This isn't White Jade Lotus Root Strips; you can't necessarily learn it just by watching once."

As he spoke, Xie Baomin lifted the teapot he was holding. He aimed the spout towards the edge of the porcelain bowl and began to gently pour the broth into it. The clear liquid flowed slowly from the teapot

into the bowl, looking as if he were merely pouring warm water. However, the rich, savory aroma that wafted up hinted that this Clear Soup was anything but simple.

The pouring was very slow, and the liquid level in the bowl gradually rose.

Activate the Cooking Learning Card! Lin Xu silently made the command in his mind.

The System's prompt quickly sounded in his head.

"Learning target: Xie Baomin. Current Skill: Pouring Water. Do you wish to learn?"

?????

Is the System joking with me?

He tried again. It was still the Pouring Water Skill.

Oh, come on! If I had known, I would have learned the Clear Soup Technique or Furong Chicken Slices earlier! Learning either of those Skills would have been far better than learning a 'Pouring Water' Skill, right? I've made a dogmatic error!

The liquid level in the bowl slowly crept up. When it reached the indentation mark left by the cotton thread, Xie Baomin stopped pouring.

Lin Xu tried one more time.

"Learning target: Xie Baomin. Current Skill: Placing Teapot. Do you wish to learn?"

Learn my foot! Why is the System so mischievous today? Lin Xu was starting to lose it.

At this moment, Qiu Zhenhua curiously asked, "What's going on, Old Xie? Is that it?"

Qin Wei also quietly paused his video recording. We've been filming all this time just to capture him pouring water? What's so great about that?

Xie Baomin just smiled. With a casual tap on the rim of the bowl.

The floral bud in the center of the bowl quivered gently. Then, the outermost petal slowly unfurled, gracefully draping itself onto the surface of the water. Following this first petal, the others also began to open, one by one, in a slow, deliberate sequence.

The first layer of petals came to rest on the water's surface. The second layer of petals unfurled about halfway, their bases supported by the first layer, allowing only their tips to dip elegantly downwards. The third layer, resting against the second, drooped even less.

After all three layers of petals had opened, the strip-like stamens within the flower became faintly visible. The sight of the flower, set against the clear broth and the white porcelain bowl, left everyone present utterly stunned.

"Holy crap! What an incredible Qingshui Furong! Your master is truly like a celestial being!" Qiu Zhenhua was almost stuttering, completely astounded that a dish could possess such breathtaking beauty.

As Lin Xu marveled at the exquisite dish, a sudden inspiration struck him.

Activate the Cooking Learning Card!

The System's prompt quickly sounded:

"Learning target: Xie Baomin. Current Skill: Qingshui Furong. Do you wish to learn?"

Haha! My bet paid off! A dish this beautiful, I absolutely have to learn it!

Learn!

"Host has consumed one Perfect Level Cooking Learning Card and obtained Master Gao Peisheng's original dish—Qingshui Furong. Congratulations, Host."

Chapter 242: So beautiful that one can hardly bear to tuck in! What, another cooking competition?

This actually worked? Lin Xu had already given up hope. Unexpectedly, just when he was least hopeful, the Cooking Learning Card actually took effect.

"How is it, Junior Brother? Master's original dish isn't bad, right?" Xie Baomin, seeing that Lin Xu wasn't speaking, thought he was stunned by the dish.

Qiu Zhenhua asked from the side, "Xie, I can understand everything else, but what was that pat at the end all about? What's the principle behind that?"

He wasn't the only one puzzled. Qin Wei was also completely baffled.

After pouring the Clear Soup, the flower bud didn't move an inch, looking like a complete failure, but after that one pat, the petals bloomed one after another. Wasn't that just magical? Had the spirit of a young culinary prodigy possessed him?

Xie Baomin looked at Lin Xu and asked, "Junior Brother, do you understand what happened?"

If the Cooking Learning Card hadn't taken effect, then Lin Xu, like Qin Wei and Qiu Zhenhua, would still be struggling in the desert of knowledge.

But now that he had read the method for making Perfect Level Qingshui Furong, he naturally understood the principle behind it.

When the fried chicken slices were soaked in hot water, they would swell somewhat, and a porous, tofu-like structure would form inside.

What his Senior Brother scooped out from the water had been deliberately drained. The water absorbed by the chicken slices during soaking was drained out, and furthermore, when they were placed into the cup, the slices were somewhat compressed.

So, by the time it was inverted into the porcelain bowl and the Clear Soup was added, these chicken slices would rapidly absorb the Clear Soup. After absorbing the Clear Soup, the chicken slices would inevitably begin to swell. The flower bud, shaped by the cup, was already precarious. At that moment, Xie Baomin gently patted it, applying a force to the bud, so the petals unavoidably started to bloom.

Truth is, even if he hadn't patted it, the petals would have opened up on their own from absorbing too much water. When Master created this dish back in the day, he had already taken this factor into account. In fact, it was a "little mechanism" he deliberately designed to make his first wife happy.

Lin Xu didn't know if Master's wife had been happy at the time. Anyway, he was quite happy right now.

Because now he had not only witnessed a visually stunning dish, but most importantly, he also knew how to make it himself. Yes, he definitely had to make this for Shen Baobao sometime and make that girl happy too.

"Junior Brother, I'm asking you, do you know the principle?" As Lin Xu remained silent, Xie Baomin couldn't help but urge him again.

Lin Xu then came back to his senses. Smiling, he said, "The chicken slices swell after absorbing water. The flower bud was already precarious, and you gave it a pat, so naturally, it bloomed."

He didn't go into too much detail, but he basically explained the principle.

No sooner had he finished speaking, Xie Baomin burst out laughing, "I always say my Junior Brother is talented! That's exactly the principle."

He explained the principle in detail, which elicited continuous admiration from Qiu Zhenhua, "This idea, how on earth did Elder Mr. Gao think of it? Isn't it just magical?"

You simply have no idea how much effort a player would put into a relationship... Lin Xu sighed quietly to himself. Other people's culinary stories are either beautiful anecdotes or thrilling legends. Yet Master's original dishes are filled with the aura of a scumbag. Even if I wanted to praise them, I wouldn't know where to start.

He gathered his thoughts and looked at the flower in the bowl.

In the crystal-clear soup, a pure white flower floated. 'A lotus emerges from clear water, naturally unadorned'—this must be it, right?

This dish was the most visually stunning Lin Xu had ever seen. It was so beautiful that it made one doubt whether it was even real.

While he was still looking, Xie Baomin handed over chopsticks and a spoon. "Come on, everyone, have a taste. No matter how good-looking a dish is, it ultimately comes down to the taste. If the taste is bad, all effort goes to waste."

Don't just praise its looks! Praise other things too, like the flavor or the texture!

Just praising its appearance is too one-sided, isn't it? Head Chef Xie, awaiting further compliments, was getting a little anxious.

Qiu Zhenhua took the chopsticks, looked at the white flower in the porcelain bowl, and a wry smile appeared on his face. "It looks so beautiful, I can hardly bring myself to touch it with my chopsticks."

He had seen beautiful dishes before. For example, famous Suzhou dishes like Wensi Tofu, Kou San Si, and White Robed Shrimp—their appearance was among the best in Chinese cuisine. But no matter how beautiful those dishes were, they still looked like food.

The Qingshui Furong in front of him, however, now looked more like a work of art.

However, Xie Baomin was right; no matter how beautiful a dish, if the taste isn't good, it's all for nothing.

He raised his chopsticks and finally picked up a petal. Supporting it with a small saucer, he brought it to his mouth and began to taste it.

"How is it, Qiuqiu? Is the taste alright?"

"It's amazing! I didn't expect that after the chicken slices expand, are drained, and then absorb some broth, they would taste so good! The chicken is tender and smooth, and full of rich juices inside. Delicious!"

Hearing such high praise, Lin Xu too felt his mouth water.

He picked up a petal with his chopsticks and brought it to his mouth. The first thing he tasted was an intense umami flavor, followed by the tender and silky texture of the chicken.

Although it had been deep-fried, and for a slightly long time, its texture in the mouth was so tender and smooth it was like eating a piece of Lactone Tofu.

However, compared to Lactone Tofu, these chicken slices were superior in both texture and flavor, especially the umami fragrance of the chicken and its juicy texture. Eating it truly gave one an uplifting and delightful sensation.

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He felt very comfortable. His mood inexplicably brightened.

After finishing the chicken slices, he scooped up some crystal-clear broth and brought it to his mouth. The flavor that burst forth with the first sip almost made him cry out. The sensation was too wonderful. Visually, it looked like simple warm water. But the rich, fresh flavor that followed was as satisfying as devouring a whole chicken and then some pork knuckle, leaving him feeling utterly refreshed and content. The taste was exquisite. It was fresh, aromatic, and rich, all in one, with just the right amount of saltiness. It was as if the soup itself had been elevated to a higher plane.

"How is it, Junior Brother?"

"The chicken slices are delicious, and the soup is savory. It's truly wonderful... I'll have to secretly practice this dish later and give my girlfriend a surprise."

Hmm, this is to prevent shocking everyone when I make it in the future. Lin Xu was already laying the groundwork.

After complimenting his Senior Brother, he turned to Qin Wei, who was slowly eating chicken slices beside him, and asked, "Master Qin, how does it taste?"

"Good... delicious!"

After speaking, Qin Wei looked at Lin Xu and asked softly, "You... really know how to make... this dish?"

When he wasn't nervous, his speech was much smoother.

Lin Xu nodded gently. "I've figured out the method, but I still need practice."

A trace of envy flashed across Qin Wei's face.

Just as Lin Xu was about to chat with him a bit more, a boisterous voice suddenly called out from the kitchen entrance, "Chef Xie, hurry up and treat me to a meal! There's great news!"

The sound had barely faded when Assistant Bai from the Dining Department hurried into the kitchen.

"I was just helping Director Liao organize some files when someone from Yanjing City TV station... Eh? Chef Qiu? What are you doing here too?"

Seeing Qiu Zhenhua was also there, a look of surprise flashed across Assistant Bai's lean face. He then turned to leave, "Ah, well, I think I left the kettle on. I'll drop by later, you all carry on... Heavens, what dish is this? Are you making bonsai arrangements here?"

He had been about to leave, but the sight of the Qingshui Furong on the workbench stopped him in his tracks. It couldn't be helped; the dish's presentation was truly exceptional. Even though a few petals were missing, it was still a cut above ordinary dishes.

"May I... try it?"

Assistant Bai picked up a nearby pair of chopsticks, about to try it, when Qiu Zhenhua stopped him, "Spill it. What's the good news? You saw me and swallowed your words. Do you still want to eat the Crab Soup Dumplings from our Building Six in the future?"

Xie Baomin joined in teasingly, "We're going to make Crab Soup Dumplings in Building Two as well. You can come eat with us."

Qiu Zhenhua raised an eyebrow and looked at Xie Baomin, "Old Xie, it's one thing to sell them secretly, but to shout about it right in front of me, aren't you afraid I'll fall out with you?"

"I'm just joking, Little Bai. What's going on? Spit it out. Otherwise, our Chef Qiu here will be guessing all night. He's so petty, you couldn't even fit a thread of Wensi Tofu into his mind."

"You..."

Assistant Bai didn't keep them in suspense any longer and said honestly, "Here's the thing. Just now, Zhen Wensheng from the Yanjing City Travel Channel came to see Director Liao. He's planning a culinary competition, inviting young chefs from ten foreign-related hotels to participate."

After speaking, he picked up a petal and, using a small saucer, began to eat.

Nearby, Lin Xu and Xie Baomin looked at each other.

A cooking competition? Fishing Platform just had one a few days ago. Why are they planning another one so soon? Are they trying to ride the coattails of the last one's popularity?

Qiu Zhenhua said to Xie Baomin, "This is aimed at your Junior Brother, isn't it? He's famous, skilled, and good-looking. With a little promotion, he could become really popular. Besides, with a title like Fishing Platform champion, if any other hotel managed to beat him, they'd boast about it to the heavens."

No one present was a fool. They all understood these kinds of tactics.

Fishing Platform held its own inter-building cooking competitions every year. These had become increasingly formal, but they never involved outside hotels, precisely for this reason. Winning wouldn't be much to brag about, but a loss would be exaggerated endlessly. Rather than serve as a stepping stone for others, it was better to keep to themselves.

Xie Baomin looked at Assistant Bai and asked curiously, "What's Director Liao's attitude?"

"He's quite interested. The higher-ups are always pushing for Fishing Platform to attract more guests from the general public, and a cooking competition is such a great promotional opportunity. Director Liao naturally doesn't want to miss it... This dish is really delicious! How come I've never seen it before?"

Qiu Zhenhua said with a smile, "Your Level isn't high enough, so you wouldn't have seen it. But you should have heard its name: Qingshui Furong."

"Heavens! So this is Qingshui Furong? I've seen it mentioned in so many documents! I never imagined it would look this stunning. No wonder those foreigners would eat it for days on end!"

Meanwhile, Xie Baomin walked over to Lin Xu and asked quietly, "Junior Brother, if you don't want to get involved in this fuss, I can help you turn it down."

Lin Xu gave a wry smile.

He naturally didn't want to get involved in such a commotion. But would the system let him miss an opportunity to be in the spotlight?

As expected, just as this thought crossed his mind, a system notification sounded in his head:

"Yanjing City Foreign-Related Hotels' Cooking Competition is about to begin! Triggering chain mission: [Conqueror]. Starting from the elimination rounds, for every round the Host wins as champion, corresponding rewards will be given. The further you progress in the competition, the richer the rewards. Winning the overall championship will also grant an additional surprise grand prize!"

Just as I thought... I haven't even entered the competition yet, and here it comes.

Chapter 244: Too Beautiful to Eat! What, Another Cooking Competition?

The system laid out the task very clearly. And to keep it attractive, this time it didn't even specify the reward, only using words like "surprise" and "abundant" to pique his interest.

Could this be marketing?

Lin Xu said to Xie Baomin, "It wouldn't hurt to participate, and it could serve as some promotion for Lin Ji's Food."

Besides, Director Liao seemed quite interested, so he might as well go. After all, when Chezai and the others came a couple of days ago, Director Liao hadn't hesitated to enroll them in a culinary enhancement class held internally at the Fishing Platform.

Director Liao is really looking out for me. I have to return the favor somehow.

"Alright," Xie Baomin replied, "it's good to get some exposure and maintain your online popularity."

While the two were chatting, Assistant Bai, who was enjoying Qingshui Furong, suddenly received a phone call.

After hanging up, he told Xie Baomin, "Chief Xie, Director Liao would like you and Master Lin to make a trip over, along with Chief Guo from Building 10 and Wei Qian from Building 1. It seems to be about the competition."

After he spoke, he took his small bowl, ladled out some soup with his spoon, and marveled as he sipped, "This soup is truly delicious; I ought to sample some more on behalf of Director Liao."

"This whole pot is yours," Xie Baomin said. "Come on, junior brother, let's go find out what's going on first."

The two headed out. Qiu Zhenhua had tried the Crab Soup Dumplings and witnessed the legendary dishes of the Fishing Platform, so he followed them out as well.

Outside, Lin Xu saw Wei Qian leisurely walking over from the entrance of Building 1, apparently having received the same notification.

Looking at this lineup, it seems Guo Xinghai, Wei Qian, and I will be the ones participating in this competition. A champion, a runner-up, and a third-place finisher... Chefs from other hotels could really hype it up if they managed to beat any of us.

"Master Lin, I wish you triumph in this competition," Qiu Zhenhua said.

After speaking, Qiu Zhenhua then said to Xie Baomin, "In a couple of days, I'll send a few chefs who make soup dumplings from our kitchen to work with Master Lin on making Crab Soup Dumplings. You should also send some top talent over to my place to exchange expertise on stir-fry dishes."

"No problem, Qiuqiu!" Xie Baomin exclaimed.

Qiu Zhenhua walked towards Building 6.

Meanwhile, Lin Xu took out his car keys and unlocked the door. Building 2 was a bit far from the Dining Department's office, and it was scorchingly hot outside, so he decided to drive there.

By the time Wei Qian arrived, the temperature inside the car had cooled down.

The three of them got into the car. Lin Xu was just about to head to the administrative building when Xie Baomin said, "Let's pick up Chief Guo from Building 10 first."

Then he lowered his head and began sending messages, his fingers going TAP-TAP-TAP on his phone.

Lin Xu: "..."

Chef Qiu just left, and you're already heading to Building 10. TSK, TSK, TSK.

Arriving at the entrance of Building 10, just as they parked, Guo Weidong came out from inside.

"Wow! Master Lin, your car is quite impressive!"

He opened the car door and sat in the back seat with Xie Baomin.

As soon as he settled in, he instructed Lin Xu, "This competition is clearly targeting your popularity. Remember to negotiate for some benefits later; don't just naively nod and agree the moment someone invites you."

Xie Baomin chimed in, "Right, if there are benefits to be had, take them. If they want to ride on your popularity, they need to offer something in return."

Benefits? What kind of benefits could I ask for?

Lin Xu pondered as he drove. Asking for money directly probably wouldn't yield much, and it wouldn't look good if word got out. Participating in a competition for money... wouldn't that make me look like a shill hired by the organizers? So, what could I ask for apart from money?

Lin Xu recalled the benefits his side had received during the Fishing Platform competition and then remembered the online live broadcast.

Hmm, asking for money wouldn't be appropriate. But a share of the online broadcast rights should be acceptable, right? My sister-in-law has been complaining about Shen Baobao and me constantly flaunting our relationship, saying it hurts her almost-thirty-year-old fragile heart. Maybe this could be a way to make it up to her.

Upon reaching the Dining Department, they met with Liao Jinming, the head of the Dining Department, and Zhen Wensheng from the travel channel.

After some pleasantries, Liao Jinming said, "There's a cooking competition coming up, and I hope you can represent the Fishing Platform. Regardless of whether you win or lose, there will be a cash prize. What do you think, Master Lin?"

Lin Xu was straightforward, looking directly at Zhen Wensheng as he asked, "Which company is in charge of the online broadcast for this competition?"

"It's fully managed by Yanjing TV Station," Zhen Wensheng replied. "Master Lin, you just need to focus on the competition; you don't need to worry about the live broadcast."

Upon hearing this, Lin Xu immediately picked up the car keys from the table. "I'm sorry, Director Liao, but I have to return to my hometown soon. Perhaps you should find someone else."

As soon as Lin Xu finished speaking, Guo Weidong, who was sipping tea beside him, put down his teacup. "Xinghai has been busy organizing the Cantonese culinary artifacts our old man collected; he won't be able to make it either."

Wei Qian looked at everyone and raised his hand. "A fortune teller told me I'm due for a bloody calamity soon, so I'd better not go running around."

Seeing the situation, Zhen Wensheng instantly understood what was going on.

He said with a smile, "To be honest, we aren't particularly skilled at online live broadcasting. We'll need to partner with an experienced company. Master Lin, do you have any recommendations?"

His original plan had been to use Lin Xu, the Fishing Platform champion, to attract other hotels to the competition. If they didn't have this bait, other hotels probably wouldn't be very interested. As for online live broadcasting, the travel channel genuinely lacked experience. Collaborating with a suitable professional company would indeed be a good idea.

Hearing this, Lin Xu decided to postpone his trip home. Guo Weidong also declared that his nephew was no longer busy organizing the family's collection. And Wei Qian, who was supposedly facing an impending bloody calamity, stated that since he grew up slaughtering pigs, facing "bloody calamities" was a daily occurrence for him—all in a day's work, so to speak.

And just like that, Chen Yan unknowingly became a partner with the travel channel.

To boost morale, Liao Jinming doled out bonuses on the spot: Lin Xu received 50,000, Guo Xinghai 40,000, and Wei Qian 30,000.

Tens of thousands of yuan wasn't enough to get overly excited about, but once the money was in his hand, Lin Xu suddenly discovered his System Points had skyrocketed by 50,000.

Can income earned during the renovation period also increase System Points? If so, I'll need to have a good chat with my senior brother about wages and bonuses later.

「At seven o'clock in the evening.」

Lin Xu finished another early shift. Driving with Dundun through the North Fourth Ring, as he neared Yingchun Street, he saw that a Shengjian Bun shop opposite the school was surrounded by a crowd.

What's going on here? Are they having some kind of promotional event?

Seeing a parking spot on the roadside, he quickly parked the car, then got out with Dundun in his arms, planning to buy some Shengjian Buns.

I haven't had them in ages, and I'm too lazy to make them myself. This is a good chance to buy some from this place and satisfy my craving. Yes, I learned my Shengjian Bun skills from a master named Wang Ziqiang at this very shop. Buying some buns now could be considered a small way of repaying him.

However, as he approached, he discovered it wasn't a promotion. Instead, people were arguing.

"You said your nephew was going back to his hometown to open a shop and asked me to teach him. I agreed. Who knew that as soon as I'd taught him everything, you'd kick me out! Is this how you run a business?"

"SCRAM! SCRAM! SCRAM! You've been paid already. Stop causing a scene at my shop's door!"

"..."

What's this all about?

As he wondered, a Little Mushroom Head emerged from the crowd, holding some newly purchased Shengjian Buns. "Ah! Dundun, Boss Lin, have you two come to watch the fun too?"

Seeing Lin Xu, the girl quickly came over.

"What's going on, Lele?" Lin Xu asked.

"The Master Wang who made those tasty Shengjian Buns before was poached by the shop owner from another place for a high salary," Lele explained. "All the business here was attracted by his craftsmanship. But the owner thought his salary was too high, a waste of money, so he had his own nephew learn from Master Wang for a while and then just kicked him out."

After saying this, she picked up a Shengjian Bun and tried it. "Ugh, it's not tasty. It's far worse than what Master Wang used to make."

Lin Xu looked at Wang Ziqiang in the crowd, who was desperately trying to get a fair explanation. His income likely supported his entire family; losing his job so suddenly meant they would probably struggle to make ends meet.

And to think, I learned my skills from him... Should I help him? But how?

Lin Xu scratched his head, then suddenly remembered he had a mission to open a shop.

He immediately took out his phone and called Dou Wenjing. "Wenjing, can you come to the east end of Yingchun Street right now, just by Lele's school? I'm looking to invest in a small project..."

Chapter 245: The Name of the Pan-Fried Bun Shop! Does the Old Lady Love Crucian Carp Stewed with Tofu? Arranged!

After receiving a call from Lin Xu, Dou Wenjing hurriedly left the company's temporary headquarters, which was not far from the store. For the convenience of renovation and management, she had rented an office on the second floor not far from Lin Ji's Food. However, once Lin Ji's Food reopened and was back on track, the company would move out. This way, the company would be the company, and the store would be the store, each operating without interfering with the other.

Arriving downstairs, she glanced at her high heels, then took out her phone and scanned a shared bicycle parked by the roadside. She then rode it toward the east entrance of Yingchun Street. Yingchun Street was about a kilometer long. The west entrance featured the Yingchun Street Subway Station, while the east entrance was next to Haidian Middle School, where Geng Lele attended. Lin Ji's Food was located in the middle of the street, about five hundred meters from either entrance. Taking a taxi for such a short distance seemed wasteful, and if she walked, she worried Lin Xu would wait too long. Thus, the shared bicycle became the best choice.

Reaching the street entrance, Dou Wenjing spotted the white G63 parked on the roadside from afar. She also saw Lin Xu holding Dundun, and Geng Lele holding a bag of Shengjian Buns.

As soon as she reached Lin Xu, Geng Lele came up to her, saying, "Wenjing, you must be tired from cycling. I bought you some Shengjian Buns to try; they're really tasty."

Dou Wenjing didn't refuse. The last time they ate crayfish, she had tried the Shengjian Buns Geng Lele bought, and they had tasted really good. So, she accepted them and casually popped one into her mouth. But after tasting it, she realized it wasn't as delicious as the ones from last time.

"Why don't these taste the same as last time?" Dou Wenjing asked.

Lin Xu smiled and explained, "That's why I called you over. The owner of this shop fired the Shengjian Bun chef—the very same chef who is over there demanding an explanation right now."

Dou Wenjing put down the Shengjian Bun, glanced at the surrounding crowd, and understood the situation.

"Boss, are you thinking about investing in a Shengjian Bun shop?"

"Exactly. Later, I want you to talk to that chef inside. Find a storefront to rent near the subway station at the west entrance of Yingchun Street, renovate it, and set up a Shengjian Bun shop."

A small Shengjian Bun shop like that wouldn't need much space; a few square meters would suffice. The investment, including equipment and renovations, would probably only cost tens of thousands of yuan.

Dou Wenjing thought it was a pretty good idea and worth a try. After all, the Shengjian Buns from last time had left a deep impression on her. Plus, with a location near the subway entrance and its high foot traffic, it would be easy to make it successful.

"So, what kind of partnership model are you considering? Should we let this chef invest with his skills, hire him directly, or contract the shop out to him after it opens?"

Things are still heated inside, so there's no rush to go in and talk to the chef yet, Dou Wenjing thought. She decided to first understand her boss's intentions. That way, she would be more confident when she negotiated.

Lin Xu replied, "Any of those options would work. It depends on what the chef prefers. The most important thing is to get it done quickly and open the shop as soon as possible. Who knows, this might become another high-profit project for our company."

"Alright! I know how to approach the negotiation now, Boss."

Dou Wenjing pushed the shared bicycle she had ridden to the side of the road and scanned the code to end her rental. Lin Xu watched her and couldn't help but think, The CEO of our company, and her mode of transport is actually a shared bike? That's hardly imposing, is it?

He suggested, "Wenjing, the company should get you a car. You can't always be riding shared bicycles."

It's not like the company is short on funds right now, Lin Xu mused. Getting a BMW 5 Series wouldn't be a strain at all.

Dou Wenjing replied, "Our company doesn't have the qualification for the license plate lottery yet. Let's talk about it again once we do."

License plate lottery qualification? Lin Xu wondered. He asked, "Then how do we get it?"

"Either we wait, or we acquire a shell company that already has the lottery qualification. However, those companies only possess the qualification itself; there's no guarantee we'd actually win a license plate in the lottery, so it might be a bit of a waste."

A waste? Lin Xu thought. It would definitely be a waste if not for Dundun. But with Dundun around, there's no such thing as a waste of money.

Lin Xu said with a smile, "Just go ahead and acquire one. Don't worry about the lottery; I'll handle that part. My luck has always been very good."

Dundun, nestled in his arms, shot him a sidelong glance. Say that again? Whose luck is good, exactly?

Shortly thereafter, local police officers arrived and separated the arguing parties. Dou Wenjing took the opportunity to neaten her hair and then walked towards a dejected-looking Wang Ziqiang.

Soon, she returned with Wang Ziqiang, bringing him before Lin Xu. Master Wang was in his forties, navigating the challenging phase of supporting both his elderly parents and young children. When he met Lin Xu, his expression was somewhat dazed; he probably couldn't believe this was all real.

"Boss, it's settled," Dou Wenjing reported. "Master Wang prefers that we open the shop and he continues to work as an employee."

Indeed, partnerships involve too much risk. Cash in hand is always the most reliable.

Lin Xu wasn't surprised. He smiled and said, "In that case, sign a contract with Master Wang as soon as possible. Then, rent a storefront and have the renovation company do a quick setup."

"Understood, Boss! What should we name the Shengjian Bun shop?"

The shop's name? Lin Xu pondered for a moment. He thought Master Wang's name, Ziqiang, was quite good. Men should always strive for self-improvement, after all.

He smiled and said, "Let's call it Ziqiang Shengjian. Master Wang, would it be alright if we use your name?"

At that moment, Wang Ziqiang felt like he needed to splash cold water on his face to see if he was dreaming. He nodded quickly and said, "Yes, yes, of course! As long as it makes money, you can use my name however you like."

"Alright then, let's go sign the contract first, and we can discuss other matters afterward," Lin Xu said, opening the car door and getting in with Dundun.

Lin Xu had assumed Geng Lele would be heading back to school. But to his surprise, the young woman pulled open the other car door, hopped into the passenger seat, and casually took little Dundun from his arms.

"Lele, where are you going?" Lin Xu asked.

"As a Platinum Level member of the company, what's wrong with me going to inspect the renovation progress?" Geng Lele retorted.

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Lin Xu was speechless. Is this platinum membership of yours even real?

Outside the car, Dou Wenjing opened the door and said to Wang Ziqiang, "Master Wang, get in the car. Let's go to the company and sign the contract."

Wang Ziqiang remembered this car; he'd seen an introduction to it in a short video before, mentioned to be worth several million. A big boss who drives this kind of car shouldn't cheat me, right?

He got into the car in a daze. He had thought they were going somewhere far away, but the car stopped in the middle section of Yingchun Street.

This... Was the car really necessary for such a short distance? It would have been just a ten-minute walk, right?

After getting out of the car, Dou Wenjing briefly introduced Wang Ziqiang to Lin Ji's Food, which was undergoing renovation next door, and then led him to the company office to sign the contract.

Meanwhile, Lin Xu, holding Dundun, and Geng Lele checked the progress of the renovation. Looking at the current situation, finishing within a month was absolutely no problem. They would first let the employees get familiar with the environment, then do a small-scale trial run to give them time to adjust. And then, they'd open for business officially.

"My grandpa has been talking about you lately; he said you haven't visited him and the old man is craving your treats again," Geng Lele said, sounding like a little adult concerned with family matters after they left the renovation site.

Remembering the winter melon candy and pumpkin candy he had made upstairs, Lin Xu said with a smile, "I made some sweets yesterday. You can take them to Mr. Lishan; I think he'll really like them."

Winter melon candy and pumpkin candy were nostalgic treats for the older generation. Eating them might bring back some youthful memories.

Upon hearing there were sweets, Geng Lele immediately perked up. "I knew following you would mean good eats!"

Back upstairs, Lin Xu brought out a small jar of winter melon candy and another of pumpkin candy for Geng Lele. He was going to visit Shen Baobao's house tomorrow, so he had specifically bought some exquisite little glass jars, filling them with all the homemade winter melon candy and pumpkin candy. He had filled about seven or eight jars of each kind.

Geng Lele unscrewed the lid, tried one, and said with a smile, "The old man craves these sweets the most. He might even want to formally acknowledge you as a sworn brother after eating them! I'm heading back now, Boss Lin. Good luck at Yueyue's house tomorrow!"

Lin Xu left Dundun at home. He went downstairs himself, strolling over to the company office. The employment contract had already been signed by this time, and he had also learned a bit about Wang Ziqiang's situation. Wang Ziqiang's parents were elderly, and his wife suffered from a chronic illness and couldn't do manual labor. Their child was about to enter the final year of high school, and the whole family depended on his income. That was why he had broken down immediately when he heard he was being laid off that afternoon. Now that he had found a job, his life had a renewed sense of hope.

After Wang Ziqiang left, Lin Xu said, "When the pan-fried bun shop opens, let Tiantian come back to be the cashier first. When the new store opens, we'll find someone else to replace her there, as I plan to make her the front-of-house manager here. What do you think?"

"That should work. Have you chosen someone for the store manager yet?" Dou Wenjing asked curiously. She was worried that her boss, having failed to poach anyone from Fishing Platform, might instead end up becoming an employee there himself.

A store manager?

Hearing this question, an image of Shu Yun involuntarily flashed in Lin Xu's mind. That affable and charming female manager seemed quite suitable for Lin Ji's Food. But she was doing well at Fishing Platform; would she consider changing jobs? He planned to find a chance to test the waters.

「The next morning.」

Dressed in new clothes, Lin Xu carried the prepared gifts to his car: six jars of winter melon candy, six jars of pumpkin candy, six jars of snow-white lard, six boxes of Black Sugar Shaqima, six boxes of Fishing Platform's snack gift boxes not sold to the public, and six bottles of special wine used by Fishing Platform to entertain foreign heads of state. To prevent his junior apprentice brother from being looked down upon by the Shen Family, Xie Baomin had made a special effort to get Lin Xu the special wine. Well, with Master not around, it was up to him as the senior apprentice brother to take extra care.

After carrying all the gifts downstairs, Lin Xu went back upstairs to tie a dark red bow tie around Dundun's neck, then carried the little guy downstairs. Off to visit Grandma and the relatives!

As the car turned onto the overpass, his mother, Chen Meijuan, specially called, repeatedly telling him to be mindful of his manners when he arrived at the Shen Family's home. For a first visit, the girl's family would usually give a bit of a hard time to show how much they valued their daughter.

"Even if you face some difficulties, bear with them, just for Yueyue's sake."

"Don't worry, Mom, I know what to do. By the way, I might take Yueyue back to our hometown before the new store opens; she's really interested in the tented camp at the scenic area."

Upon hearing this, Chen Meijuan immediately perked up. "What color does Yueyue like? I'll order a high-end tent for her right away. Those tents at the campsite have all been used before; Yueyue needs a new one when she comes."

What color? Lin Xu thought for a moment and said, "Yellow, I guess. Yueyue really likes Minions and Pikachu."

"Alright, son, I've got it."

Following the GPS, he arrived at the West Fourth Ring. Not long after exiting the West Fourth Ring, Lin Xu turned into an upscale villa community. In the exorbitantly expensive Yanjing City, each villa in the community had a spacious front and back yard, some even complete with a garden out front—they were absolutely worth a fortune.

Soon, Lin Xu saw Shen Baobao waiting for him by the roadside. Today, Shen Baobao had her hair tied up in her signature high ponytail, wearing a T-shirt with a Minions print and denim hot pants. Her fair, straight legs were well-proportioned yet appealingly rounded, her delicate skin as smooth as if carved from cream. The Pikachu-themed slippers on her feet added a touch of playful, childlike charm.

Chapter 247: The Name of the Pan-Fried Bun Shop! Does the Old Lady Love Crucian Carp Stewed with Tofu? Arranged!

"Over here, over here!"

As soon as Lin Xu appeared, Shen Jiayue hurried over. Lin Xu drove the car over.

There were already quite a few cars parked in front of the Shen Family's house: a high-end Range Rover, a Bentley Bentayga, his elder sister-in-law's Porsche 911, and also a Cullinan and a Maybach.

WOW... All the relatives of the Shen Family seem to be wealthy. They aren't really going to give me a hard time like Mom said, are they?

While he was parking, Old Mrs. Shen was sitting on the sofa in the living room, instructing the relatives. "When Yueyue's boyfriend arrives later, no matter what gifts he brings, you mustn't look down on them. Don't give him dirty looks or say rude things because he's from out of town. Otherwise, don't blame this old lady for turning hostile."

The granddaughter she had personally raised was finally bringing her boyfriend home today, so Old Mrs. Shen was so happy she had gotten up before five in the morning to start preparing. She had checked the assortment of fruit plates in the living room, the choice of flowers for the vases, and the attire of the family members—everything.

Chen Yan, fluttery as a butterfly, took a seat next to Old Mrs. Shen and said, "Grandma, you can rest assured. My brother-in-law is perfect. Even if everyone scrutinized him, they wouldn't find a single flaw."

Old Mrs. Shen asked with a smile, "When will you find such a perfect partner yourself?"

Chen Yan was speechless. Why did I have to put in my two cents? Isn't it good enough to sit quietly in a corner and freeload food and drinks?

Just then, the housekeeper came in. "Madam," she announced, "Yueyue's boyfriend is here, at the door, and he has brought a lot of stuff in his car."

"Don't just stand there, everyone," Old Mrs. Shen said to the relatives. "Go help carry things."

At the doorway, Shen Jiayue was holding Dundun, who wore a bow tie, while reciting her home's address. Lin Xu was unloading the car, struggling with the many bottles and jars. I should have known to pack them in boxes, he thought.

In the midst of the hustle and bustle, Shen Guofu, his wife, and other relatives came outside.

After Lin Xu greeted his future father and mother-in-law, Shen Jiayue began to introduce the relatives.

"This is my aunt."

"Hello, Aunt."

"This is my uncle."

"Hello, Uncle."

"This is my second aunt."

"Hello, Second Aunt."

"This is my second uncle."

"Hello, Second Uncle."

...

While she was introducing them, Chen Yan suddenly squeezed through. "Me, me, me! It's my turn to be introduced."

Shen Jiayue gestured with her hand. "This is my cousin, nearly thirty and still not married."

Chen Yan was speechless again. It's bad enough having to witness their public displays of affection, but do I also have to be mocked? Is there no room for a single woman like me to survive?

Lin Xu laughed and said, "Director Chen, I secured a deal with a travel channel for you yesterday afternoon. We'll talk about the details later."

Chen Yan was suddenly overjoyed. "I knew my brother-in-law was the best! Come on, let me help you carry these."

With many hands helping, everything was carried inside.

At first, when everyone saw the pork lard winter melon candy and the pumpkin candy, they didn't think much of it. But when they saw the snacks exclusive to the Fishing Platform and the special wine used for entertaining heads of state, their curiosity was instantly piqued.

To casually bring such wine from the Fishing Platform... Yueyue's boyfriend is no ordinary person, they thought. Especially that wine reserved for heads of state; even if these relatives could get their hands on it through connections at the Fishing Platform, it would cost them a pretty penny.

When they reached the living room, Lin Xu hurriedly greeted Old Mrs. Shen.

"Good boy, come closer and let me have a look at you. Truly handsome!" she praised.

Shen Jiayue presented the gifts Lin Xu had brought as if unveiling a treasure. "Grandma," she said, "your favorite winter melon candy. He started making it a few days ago when we were eating crawfish. It's specially prepared for you."

"Good boy, you've really gone to a lot of trouble," said Old Mrs. Shen, truly touched. Winter melon candy wasn't expensive, but someone had prepared it days in advance, and by hand. It wasn't about the money anymore; it was the sincerity that counted. What more could we ask for? Let's hurry up and get them engaged! she thought.

She took a piece and tasted it, smiling as she said, "Guofang, Guofu, both of you try some. It tastes just like the winter melon candy you used to cry and beg for when you were children. Delicious, truly delicious!"

Everyone started tasting it. The younger ones didn't find anything particularly special about it; it was just winter melon-flavored candy to them. But for the middle-aged and older folks, tasting this winter melon candy inevitably brought back memories of the days when life revolved around ration coupons for grain, cloth, and meat. This gift was truly thoughtful! they mused.

As they were eating, Dundun jumped out of Shen Jiayue's arms, leisurely flicked its tail, hopped onto the sofa, and curled up in Old Mrs. Shen's lap.

"Oh, you little thing!" Old Mrs. Shen cooed, scratching Dundun's head. "Not the least bit shy on your first visit. Do you know this is your own home, little darling?"

The little cat immediately started purring. This made Old Mrs. Shen even happier, and she held Dundun tightly.

After chatting for a while longer, Shen Jiayue led Lin Xu upstairs to see her room.

Just as they entered, she turned and wrapped her arms around Lin Xu's neck. "Thank you, Xu Baobao," she whispered, "thank you for making my grandma so happy."

Then, without waiting for a reply, she kissed him.

Always so sudden... Lin Xu thought, lowering his head and embracing Shen Baobao.

As they were kissing, Chen Yan's voice came from the doorway. "Brother-in-law, come have some tea! It's Grandma's cherished Pu'er, which we usually never get to..."

She pushed open the door and saw the two passionately kissing. Chen Yan froze, utterly bewildered. Who am I? Where am I? What am I doing? she wondered.

Her appearance, however, prompted the kissing couple to quickly separate.

With a slight cough, Lin Xu spoke to his elder sister-in-law as if nothing had happened. "In a few days, Yanjing City TV's travel channel is hosting a cooking competition, and they've invited me to participate. They probably want to capitalize on the Fishing Platform champion's popularity. So, I requested an opportunity for a live online broadcast as part of the deal. Tomorrow, you can go to the travel channel and speak with the program director about the specific collaboration details."

After listening, Chen Yan, who had just been wallowing in self-pity, immediately brightened. "Thank you so much, brother-in-law!" she exclaimed. "You two continue; I'll stand guard for you outside!"

With that, she left, not forgetting to close the door behind her. Lin Xu didn't know whether to laugh or cry at her antics.

The romantic atmosphere was shattered. Even if they continued, the feeling wouldn't be the same.

He went over to the bed and asked Shen Baobao, who had buried her face like an ostrich, "What does Grandma like to eat? I'll go to the kitchen and show off my skills later."

Yes, the adults were chatting in the living room. Standing around felt awkward, and so did sitting. He'd be more comfortable in the kitchen.

Upon hearing his question, Shen Baobao, who had been lying on the bed shyly, immediately sat up. "Grandma loves stewed crucian carp with tofu! Can you make that? If you can, I'll tell Auntie Liu not to prepare that dish so you can make it."

HA! So that's why Dundun influenced things for me to get that crucian carp dish recipe as a reward! It was all leading up to this moment. Since Grandma loves it, then it's settled. Time to make the arrangements!

Chapter 248: This Soup is Too Delicious! Xiao Xu, could you invite your parents to Beijing?

"Huh? You guys finished so quickly?"

In the small living room on the second floor, Chen Yan, who was sitting on the sofa playing with her phone, looked at her sister and brother-in-law walking out of the room with an astonished expression.

It hadn't even been three minutes. That was way too fast, wasn't it?

"Stinky Yan, what nonsense are you spouting?"

Shen Jiayue, a mix of shyness and fury, grabbed a cushion from the sofa and smacked Chen Yan with it.

"Lin Xu's going to the kitchen to make Grandma some crucian carp tofu stew. Are you coming or not?"

Chen Yan had no intention of enduring their public displays of affection.

These two were so clingy now. If their feelings deepened and they started cuddling and nuzzling like a pair of seals, wouldn't that be another devastating blow to her single self?

She shook her head and said, "You two go on. I'll just stay here in the small living room."

The main living room downstairs was off-limits. All the relatives were there chatting. Now that her sister and brother-in-law weren't around, the moment she showed her face, she'd definitely be hounded about marriage. Going to the kitchen, on the other hand, meant enduring their public displays of affection. The small living room on the second floor was much better.

She kicked off her high heels and blissfully sprawled on the sofa.

Later, when dinner was ready, she'd just go downstairs, find a corner to sit in, grab some food and drink, eat her fill, and then quickly leave. She had no intention of listening to the adults' chatter.

「Downstairs.」

Guided by Shen Jiayue, Lin Xu arrived at the kitchen on the first floor.

The kitchen was spacious, almost as large as an average family's living room.

Currently, Aunt Liu and two other maids were busy preparing lunch.

There were many guests at home today, making it a rather grand occasion, so a large quantity of dishes needed to be prepared: various kinds of fresh seafood, imported ingredients, and relatively rare mountain delicacies, a spread that rather dazzled Lin Xu.

Upon seeing Shen Jiayue and the new son-in-law arrive, Aunt Liu greeted them with a smile, saying, "Yueyue, is this your boyfriend? He's so handsome, even more handsome than a movie star."

"Hehe, thank you for the compliment, Aunt Liu. Where are the crucian carp and tofu? My boyfriend wants to show Grandma his skills, so just let him handle this dish."

As soon as Aunt Liu heard this, she promptly said, "How can we let the new son-in-law cook on his first visit? If word got out, wouldn't people make fun of us?"

"Don't worry, Aunt Liu. He's a specially-hired chef from the Fishing Platform; his culinary skills are top-notch."

Upon hearing his skills were "top-notch," Aunt Liu no longer objected.

Instead, she brought over the still lively crucian carp and a block of tofu, saying, "Then we'll have to trouble the new son-in-law... This crucian carp, shall I clean it for you?"

Lin Xu smiled and took them. "No need, I can do it."

He washed his hands and boiled a pot of water on the stove.

Then, taking a kitchen knife, he deftly cut the tofu into strips about four to five centimeters long and two centimeters square.

If making braised tofu, cutting it into triangles is more suitable. This not only helps it absorb flavors more easily but also allows the tofu to hold more sauce, making it tastier. For general soups, tofu is usually cut into slices about four centimeters square; this way, it cooks through easily and is more delicious to eat. But for stewed tofu, it has to be tofu cubes or strips. Tofu cut in other ways tends to fall apart easily during the stewing process.

After cutting the tofu, Lin Xu waited a bit longer for the water on the stove to boil.

He poured the cut tofu strips into the pot to blanch them, simmering for a few minutes to remove the tofu's inherent bitterness and beany taste, ensuring it would be full of pure bean aroma when eaten.

A few minutes later, he turned off the stove and then scooped the tofu out of the pot, setting it aside to drain.

After being blanched, the tofu's fragrance began to waft out, and the tofu itself became even whiter and more tender.

Having blanched the tofu, he took the few crucian carp to the sink and deftly descaled, degilled, and gutted them, carefully cleaning the black membrane from inside their bellies as well.

For other cooking methods, these crucian carp would need to be killed and marinated beforehand.

But crucian carp and tofu stew didn't require this. It was best prepared with freshly killed fish.

This way, the fish meat would be fresh, and the resulting broth would be rich and flavorful.

After the crucian carp were cleaned, Lin Xu placed the pan back on the stove.

Once the pan was hot, he drizzled some lard onto the bottom and then sprinkled some salt.

The fish meat had a rich umami flavor but lacked aroma; lard was needed to enhance its fragrance. Sprinkling salt was to prevent the fish skin from breaking during frying and also to give the fish a base seasoning as it cooked.

Once the oil was hot, Lin Xu laid the crucian carp side by side in the pan to begin frying.

When the fish were first placed in the pan, it shouldn't be moved. They needed to be fried slowly and gently to keep the fish skin intact.

Judging when they were ready to flip was also quite easy. When he held the panhandle and gently shook it, if the fish inside also moved with the pan, it meant the underside was fried and ready to be flipped.

However, the heat from a home stove was relatively low, and it felt like a long time before the fish budged at all.

On a professional stove in a restaurant kitchen, both sides would have already been fried to an enticing golden brown by now.

Finally, when he shook the pan and the fish moved with it, Lin Xu immediately executed a large pan-flip. The crucian carp in the pan somersaulted in the air before landing, perfectly arranged, back into the pan.

"Wow, that's so cool! Can I learn that?"

Even Shen Jiayue, who knew nothing about cooking, could tell this large pan-flip was no simple feat.

Because the crucian carp varied in size and were not uniform, controlling the force during the flip had to be even more precise; otherwise, they definitely wouldn't have landed so neatly arranged.

"A young lady like you, why would you learn that?"

Lin Xu quickly quashed the unrealistic notion forming in Shen Baobao's mind.

Chapter 249: This soup is too delicious! Xiaoxu, can you let your parents come to Beijing?

A novice like him, with no cooking foundation, attempting a wok flip would likely result in splashing hot oil all over himself, or worse, performing a "Heavenly Girl Scattering Flowers" and scattering ingredients across the entire kitchen.

Better not risk it, Lin Xu decided. Cooking is enjoyable, but safety is paramount.

He decided against any fancy wok-tossing and focused on pan-frying the fish. Once both sides were golden brown, he poured half a pot of boiling water directly into the wok.

The secret to making a Milk Soup when stewing fish lies in pan-frying the skin first and using boiling water. With these two steps, one can generally achieve a thick, creamy white fish broth.

After adding the water, Lin Xu placed a knot of scallion and a few slices of ginger into the wok and began to stew.

"You didn't add Sichuan peppercorns," Shen Baobao, watching intently, noticed her Xu Bao had only added Scallion and Ginger, omitting the Sichuan peppercorns, and couldn't help but point it out.

Lin Xu said with a smile, "You don't put Sichuan peppercorns in stewed fish; it would overpower the delicate, fresh flavor of the fish."

Soon, the boiling broth in the wok turned creamy white. Lin Xu skimmed the froth from the surface with a spoon. He let it stew for about twenty more minutes. Once the soup had transformed into a thick, milky broth, he added the previously blanched tofu. He turned down the heat a bit and continued to stew.

After about ten more minutes, when the tofu in the wok began to quiver, it signaled that it was thoroughly cooked and ready to be served. He used chopsticks to remove the Scallion and Ginger from the pot. Then, he added salt and White Pepper for simple seasoning. Finally, he carefully carried the wok and poured its entire contents—fish and tofu—into a large serving bowl.

This Stewed Crucian Carp with Tofu was now ready.

This dish used minimal seasonings—only salt and White Pepper. And the only aromatics were Scallion and Ginger. But as long as the fish was sufficiently fresh and the tofu was blanched beforehand, one could create a Stewed Crucian Carp with Tofu so delicious it could even surpass the skills of a restaurant chef.

"Wow, this tastes incredibly fresh," Aunt Liu praised, but an inexplicable sense of job insecurity pricked at her. With a son-in-law who could cook this well, might she end up unemployed? She resolved to find time to enroll in culinary classes through a domestic agency. She was determined to improve her culinary skills. She needed to demonstrate her value to continue working for the Shen family.

Lin Xu was oblivious that his simple act of cooking had inadvertently spurred Aunt Liu into a competitive mode. He said to Shen Jiayue, who was ready to sneak a taste, "It's just finished. Be careful, it's hot."

"Okay!"

Shen Baobao scooped a small piece of tofu into her mouth. Her eyes widened in surprise as she tasted it. "Wow, this tofu is both fragrant and savory; and it has a rich, beany flavor that melts in your mouth. Your cooking is incredible! Will this dish be on the menu when your new restaurant opens?"

"It will."

"Then I want to eat it every day! YES! This flavor is absolutely amazing!"

「Soon」

The Shen family's lunch commenced.

The whole family gathered around the dining table. All eyes were fixed on the Stewed Crucian Carp with Tofu placed in the center. The milky-white soup exuded a rich, savory aroma, instantly whetting everyone's appetite.

"Grandma, Xu Bao specially cooked this Stewed Crucian Carp with Tofu for you. Let me serve you some," Shen Baobao said, ever thoughtful in her grandmother's presence. She picked up a small bowl and served a generous portion of soup and tofu.

"It's made by Little Xu? No wonder it smells so fresh! Quick, quick, let me have a taste." The old lady accepted the bowl, spooned a little soup, blew on it gently, and eagerly brought it to her lips. "Hmm, this is wonderfully fresh! Your skill is truly excellent," she exclaimed.

After savoring the soup, she tried the tofu. It was also incredibly delicious, not at all like the tofu she usually ate.

Lin Xu explained to her, "Grandma, this tofu was blanched in hot water before being added to the fish soup for stewing. Does it taste different from usual?"

"Is that so?" Grandma remarked. "No wonder it tastes different! All of you, try it. Little Xu's cooking skills are truly excellent. He can make even a simple dish like crucian carp and tofu so delicious. You all must have a taste!"

The old lady was overjoyed. The more she observed her grandson-in-law, the more pleased she felt. He was also so capable of earning money—truly flawless in every aspect.

Lin Xu added, "Besides blanching the tofu, I also used lard. Otherwise, this soup dish would be too bland; it wouldn't have this rich, aromatic flavor."

At the mention of lard, his mother-in-law, Han Shuzhen, became animated. She said to their relatives, "I used to be quite resistant to lard, but after tasting Little Xu's cooking, I've grown to love its flavor more and more. You all must try this; it's completely different from the usual dishes!"

Director Han had practically become an ambassador for lard. This piqued the relatives' curiosity further, and they instinctively reached for their bowls and spoons to serve themselves some.

Upon tasting the flavor of the Crucian Carp soup and the texture of the tofu, they couldn't help but shower it with praise.

"This soup is truly delicious."

"It's so fresh! Savory and fragrant!"

"The tofu is delicious too—soft and tender, without any unpleasant beany taste!"

"I must tell our housekeeper when I get back. From now on, we'll make Stewed Crucian Carp with Tofu this way. It's simply too delicious!"

While everyone was savoring Lin Xu's culinary creations, Shen Guofu, without a word, opened a bottle of Moutai that had been stored in their home for nearly twenty years. In his eyes, this bottle of Liquor, valuable enough to be traded for a small car, still couldn't fully express the immense joy he felt. His daughter had found such a perfect partner! In such a joyous atmosphere, he felt he absolutely had to casually down about half a jin of it.

He filled the glasses for Shen Jiayue's uncles—the husbands of her paternal and maternal aunts, as well as her maternal uncle—and other male relatives one by one. Then, he raised his own glass and downed its contents in a single gulp.

When one is truly happy, even strong Liquor goes down more smoothly.

Chapter 250: This soup is too delicious! Xiaoxu, can you let your parents come to Beijing?

"Lin Xu, not having a drink?"

Chen Yan's father, Chen Yuejin, holding a wine glass, looked ever more pleased with his nephew-in-law. Unfortunately, his own daughter hadn't found a partner yet, making it almost embarrassing for him and Shen Guofang in front of their relatives.

"I have to drive later, Uncle, so I won't drink. I'll join you with a soft drink, though."

Lin Xu stood up, holding his juice, and clinked glasses with Chen Yuejin, intentionally lowering his glass to meet the middle of Chen Yuejin's wine glass.

Chen Yuejin was even happier then.

Few young people nowadays knew the etiquette of toasting.

After finishing his drink, Lin Xu used soft drinks to toast with the other relatives in the house, much to the old lady's delight.

"We're all family here; no need for such formality. Liu, see if the stewed pork knuckle is ready? Bring it over if it is."

Today was such an important day. The old lady's crystal sugar pork knuckle wouldn't be absent.

But today, with so many people, she hadn't stayed in the kitchen; instead, after starting the stew, she had left it to Aunt Liu to watch over.

Not long after, Aunt Liu came over with the aromatic pork knuckle.

Its skin glistened a rich, oily red, and as it was placed on the table, the meat jiggled like jelly, indicating it had been stewed for a long time.

After the pork knuckle was set down, the old lady cheerfully said to Lin Xu, "Child, come taste my cooking. See if it's as delicious as yours."

Lin Xu quickly replied, "Grandma's cooking is definitely better than mine because home-cooked meals have that homely flavor, unlike restaurants that only care about finesse and lack that home taste."

His words delighted the old lady immensely.

Only after the elders began tasting the pork knuckle did Lin Xu pick up a small piece of the skin with his chopsticks and pop it into his mouth.

Hmm, the pork skin was stewed until it was so soft and tender. It almost didn't require chewing, as it simply melted in the mouth.

They always said delicious pork knuckle was best sucked rather than chewed. He finally got to taste it today.

The pork knuckle was not only soft and tender but tasted fantastic too. It had a complex flavor of sweet and salty, and one could even detect a hint of the tart-sweetness of hawthorn, which greatly reduced any greasy feel.

Delicious! The pork knuckle was truly delicious.

As he was enjoying it, Shen Jiayue suddenly said, "Grandma has been making us crystal sugar pork knuckle all our lives. Why don't you make it for her someday?"

Make crystal sugar pork knuckle? I'm not very skilled at that.

As Lin Xu was pondering this, the system's notification sounded in his mind: "Host shows great respect and filial piety, triggering reward task [Crystal Sugar Pork Knuckle]: Please make a Perfect Level crystal sugar pork knuckle for Old Lady Shen within two weeks to earn a seafood Dish Upgrade Card."

As expected... Every time Baobao talks about food, the system issues a reward task. It looks like I won't be learning how to roast suckling pig any time soon.

Lin Xu still had a Perfect Level Cooking Learning Card. It was originally saved to learn Guo Weidong's roast suckling pig recipes, but now the system specifically required a Perfect Level crystal sugar pork knuckle.

He would have to use the Perfect Level Cooking Learning Card to learn. After all, the task timeline was just two weeks. Going from nothing to practicing a dish in two weeks could hardly reach the Perfect Level.

Thinking this, he said with a smile, "Then I will humbly present my cooking in front of Grandma. I just hope she doesn't mind a young man's inferior skills."

Old Lady Shen was so pleased that she couldn't stop smiling. "This child is just being modest. As per our family tradition, crystal sugar pork knuckle is a must at every banquet. If you can cook it, then I can finally rest my old bones."

Everyone enjoyed the meal thoroughly. Lin Xu also felt the warmth of family, far from his home in Beijing.

「After dinner.」

Aunt Liu brought over a fruit plate and some snacks.

Just as Old Lady Shen sat down on the couch, Dundun, who had just finished his boiled chicken thigh, rushed over and unceremoniously cuddled up in her arms.

"Oh, this little darling is really clinging to me." She held Dundun in her arms and said to Lin Xu, "Xuxu, can you have your parents come to Beijing recently?"

What? Have my parents come to Beijing?

Shen Guofu added from the side, "You and Yueyue have hit it off so well, it's time to sit down and finalize the wedding plans. I'm still waiting to have a few drinks with your father."

Lin Xu had originally planned to buy a house before bringing up the engagement.

He didn't expect Shen Baobao's family to be so eager. Were they that keen on marrying off their daughter quickly?

However, since they had brought it up, he said, "I will get my parents to come to Beijing as soon as possible."

Well, in a few days, during the competition, I'll have Dad and Mom come watch me cook. After the competition, we can finalize the wedding. And if there's nothing else, I'll take Shen Baobao and my parents back to my hometown for a trip. We can take a walk in the scenic area to relax and rejuvenate, then return to Beijing to continue making money.

The old lady played with Dundun for a while. Feeling a bit tired, she went to her room for a midday rest. The other relatives were also preparing to leave.

The presents Lin Xu brought were divided into six portions, with each family taking one.

After seeing the guests off, Han Shuzhen picked up Dundun. "Did you enjoy visiting Grandma's relatives today, my little darling?"

Dundun immediately cooed softly, "MEOW~~~~~"

This immediately thrilled Han Shuzhen. She hugged Dundun and went down to the basement floor's gym and home cinema, preparing to acquaint the little guy with the house.

Shen Guofu was sitting on the sofa drinking tea. As he set down his teacup, he said, "Xuxu, the crawfish you made last time was really good. Your aunt and I didn't get enough. How about you make some more tonight? We can leave after eating crawfish."

Lin Xu didn't mind. "Sure. I wish I had saved more for you that day."

Shen Guofu whispered, "Actually, I hardly had any. Your aunt ate them all. I had the maid boil some noodles and mix them in. That's how I got a taste. Make more tonight, okay?"

"No problem."

After discussing this, Shen Guofu took the elevator to the main bedroom on the third floor to rest. He had woken up too early, and the effects of the alcohol had set in. He needed to lie down.

「After he had gone.」

Shen Baobao immediately pulled Lin Xu upstairs.

Finally, I can properly kiss my precious Xu!

On the second floor, she didn't even bother entering a room and started nibbling at Lin Xu's neck.

Lin Xu, wrapping his arms around her waist, passionately reciprocated.

Just as they were kissing, a sleepy figure sat up on the sofa. "Is it lunchtime yet?"

Lin Xu: ?????

Shen Jiayue: ?????

Man, no wonder it felt so quiet at the dining table. I didn't expect my sister-in-law was sleeping here.

"Can't you two kiss after eating? Look how clingy you are. I might as well buy some superglue and stick you together."

Chen Yan rubbed her eyes, got up from the sofa, and while tying her high heels, urged, "Come on, let's go down for lunch; I'm starving."

Lin Xu: "..."

How should I calmly explain to my sister-in-law that everyone has already had lunch? Online now, it's urgent!