

Culinary 261

Chapter 261: An Extremely Labor-Intensive Dish to Impress - Crystal Sugar Pork Knuckle!

But this method is much simpler.

When it bubbles, just add the ingredients and stir-fry. That's all there is to it.

After the fragrance of the scallion and Sichuan peppercorns filled the air, Xie Baomin poured the boiling water from a nearby kettle into the pot. The water immediately turned an enticing red.

"The color of this soup is really beautiful!" Song Dahai couldn't help but exclaim.

Although Xie Baomin's words and actions could be infuriating, his cooking skills were undeniably top-notch. The Fishing Platform wouldn't have indulged him otherwise. Actually, when you think about it, his master, Chef Gao, was also that kind of person. It was a trait passed down from master to apprentice, it seemed.

After pouring the boiling water, Xie Baomin stirred the pot with a spoon and said to Lin Xu, "You can't add soy sauce to Crystal Sugar Pork Knuckle, not Light Soy Sauce nor Dark Soy Sauce. It must be stewed with caramelized sugar to get that good color on the pork knuckle."

No Soy Sauce?

Lin Xu curiously asked, "Then what about seasoning?"

"For seasoning, we only use salt and crystal sugar, nothing else."

Lin Xu felt this was the complete opposite of the sweet and sour pork ribs from Wuxi, which used only Soy Sauce and sugar, but no salt.

While they were talking, Xie Baomin added some salt to the pot and a few pieces of crystal sugar to enhance the flavor. Crystal Sugar Pork Knuckle needs to be sweet and delicious, with a hint of saltiness in the aftertaste. So, you don't add too much salt—just enough to give the braising liquid a savory flavor.

Once the braising liquid was seasoned, they poured it into the kitchen's extra-large pressure cooker.

Then, he cut the reserved sugarcane into small sections and split each section into four pieces with a cleaver. Once done, he added them all to the pressure cooker.

Seeing the leftover sugarcane, Song Dahai asked, "Not using the rest?"

"Right, we don't need it," Baomin replied.

"Then why the hell did you grab two stalks?"

"I was afraid you'd chase me down for a fight. I couldn't very well fight you empty-handed, could I?"

Song Dahai burst out laughing.

That rascal had really thought of everything.

After joking with Song Dahai, Xie Baomin said, "I've been researching Cantonese sweet soups lately. I'll use the leftover sugarcane to try making some later. I recall a sweet soup that uses this type of green sugarcane; it has a very refreshing, sweet taste."

Meanwhile, the pork knuckles that had been simmering since morning were almost done.

He scooped them out with a slotted spoon, carefully placing them into the pressure cooker before closing the lid. The Crystal Sugar Pork Knuckle formally entered the stewing phase.

"It needs to stew for at least an hour for the pork knuckle to become perfectly tender. Everyone, go on with your tasks. The most exciting part won't be ready for another hour."

With that said, Xie Baomin led Song Dahai off to have some tea. After all, he had 'borrowed' Song Dahai's sugarcane, so treating him to a cup of tea was only right. Besides, the tea leaves were from Building 10 and didn't cost him anything.

Looking at the remaining half bowl of crystal sugar, Lin Xu turned to Xie Baomin and asked, "Senior Brother, this crystal sugar..."

"That's for thickening the sauce later. Crystal Sugar Pork Knuckle requires the skin to be tender and the meat succulent, with the braising liquid like a gel. That 'gel' refers to the sauce made by reducing it with more crystal sugar at the end."

This was completely different from the Crystal Sugar Pork Knuckle he was familiar with. Of course, there were many ways to make Crystal Sugar Pork Knuckle among home cooks. Pretty much any recipe that involved crystal sugar and pork knuckles could be called by that name. But the authentic way to make this dish must be like his senior brother's. The seasoning was incredibly restrained. After the pork knuckle was stewed until flavorful, it would be coated in a thick, sugary glaze. Just the thought of it was mouthwatering.

「An hour later.」

Xie Baomin and Song Dahai returned to the kitchen.

Xie Baomin took the pressure cooker off the stove and released the steam. Then, he opened the lid.

A rich aroma immediately wafted from the pot, mingled with delicate threads of fresh, clean sweetness.

This was clearly the scent produced by the stewed green sugarcane.

Using a slotted spoon, Xie Baomin carefully lifted the pork knuckle out of the pot and set it aside. The pork knuckle's skin was now a ruddy red and perfectly intact. It trembled in the slotted spoon, evidently stewed until incredibly tender.

Xie Baomin poured the braising liquid into a wok. First, he used a slotted spoon to remove all the scallions, ginger, other aromatics, and green sugarcane pieces from the liquid. Then, using a ladle, he skimmed the fat from the surface of the braising liquid.

"The finishing sauce can't have any oil, or it will affect the final color. You must skim all the oil off cleanly. That way, the pork knuckle will have a better, brilliant shine."

After removing the solids, he heated the braising liquid, then added all the remaining crystal sugar to the wok. He stirred continuously with a spoon to hasten the sugar's melting.

Once the crystal sugar had completely dissolved, Xie Baomin held the pork knuckle in the slotted spoon with his left hand and placed it back into the wok. With his right hand, he continuously ladled the hot liquid from the wok over the knuckle.

Song Dahai said to Lin Xu, "This step is to rinse off any surface oil or residue from the knuckle and also to keep it hot."

After this basting, the pork knuckle's color looked even more ruddy and lustrous.

Xie Baomin set the pork knuckle aside again. He then picked up a fine-mesh sieve and strained the braising liquid once more before continuing to stir it in the wok.

As he stirred, the rich, red braising liquid gradually thickened.

"You see, this is the advantage of using caramelized sugar. If you used Dark Soy Sauce for color, the braising liquid in the wok would have turned into black sludge by now."

No matter how long caramelized sugar is cooked, its color will always remain a vibrant, glossy red.

After about four or five minutes, Xie Baomin brought the pork knuckle over and basted it again.

"Basting it every few minutes makes the pork knuckle look more beautiful and present better. It also keeps it piping hot."

A dish with this much sugar will get sticky as it cools, so it's crucial to keep the pork knuckle hot.

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While busy, Xie Baomin called out to Song Dahai, "This isn't a soccer match, Old Song. Stop commentating and help me blanch some baby bok choy for the plating, with the roots facing out."

Song Dahai muttered, "Damn it, after sharing a couple of cups of tea, you start bossing me around..."

The baby bok choy was already washed and ready. Song Dahai boiled a pot of water, added some peanut oil, and a pinch of salt. Once the water boiled, he poured the baby bok choy inside and blanched it until it turned bright green before taking it out. He then rinsed it with cold water, drained it, and laid it on the plate with the roots facing out.

After preparing four plates of baby bok choy, Xie Baomin was also reaching the final stages of reducing his sauce. The pot's lustrous braising liquid was now so thick it was almost paste-like. Even stirring it was somewhat difficult. Meanwhile, the pork knuckle had been washed three times, its skin becoming ever more glossy and reddish. Song Dahai carefully placed the pork knuckle from the strainer onto the plate, making sure to expose a segment of the leg bone to enhance its appearance.

Just as he finished plating, the braising liquid in the pot started bubbling. Xie Baomin picked up the pot without delay and ladled the thick braising liquid evenly over the pork knuckle.

"Wow, this really is beautiful!" Bai Pengbo exclaimed, starting to film with his cellphone.

Meanwhile, Lin Xu silently conjured in his mind, Use the Cooking Learning Card!

Soon, the system's prompt echoed in his mind: "Learning target: Xie Baomin. Current Skill: Crystal Sugar Pork Knuckle. Would you like to learn?"

"Learn!" Lin Xu commanded.

Fortunately, the system didn't glitch this time.

Shortly after, the system's prompt rang again in his mind: "One Perfect Level Cooking Learning Card consumed. You have acquired the Perfect Level Technique for making Crystal Sugar Pork Knuckle. Congratulations to the host."

He finally acquired it. A wave of relief washed over Lin Xu.

By this time, Xie Baomin had also ladled the sauce over all four pork knuckles. Their gleaming reddish skin was coated in a thick layer of red braising sauce and even twinkled under the light; their appearance was utterly gorgeous. The rich, aromatic scent, along with a subtle sweetness, continually tempted everyone's appetite.

"No wonder it's the showstopper dish at banquets; this pork knuckle is just beautiful," Song Dahai exclaimed in admiration. He was quite intrigued by Xie Baomin's use of sugar cane.

That damn genius, actually thinking of using green sugar cane to enhance the pork knuckle's fresh flavor! he thought. The flavor made the otherwise greasy pork knuckle instantly less oily, inevitably making one eager to try a few bites. A truly nice improvement.

He decided to give it a try when he got back. Song Dahai was well aware that even if he didn't make it, other head chefs would try after hearing about it. The result of everyone's attempts would be a collective venture to Building 15 to steal sugar cane.

Better to use it myself before other head chefs can steal it away, he mused.

"Can we eat now?" Lin Xu asked, coming over with chopsticks and handing them out to everyone.

After being tantalized for so long, they finally had the chance to taste the dish. However, just as he was about to try it, his father-in-law, Shen Guofu, suddenly called.

"Xiaoxu," Shen Guofu said, "Uncle Tan and I, along with a few friends, are at Building Two to have a meal. The front desk manager said you're in the kitchen cooking. What are you making? Can we try some?"

What a coincidence, Lin Xu thought. He picked up a plate of pork knuckle and said to Xie Baomin, "My father-in-law is here. I'll bring him a portion of the pork knuckle, Senior Brother."

"Go ahead, go ahead, we made extra," Xie Baomin waved him off. He then picked up a piece of pork knuckle skin with his chopsticks and placed it in his mouth. The sweet flavor and melt-in-your-mouth texture of the skin were truly good.

After tasting it, he called out to Lin Xu, "Hurry back, Junior Brother! I'm preparing to make some Cantonese dessert soup with the leftover sugar cane. You should learn this too. Three of this time's judges are from Lingnan; making Cantonese dishes and Cantonese Snacks will earn extra points."

Lin Xu agreed and quickly headed toward the dining area with the pork knuckle.

He mumbled to himself as he walked. If the sugar cane dessert soup is delicious, then after finishing work today, I'll definitely have to swing by Building 15 to snag a couple of green sugar cane stalks to bring home and make some dessert soup for Shen Baobao...

Chapter 263: Super Simple Sugarcane Juice! Fish Scales Can Also Be Snacks?

Upon arriving at the restaurant, Lin Xu spotted his father-in-law from afar, sitting at a table by the window. Various signature dishes from Building No. 2 were laid out before him.

Around him sat Tan Yajun from the audit office and a few other middle-aged men, chatting and eating together in what looked to be a harmonious atmosphere.

"Wow, there really is a new dish!" Shen Guofu exclaimed upon seeing Lin Xu approaching with a dish in hand, and he quickly got up.

When he saw it was pork knuckle, his face immediately lit up with joy. "Pork knuckle with wine—the more you eat, the more you'll find to enjoy! This dish is truly impressive."

As long as it's meat, you're happy, huh? Lin Xu thought.

Lin Xu walked over, placed the plate on their table with a smile, and casually said to Shen Guofu, "Grandma wanted to eat Crystal Sugar Pork Knuckle, and I was worried I wouldn't make it right, so my senior brother made a few to teach me. Since you're here, it's the perfect opportunity for you to try it."

Upon hearing this, Shen Guofu immediately patted Lin Xu's shoulder. "Good boy!"

Then he said to Tan Yajun and the others, "Lin Xu visited my home yesterday, and the old lady was delighted. She even made Crystal Sugar Pork Knuckle herself. Yueyue, that girl, was teasingly egging Lin Xu on to make it for the old lady, and I didn't expect this kid to actually start learning today."

The moment Tan Yajun heard this, he couldn't help but praise, "Truly a good, filial kid, just like Yueyue."

Shen Guofu was momentarily speechless. Old Tan, if you're envious, just say so. Why go around cursing people?

He pulled Lin Xu over and said, "Come, let me introduce you to these uncles. They grew up in the same alley as me and Old Tan, and they came specially today to taste your cooking."

Lin Xu quickly greeted the uncles.

After the pleasantries, Lin Xu said, "Please, go ahead and eat. I still have work to do, so I need to get back."

"Sure, sure. You go ahead."

Once Lin Xu had left, the middle-aged men couldn't wait to pick up their chopsticks, all reaching for the Crystal Sugar Pork Knuckle that had made them drool the moment it was served.

Shen Guofu took a piece of the pork knuckle skin and popped it into his mouth, instantly mesmerized by the sweet flavor.

It was deliciously sweet yet not greasy, with a refreshing quality reminiscent of sugarcane. The skin itself was tender and flavorful, melting away at the mere touch of his tongue.

Only after they finished the pork knuckle could they discern the subtle saltiness within the skin. It left an unforgettable and utterly delightful aftertaste.

"Oh my goodness, this pork knuckle is so delicious!"

"Indeed, the meat is tender, and the flavor is spot on."

"I don't usually like sweet dishes, but I can't stop eating this pork knuckle."

"The more you eat, the tastier it gets! Old Shen, I forgot to ask if your son-in-law has learned how to make it yet. If he has, we'll have to start coming over to your place for dinner more often!"

"Yes, we must! This pork knuckle is just too satisfying."

"..."

While Tan Yajun and the others chattered non-stop, Shen Guofu remained silent, his head down, busy vying with his old friends for the pork knuckle on the plate.

A bunch of fools who've never had to fight for their food, Shen Guofu thought. Is this really the time for talking? Every extra word spoken means one less bite of pork knuckle. Go on, keep talking. The more you talk, the more I get to eat.

Only when nothing was left on the plate but a lone leg bone did they finally stop.

Shen Guofu let out a contented burp. That was so satisfying!

「Back in the kitchen.」

His senior brother had gone upstairs for an executive meeting for Building No. 2, so the sugarcane syrup Lin Xu had been planning to make had to be postponed.

However, Lin Xu wasn't in a rush.

The Crystal Sugar Pork Knuckle he'd just carried to the dining hall had been tempting him the entire way, and he was already craving the dish badly. Seeing a plate still left, he hurriedly picked up his chopsticks and eagerly tasted a piece of the pork skin.

Mmm, it really is delicious, he thought. Despite so much sugar, it wasn't cloying at all. That's almost unbelievable!

After a few more bites, he got himself a bowl of rice, scooped some of the remaining sauce from the pot, mixed it with the rice, and took a bite.

Mmm, this warm rice mixed with the savory-sweet sauce is just incredible, he mused. Even plain rice becomes a delicacy!

"You like eating it mixed like this too?"

As he was eating, Song Dahai came over.

It was past dinnertime, so he also served himself a bowl of rice and began eating it with the pork knuckle before heading back to his duties.

Hmph, Xie Baomin managed to snag two sugarcanes from me, Song Dahai thought. Well, I'll make up for it with this rice and pork knuckle. I, Old Song, can't let myself be taken advantage of!

Lin Xu smiled and replied, "We're about to get busy, so I'm just grabbing a quick bite. Chef Song, where is Building No. 15? Is it a bit far from here?"

"Not too far. Just follow the main road inside Fishing Platform, and you'll see a red, traditional Chinese-style building near the rockery. That's Building No. 15... Chef Lin, if you're not busy, you should come visit us. Many of the young people in Building No. 15 look up to you as a role model."

Really? Lin Xu thought. Then I'll definitely stop by after work. The sugarcane isn't important; I just want to make more friends.

Song Dahai continued, "Especially my nephew. Ever since he watched your competition, he's been looking up your information online, constantly creating buzz about you and doing daily check-ins, just like those kids who idolize celebrities."

This immediately caught Lin Xu's interest. He said, "That's so flattering! I didn't expect to have fans here at Fishing Platform."

He'd thought the people constantly chattering about him in the online discussions were just food enthusiasts; he hadn't realized that even chefs from Fishing Platform were captivated.

This makes a visit to Building No. 15 an absolute must, Lin Xu decided. I should get to know this fanboy first. Then, if I want some sugarcane later, it'll just be a matter of asking!

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Hmm, I can't just fleece them and run like Senior Brother. That would be too crude.

It's better to have people offer things willingly.

That's the rule of a civilized society, after all.

"Chef Song, what's your nephew's name? It'd be good to get to know him when I go there."

Lin Xu was focused on the matter of getting sugarcane from them.

Suddenly, he remembered he also had the task of finding a head chef.

If Song Dahai's nephew met the requirements, wouldn't this be a chance to poach him?

"My nephew's name is Zhu Yong. Just ask around in Building 15, and you'll find him. He's been participating in cooking competitions for the past few days. Unfortunately, he's over twenty-five this year, so he didn't participate and missed the chance to compete with you in culinary skills."

He can participate in cooking competitions?

That means his culinary skills must be exceptionally high!

It's confirmed then. This is the third chef I need to poach.

I must visit Building 15 soon, make contact with this Zhu Yong first, and see if he's willing to switch jobs. If he is, I'll start poaching immediately.

After finishing the rice in his bowl, Song Dahai was preparing to leave when he suddenly spotted a kitchen helper in the distance carrying a large Carp, weighing over ten pounds, to the sink, preparing to gut it.

He casually remarked, as if sighing with emotion, "That's a hefty fish. Its Fish Scales alone could make two dishes."

Lin Xu, who was nearby, was somewhat astonished.

Really? Is that true?

Fish Scales can be used in cooking?

He asked curiously, "Chef Song, can Fish Scales really be eaten?"

"Why can't Fish Scales be eaten? Blanch the Fish Scales, clean them, and simmer them for a few hours to make Fish Scale Jelly. It has an even better texture than pork skin jelly. Or, you could wash them thoroughly, coat them in dry starch, and deep-fry them. After taking them out of the oil, sprinkle some chili powder on top, and you'll have crispy Fish Scales."

WOW!

Lin Xu truly hadn't expected Fish Scales could be prepared this way.

He wasn't very interested in Fish Scale Jelly.

But he wanted to try the crispy Fish Scales.

His own Shen Baobao loved these kinds of fragrant and crispy snacks. He'd collect the Fish Scales later and try frying them.

After seeing Song Dahai off, Lin Xu quickly went to the sink and said to the kitchen helper who was gutting the Carp, "Save the Fish Scales for me. Chef Song said they can be used in cooking, and I plan to give it a try."

"Got it, Master Lin!"

Back at the stove, he prepared several tables of pre-ordered dishes. Then, he saw his Senior Brother Xie Baomin stride into the kitchen.

"Has Old Song left?"

"He's left. He said he still had things to do back there, so he ate a bowl of rice and went back."

"HA! That old fellow really doesn't let himself be taken advantage of. We managed to fleece two sugarcanes off him, and he still ate a bowl of our rice before leaving! We'll have to go fleece a couple more from him tomorrow."

As he spoke, Xie Baomin picked up the remaining sugarcane and began to prepare a Cantonese-style sweet soup.

To make the sweet soup, it needed sweetness, so he had to use the sugarcane stalks.

Using a chef's knife, he peeled off the hard outer rind of the sugarcane, removed the joint sections, and kept only the relatively tender core, which was easier to chew.

Lin Xu picked up a piece and tasted it.

This sugarcane is still quite juicy. It's just not sweet enough, likely because it hasn't fully matured, but chewing it reveals a crisp freshness that mature sugarcane lacks.

Hmm, it's the taste of nature.

Xie Baomin split each section of sugarcane core into four pieces, then placed them into the pot used for making desserts, added water, and began to boil it.

"Young sugarcane is quite cooling and very suitable for drinking in this current weather."

Lin Xu wasn't very familiar with how this type of sweet soup was made. Chewing on the sugarcane in his hand, he asked, "Just sugarcane?"

"Of course not. You have to add at least some snow pears. That way, you get sugarcane and snow pear soup. No sugar added, just drink it plain and light like this. It not only cools you down but also clears the lungs."

That sounds pretty good.

Lin Xu asked again, "Besides snow pears, what else can you add?"

"Any similar cooling fruits will do, or other ingredients like yam, Horse Hoof, and taro. Actually, there aren't many strict rules, as long as the properties of the combined ingredients don't clash."

Is it that simple?

Just as Lin Xu thought of this, a system notification sounded in his mind:

"The host has listened to the guidance of a State Banquet master and has comprehended the Qualified Level Sweet Soup Technique — Ingredient Pairing. Congratulations to the host."

Sweet Soup Technique?

I can comprehend things just like that?

It seems I'll have to chat more with these head chefs when I have free time.

Who knows, I might comprehend a whole wave of Techniques.

Isn't that just a free gain?

Soon, the water in the pot came to a boil. Xie Baomin covered the pot with a lid, turned down the heat, and continued to simmer it.

"Sugarcane has plenty of water content and can withstand long cooking. It should be simmered for as long as possible so that its crisp, fresh flavor can infuse into the soup."

Lin Xu nodded, mentally noting it down.

When I make this for Shen Baobao later, these pointers will come in handy.

After simmering for about twenty minutes, Xie Baomin went to the storage room and fetched two snow pears. He peeled them, cut them into small pieces, and added them to the pot. After cooking for about five or six more minutes, he turned off the heat and removed the pot from the stove.

"Snow pears shouldn't be cooked for too long; just until their flavor comes out is enough. Although this might sound very particular, as long as you understand the techniques for pairing ingredients, you can make a pot of sweet soup in minutes."

Lin Xu nodded and then asked, "If one wanted to add sugar, at what step would it be most appropriate?"

"Add two pieces of Crystal Sugar while boiling the snow pears; the flavor will be very good."

After saying this, Xie Baomin ladled some soup into a bowl. He blew on it a bit and drank it once it wasn't too hot. Nodding, he said, "Hmm, not bad. Although the sweetness is a little faint, the crisp, fresh flavor of the young sugarcane is quite rich. Try it, Junior Brother. See if it gives you any inspiration."

Lin Xu nodded and ladled some for himself.

He drank it when it wasn't too hot. The soup was slightly sweet, carrying the distinct, crisp freshness characteristic of sugarcane, intermingled with the refreshing sensation of snow pear.

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Drinking it made one feel completely refreshed. Delicious! Xie Baomin poured himself a large bowl and started patrolling the kitchen with it.

Just as Lin Xu was about to drink some more, the kitchen helper who had slaughtered the carp came over with a small basin, "Chef Lin, here are the Fish Scales you requested. I didn't dare to disturb you earlier when the head chef was teaching you how to make sugar syrup. They're all here. Do you want me to help you wash them?"

"No need, no need, I can wash them myself. Thank you for your trouble."

"If you say that, it makes me feel like an outsider, Chef Lin. You're our hero in Building Two after all."

Lin Xu, representing Building Two, had won the championship in this cooking competition, giving everyone in Building Two a reason to hold their heads high. The staff in the back kitchen practically considered him their hero.

After the kitchen helper left, Lin Xu went to the sink, carefully washing the Fish Scales twice in the basin.

Concerned about any fishy smell, he grabbed some flour and, like washing Fatty Intestines, he scrubbed and washed the Fish Scales as well.

After rinsing them clean again, he dried the Fish Scales, poured in some Cooking Wine and Scallion and Ginger water to remove the fishy smell, sprinkled some salt, and set them aside to marinate.

He had never tasted the spicy Fish Scales Song Dahai talked about; he hadn't even seen them. Therefore, he could only use his experience from cooking other dishes to experiment with the preparation, step by step.

After marinating for about ten minutes, he sprinkled some dry starch onto the Fish Scales, mixing them well so the starch evenly coated their surfaces.

After finishing these tasks, he set up a wok, heated the oil to medium temperature, and then started to deep-fry. He grabbed a handful of starch-coated Fish Scales and scattered them into the wok. Then, he stirred them with a spoon a few times to spread them out. When they turned golden brown and curled, he took them out and started frying the next batch.

By now, the previously fried Fish Scales had cooled down sufficiently, so he picked up a piece to taste.

Hmm, surprisingly crispy. None of the anticipated issues, like being prickly or fishy, were present; they were just fragrant and crispy.

As he was enjoying the taste, the system's notification sound rang in his mind again: "Host has successfully made 'Excellent Level' crispy fried Fish Scales snack based on the introduction by a State Banquet master, and has thus acquired the 'Excellent Level' basic aquatic Technique — Peeling Fish Skin. Congratulations to the host."

What? There are rewards, too?

Lin Xu had originally intended to try making a small snack for Shen Baobao. He didn't expect to actually trigger a system reward, and to receive a Technique for Peeling Fish Skin at that.

Although this Technique might end up neglected in a corner like the Pig Slaughtering Technique, every little bit helps—it's better than nothing.

At this moment, the Fish Scales in the wok were ready again. Lin Xu scooped them out with a slotted spoon and continued frying.

After all the Fish Scales were fried, he raised the oil temperature and poured the fried Fish Scales back into the wok for a second fry. Since the Fish Scales were thin and fried quickly, the refrying process was very short. They had to be scooped out almost as soon as they were poured in.

Just as he was taking the Fish Scales out, Xie Baomin sauntered over.

"Fish Scales? Did Old Song teach you this?"

Lin Xu nodded, then asked, "How did you know?"

"Old Song is the best at preparing fish in Fishing Platform; we used to call him Fatty Carp, and it made him turn against us several times."

Lin Xu: "..."

You're really quite the joker.

Xie Baomin tasted the Fish Scales, then opened a nearby cabinet, rummaged out a cardboard box, pulled out a sealed bag of chili powder, and handed it over, "Sprinkle some of this; it'll taste even better."

Lin Xu looked at it and saw no difference from the chili powder usually used in the kitchen. He opened it and sprinkled a little into the basin. He then pinched a piece of Fish Scales covered in chili powder and tasted it.

The flavor was not only crispy and fragrant but also had an added numbing spiciness. This numbing taste wasn't overpowering at all. Instead, it had a pleasant aroma. It produced a dry fragrance in the mouth, making the Fish Scales even more delicious.

"Why is this chili powder so tasty, senior brother? After adding it, the texture and taste of the Fish Scales have jumped up a level."

Lin Xu was quite surprised. He didn't expect this ordinary-looking chili powder to be so delicious.

"It contains soybean powder, so it tastes more fragrant. Next time you eat barbecue or use a dry dip for hot pot, you could try it too; it's pretty good."

Upon hearing this, Lin Xu said jokingly, "Since it's so good, I'll just take this cardboard box away then."

Who knew that Xie Baomin would wave his hand and say, "Take it, we don't need it anyway, and it just takes up space."

Don't need it? If you don't need it, why make this stuff at all?

Seeing the look of disdain on his senior brother's face, Lin Xu suddenly thought of a possibility, "Who made this?"

"It was Chef Dai from Building Eighteen. They specialize in Sichuan cuisine, and dry dish dipping sauces are a piece of cake for them."

As expected... This stuff was acquired from another building.

"Why did Chef Dai make so much chili powder for you?" Lin Xu was somewhat curious. If you're not running a barbecue restaurant, you don't need a lot of this stuff. Making a whole cardboard box would last for months, right?

"I won it from a bet with him last time. We were at a head chef meeting, and he said I wouldn't dare to touch Old Song's head. So I pretended there was a fly and swatted Old Song, and this box of chili powder became mine."

Lin Xu: "..."

He had never imagined that the little Fishing Platform actually housed two such characters as his senior brother and Chef Dai. He'd originally thought only idiocy was contagious. Who knew that being a joker could also be spread from person to person?

「At seven in the evening.」

After finishing up his work, Lin Xu packed the fried crispy Fish Scales into a takeaway bag, then loaded the box of chili powder into his car, carried Dundun out, and headed home from work.

Before leaving though, he had to go to Building Fifteen. The taste of the sugarcane and pear soup was pretty refreshing, so he planned to "borrow" a couple of sugarcanes to take home and make some sweet soup for Shen Baobao.

He drove away from Building Two. Following the main road of Fishing Platform, he headed towards the rockery area.

While driving, he spotted the figure of Qiu Zhenhua, the head chef of Building Six. This head chef, with an air of scholarly elegance and wearing gold-rimmed glasses, was carrying several muddy sugarcanes, striding along like a warrior returning from target practice, his shadow elongated by the setting sun.

Lin Xu stopped the car, rolled down the window, and greeted Qiu Zhenhua, "Chef Qiu, what's going on here?"

"Eh? Chef Lin, what are you doing driving over here? Are you planning to go to Building Fifteen to snatch some sugarcanes? Don't bother; the other head chefs have already grabbed them all. I had to use all my powers of persuasion to get Old Dai from Building Eighteen to spare a few..."

Lin Xu: ??????

Are you guys playing 'Confiscate the Landlords' Wealth and Distribute it to the Peasants' here? If you've taken them all, what about the sugarcane and pear soup for my Shen Baobao?

Seeing the sugarcanes on Qiu Zhenhua's shoulder, Lin Xu suddenly had an idea...

Chapter 266: Are you hungry? Then I'll make you barbecue! Guessing the competition questions!

Since all the sugarcane at Building Number Fifteen has been harvested, Chef Song must be fuming right now. There's no point in going there; I don't want him to see me and be reminded of Senior Brother's actions.

With that thought, Lin Xu turned his attention to the sugarcane Qiu Zhenhua was shouldering. There's an old saying: "When you meet, you split it half." Since Chef Qiu's sugarcane was shared by Chef Dai, wouldn't it be reasonable for me to get one or two canes from him? But how should I bring this up?

Lin Xu pondered for a moment, then decided to use his Senior Brother as an excuse. "My Senior Brother asked me to go to Building Number Fifteen to borrow two more sugarcane stems from Chef Song. He needs them urgently. What are we going to do now that there's no sugarcane left..."

Upon hearing this, Qiu Zhenhua immediately handed over two stems. "If your Senior Brother needs them, then take these. I've already reported it to the Dining Department. They'll deliver some green sugarcane specifically for everyone to practice with in the next day or two."

Tsk, that's the Fishing Platform for you. So extravagant and generous. I wonder if Chef Song will feel even worse when he hears about this. After all, if everyone had just waited one more day, the sugarcane he planted could have been saved. Sigh! It's all Senior Brother's fault.

Lin Xu sighed inwardly, then got out of the car and took the sugarcane Qiu Zhenhua handed him.

Well, since a fresh supply was coming soon, he didn't stand on ceremony. He took the sugarcane, broke off the less flavorful top half, and casually tossed it into a roadside trash can. Then, he picked a banana leaf from a nearby flowerbed, laid it in the trunk, and placed the two muddy sugarcane stems inside. After closing the car door, he said goodbye to Qiu Zhenhua, turned the car around, and drove towards the main entrance.

Once the car had left the Fishing Platform's gates, Lin Xu thought, Since I used Senior Brother's name to get the sugarcane, it would look like I was lying if Chef Qiu mentions it to him. So, he called his Senior Brother via the car's Bluetooth system and recounted the entire situation.

Who would have thought Xie Baomin would respond, "That doesn't sound like my style."

Your style? Lin Xu thought.

"What is your style then, Senior Brother?"

"If it were me, I'd have snatched all the sugarcane from his hands. Then I'd tell him to go get ten more from Old Dai, and after he got them, he'd have to give me three."

Lin Xu: "..."

Senior Brother, please, try to be a decent human being!

After hanging up, just as he was about to listen to some music, Shen Baobao's call came through. "I'm at the entrance to your residential complex. When do you get off work?"

"I'm almost at Yingchun Street. I'll make you some sweet soup when I get home; it's good for cooling down and reducing internal heat."

Lin Xu had thought Shen Baobao would say again how much she loved sweet soup, but instead, the girl muttered quietly, "Is it just sweet soup? My tummy's a little hungry right now..."

A little hungry?

"Then I'll make you something to eat."

Although I don't have all the ingredients at home, cooking a meal shouldn't be a problem. But what should I make?

As he was contemplating, a sudden rustle came from the back seat. Looking through the rearview mirror, he saw that Dundun, the little rascal, had spotted a cardboard box on the rear seat and was now pawing at it, trying to squeeze inside.

Mmm, cats really can't resist cardboard boxes. But this particular box wasn't for playing today because it was filled with chili powder. If the cat sniffed it, it could easily start choking.

Wait... chili powder?

Thinking of the chili powder Chef Dai had lost to Senior Brother, Lin Xu suddenly knew what to make. Senior Brother said this chili powder is especially good for dipping grilled meat. So why wait? Grilling some meat is the perfect idea!

He said to Shen Baobao on the other end of the phone, "Senior Brother gave me some chili powder that's super suitable as a dipping sauce. I'll make you some Northeastern barbecue later; it's pretty easy to do."

Shen Jiayue immediately agreed, "Yeah, yeah! I love barbecue!"

You really are your father's daughter, getting so excited just at the mention of meat, Lin Xu thought.

「Upon arriving at Yingchun Street」

As Lin Xu turned into the residential complex, he saw a familiar BMW X1 parked in a spot near the entrance. Shen Baobao, wearing a Minion T-shirt and black wide-leg pants, was standing by the gate, playing with her phone.

When she saw his car pull in, she hurried over. "Barbecue, barbecue! My barbecue!"

After parking the car inside the complex, Lin Xu handed the crispy Fish Scales he had brought to Shen Baobao. "Preparing the barbecue will take some time for slicing and marinating, so have this to tide you over. I'll take Dundun upstairs and then go buy the meat."

"What's this?"

"Fish Scales!"

"Can this be eaten... MMM, it's so tasty!"

Although surprised at the mention of Fish Scales, Shen Baobao immediately opened the packaging and tried some. Mmm, anything Xu Bao gives me is definitely delicious!

Shen Jiayue munched on the Fish Scales, carrying the box of chili powder in her other hand. Lin Xu, meanwhile, carried Dundun, held two jars of garlic sauce he had made that morning, and tucked the sugarcane he had scammed from Qiu Zhenhua under his arm, as they took the elevator upstairs.

Once upstairs, he first turned on the air conditioning to disperse the heat in the apartment, then placed everything in the kitchen. The two of them then headed downstairs together to shop for groceries.

"Wow, these Fish Scales are so delicious! They're crispy and aromatic, especially the chili powder sprinkled on top—it's not too spicy but super fragrant. The more I chew, the tastier it gets!"

Being with Lin Xu always made Shen Baobao very happy, and with the delicious crispy Fish Scales, her happiness doubled.

Exiting the residential complex, they bumped into Geng Lele, who was skipping class to hang out with Dou Wenjing.

"Lele, you skipped class again!"

Chapter 267: Are you hungry? Then I'll make you barbecue! Guessing the competition questions!

"Why are you tarnishing someone's reputation out of thin air? I do have a leave slip."

Shen Jiayue shared the crispy Fish Scales she was holding with the girl.

"Try this, a snack made from Fish Scales. It's super crispy and delicious."

Geng Lele, half-doubtful, pinched two pieces and popped them into her mouth. Her eyes instantly widened in surprise.

"Wow, it really is tasty!"

"Wait till later, there's even tastier stuff coming. Xu is going to make me some barbecue. Do you want to try some?"

"Yes, yes! I was just thinking about finding something to eat."

By this time, Dou Wenjing had also finished work.

The three chattered away, and Lin Xu had to go to the supermarket by himself to buy meat.

"Boss Lin, what would you like today?"

Old Mr. Yu saw Lin Xu and couldn't help but praise the Winter Melon candy he made.

"That candy is really tasty. Can you make some more for me when I finish this batch?"

"No problem, but eat less of it. The sugar content is so high, too much could make your blood sugar unstable."

After saying that, Lin Xu headed to the chilled section.

He began selecting ingredients for the barbecue.

Some pork belly, a bit of slightly fatty beef, a large box of chicken wing mid-sections, and a piece of lamb leg meat that was half fat, half lean.

While picking, he saw a fresh Beef Tongue in the chiller and quickly had it packed and weighed.

This is great stuff. Perfect for barbecuing.

After buying all this meat, Lin Xu also picked up a few tender round lettuces.

Lettuce is essential for barbecue; not only is it refreshingly crisp and cuts through the grease, but it also effectively helps prevent internal heat. It's the perfect partner for barbecue.

After purchasing the barbecue ingredients, he saw water chestnuts in the fresh produce area and bought a few.

Water chestnuts, also known as Horse Hoof, can be cooked with sugarcane to make a sweet soup.

With the ingredients packed, Lin Xu headed to the home appliance section and bought a large electric grill.

Making barbecue at home with an induction cooker and a flat pan would do, but that's not professional. The meat might end up burnt or undercooked, and it isn't as convenient as using an electric grill.

After paying at the checkout, Lin Xu said goodbye to Old Mr. Yu and left the supermarket, carrying his purchases.

When he entered the supermarket, he remembered that only Shen Baobao, Geng Lele, and Dou Wenjing were outside, eating crispy Fish Scales and chatting.

But now, coming out, he found Wei Qian and Guo Xinghai had joined them.

Huh? Wasn't Guo Xinghai supposed to be organizing the Cantonese Cuisine Museum? He's back already?

Seeing Lin Xu laden with bags, the two came over to help.

Wei Qian took the electric grill and said, "I was busy in the back kitchen when Xinghai mentioned he was in Beijing and wanted to hang out with you. So, I found a coworker I don't get along with and swapped shifts. I even promised him all my days off next month."

Lin Xu: ????

You're at a loss, aren't you? But then he thought about his plan to poach Wei Qian next month. What loss would that be! Hmm, to prevent his brother from losing out, he'd have to poach him regardless.

He looked at Guo Xinghai and asked, "When did you arrive?"

"Got here at two in the afternoon. I hung out at Building 10 all afternoon and witnessed Chef Song's sugarcane supply go from plentiful to non-existent."

The group arrived at Lin Xu's house. The girls continued to play with Dundun, while Lin Xu, Wei Qian, and Guo Xinghai went to the kitchen to get busy.

The preparation for the barbecue was quite straightforward: just wash, slice, and marinate.

With all three participants from the Fishing Platform present, it was a good opportunity to discuss the competition.

Guo Xinghai clearly had done a lot of preparation.

He skillfully peeled the thick coating off the Beef Tongue as he spoke, "Our opponents this time are all strong, especially the China World Hotel, which is also known as the second State Guesthouse. Their Chinese restaurant is the famous Xia Palace, and its culinary skills rival those of the Fishing Platform."

The second State Guesthouse? That sounds formidable indeed.

"Additionally, Yanjing Hotel, St. Regis Hotel, Capital Hotel, and Great Wall Hotel—all venerable establishments catering to foreign guests—possess significant strengths and profound legacies. They all hope to make a big comeback through this competition and re-enter the public eye."

While cutting pork belly, Wei Qian muttered, "Sounds like the Six Factions besieging Guangming Peak..."

After cutting the meat, he didn't immediately marinate it. Instead, he took out the dipping sauce to taste it, intending to adjust the marinade's seasoning based on the sauce's saltiness.

Tasting the dipping sauce, Wei Qian immediately exclaimed, "Lin Xu, did you make this sauce? The flavor is amazing!"

Hearing this, Guo Xinghai also came over to taste it.

"Hmm, it really is good. It tastes a bit like the dry dip used in Sichuan-Chongqing spicy beef butter hotpot. But compared to that, this sauce's spiciness is much milder. Lin Xu, when did you learn this skill?"

Lin Xu replied, "I don't know how to make this. This is from Chef Dai at Building 18. He lost a bet to my senior brother and sent over the prepared chili powder."

"So it's Chef Dai's work, I see now. Chef Dai is exceptional at making Sichuan cuisine. A few years ago in the competition, my third uncle nearly lost to him."

The pork belly for the barbecue doesn't require much marinating. Just add some Light Soy Sauce, oyster sauce, Cooking Wine, and some Scallion and Ginger. Mix everything well, cover with plastic wrap, and place it in the fridge.

After marinating for ten to twenty minutes, it would be ready for the grill.

After setting the meat to marinate, Wei Qian began washing the lettuce.

Lin Xu had originally planned to peel the sugarcane and boil it with the water chestnuts to make a sweet soup. However, Guo Xinghai, who was more skilled at making them, took over the task.

"Next time, you can also buy some reed root. Add it with sugarcane, water chestnuts (Horse Hoof), lotus seeds, and such to a stew pot, and double-boil it for an hour. The sweet soup made that way will taste even better."

Chapter 268: Hungry? Let me make you some barbecue! Betting on contest questions!

When it came to making sweet soups, Guo Xinghai considered himself quite an authority. Before long, the meat was marinated.

He cleaned the electric grill and placed it on the coffee table in the living room, surrounded it with the marinated meat and washed lettuce leaves, and set down a bowl of sliced garlic. Now, they were ready to enjoy some barbecue.

He placed the marinated pork belly on the grill and turned the heat to high. Soon, these thinly sliced pieces of pork belly began to sizzle and release oil, the rich aroma of the meat wafting through the air, making the people around him practically drool.

When the meat turned golden brown, he flipped it over and patiently waited some more.

Once both sides were nicely browned and the slices slightly curled, Lin Xu said, "It's ready to eat."

"Woohoo! Finally, we can eat! It smells so good, I'm practically drooling."

"Me too. My mouth has been watering non-stop."

Shen Jiayue and Geng Lele picked up a piece of lettuce with their hands, deftly grabbed a slice of the golden brown pork belly with chopsticks, dipped it in the sauce, placed it on the lettuce, and added some garlic slices.

When eating Northeastern barbecue, raw garlic slices are an essential accompaniment. They not only whet the appetite and cut through the grease but also helped prevent stomach issues.

They wrapped the meat and garlic in a lettuce leaf, brought it to their mouths, and took a bite. The still-hot meat and the crisp, fresh lettuce perfectly met in their mouths. The pungency of the garlic, the spicy flavor of the sauce, the fresh crunch of the lettuce, and the rich taste of the meat all mingled together wonderfully.

"Wow! So delicious!"

"Yummy, yummy, I need to add barbecue to my must-eat list from now on."

"Mmm, this meat is really good; the Boss's skills are excellent."

Geng Lele and Shen Baobao were loudly praising how tasty it was, while Dou Wenjing complimented Lin Xu's skills.

Guo Xinghai, using a lettuce leaf to pick up a piece of meat, took a bite. "Honestly, I'd hardly ever eaten this way before. I always thought it was a bit rough, but trying it now, it feels quite fun."

Wei Qian wrapped some meat in lettuce, stuffed it into his mouth, and said while chewing, "Eating like this is really satisfying, especially with a good dipping sauce. Boss, this dipping sauce of yours is just perfect. It enhances the flavor without overpowering the meat and is much better than what they have at barbecue restaurants."

Barbecue restaurants sometimes use leftover ingredients, so they have to rely on strong-tasting marinades. But when you make it yourself, you don't have to worry about that. A light marination is enough to fully savor the perfect flavors of the meat.

After finishing the pork belly, Lin Xu, with his chopsticks, spread the marinated beef on the grill. Meanwhile, Wei Qian placed the chicken wings one by one on the edge of the grill. These items cooked slowly, so they were placed on the edge of the grill to heat gradually. This method ensured the chicken wings would be crispy on the outside and tender on the inside.

Meat is quite filling. After eating for a while, everyone slowed down, and the conversation returned to Friday's competition.

"No idea what the topic will be this time. Mr. Lishan's last question was quite a handful," Wei Qian said after eating a piece of meat and taking a sip of chilled beer.

Guo Xinghai nodded. "Right, the rules of the competition and the content are really important. It's a pity we don't know the head judge or his preferences; it's hard to prepare, as you can't even guess the topic effectively."

Cooking competitions are like exams; success often hinges on correctly guessing the judges' preferences, particularly the head judge's. This allows contestants to tailor their dishes strategically. For instance, if the head judge is a Sichuan-Chongqing native who loves spicy food, you can't prepare a light Cantonese stir-fry. Instead, you'd need to make heavily spicy and numbing dishes to score high points.

While the three were chatting, Geng Lele said, "You guys could simulate a competition, just like how we do mock exams. Go through various unusual but skill-showcasing challenges, and you're bound to hit on something relevant."

After speaking, she pointed at the dipping sauces on the table. "Take these dipping sauces, for example. It's very likely that in the competition, each contestant will be given a dish of sauce and asked to identify the ingredients. This would increase the difficulty while also showcasing the contestants' skills."

No sooner had she finished speaking than Guo Xinghai said, "That's a good suggestion. We could give it a try."

He then dipped the tip of his chopstick into the dipping sauce and began to taste it seriously. "I won't mention the roasted sesame, since that's visible. Soybean powder, dried chili—should be thread pepper, not very spicy but fragrant—Sichuan peppercorns, Sichuan peppercorns, star anise, bay leaves, cinnamon, Angelica dahurica, tsao-ko, cumin, fennel..."

He listed out the spices he tasted continuously, causing Lin Xu to look on in amazement.

Damn! What kind of taste buds are these, to distinguish so many spices and seasonings?

After trying it again, Wei Qian also made some additions. "Seems like there's a hint of cloves. It's not strong, probably just one clove in the whole batch. And there's pepper, granulated sugar, salt... Right, there must have been dried onion, the kind that's fried until fragrant and dry, because I can still taste a hint of onion."

Lin Xu was speechless.

I'm the one with the cheat system, so why do these two guys seem like they're using cheats too? Their palates are incredible! Compared to them, my tongue is only fit to be sliced, marinated, and cooked on the grill as an ingredient.

"Lin Xu, how did we do?"

"Did we miss anything?"

Wei Qian took a sip of chilled beer, joining Guo Xinghai in looking at Lin Xu.

Lin Xu gave a wry smile. "I'm not good at these things; my fundamentals are really poor, and I'm still pretty unfamiliar with seasonings."

If he had to guess what was in the dipping sauce, he could only detect spices with strong flavors like chili and Sichuan peppercorns. Beyond that, he was completely in the dark.

"You're not joking, Lin Xu? Really can't do it?" Guo Xinghai looked astonished. He couldn't believe that someone so skilled in cooking had such poor knowledge of seasonings.

Wei Qian was also in disbelief.

"It's true," Lin Xu explained with a bitter smile. Though he didn't want to admit it, it was indeed the truth. "I studied finance before opening the restaurant, so my knowledge of seasonings is quite superficial."

"Then what would he do if there really was such a segment during the competition?" Guo Xinghai and Wei Qian began to worry.

They were right. If the competition really included such a challenge, Lin Xu would be completely lost. And it was a bit late for cramming now. Memorizing the flavors of all those seasonings in just a few days was impossible. What could be done?

Just as they were worrying, Lin Xu suddenly noticed an unused card in his system inventory. The heavy feeling in his chest finally lifted...

Chapter 269: Garlic Vermicelli Prawns! Parents Are Here! New Main Quest!

「Two days later.」

An announcement was issued by the restaurant in Building No. 2 of the Fishing Platform:

"Due to Master Lin needing to represent the Fishing Platform in a culinary competition, we will temporarily not be accepting dish reservations. We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause."

Although the "Family" and Braised Pork Belly dishes that Lin Xu made could sell twenty or so servings each day, for the sake of the competition and the honor of the Fishing Platform, Xie Baomin still reluctantly gave Lin Xu time off to rest at home. The competition was imminent, and it was time to rest and build up strength, hoping to clinch the championship in one fell swoop. All the folks at the Fishing Platform were looking forward to it.

「At the front desk.」

Looking at today's meal reservation records, Shu Yun spoke to Xie Baomin, somewhat speechless, "Ever since Boss Lin stopped coming to work, our orders have also decreased a bit."

"It's fine if they're less; the most important thing is to win the championship. The Fishing Platform hasn't vied for any honors for years, which inevitably gives some people the wrong impression that it's easy to bully us. The mission for my junior this time is to give them a good wake-up call."

Unfortunately, the competition had an age limit. Otherwise, I, Old Xie, would definitely let them know what a dangerous place the Fishing Platform is.

Having said that, Xie Baomin went outside. He drove a shuttle bus leisurely around to the main road within the Fishing Platform. After reaching the rockery area, he turned toward Building No. 15.

As soon as he entered, he saw Song Dahai holding a hoe, turning over the soil where sugarcane used to be planted.

"Old Song, you're not afraid of heatstroke working in this hot weather? Why don't you take a break? Look at all that sweat on your head."

Seeing Xie Baomin, Song Dahai immediately fumed, "Get lost, get lost, get lost! If it weren't for you starting it, I could've pressed dozens of pounds of brown sugar from the sugarcane I planted this year... How the hell did I end up knowing a character like you?"

That day, abiding by his principle of not being taken advantage of, he had stayed in Building No. 2 and eaten a bowl of rice. After eating, he leisurely headed towards Building No. 15. The walk took half an hour, during which Old Dai's gang of criminals had also been up to no good in his sugarcane field. By the time he returned, only about twenty canes were left, all of them the poor ones Old Dai and his gang had dismissed as worthless. That made Song Dahai furious.

What angered him even more was that the Dining Department bought a small truckload of green sugarcane the next day. Old Dai, that bastard, even brought over the sugarcane they hadn't used, claiming it wasn't as good as what the Dining Department had procured. This enraged Song Dahai so much that he chased him for a good distance with a shovel.

Now, seeing the instigator approach, Song Dahai really wanted to lift the hoe in his hand and give the guy a whack.

"Why are you still angry with me? I only took two stalks, the least of all the head chefs. It's Old Dai's fault, acting like a bandit."

Xie Baomin took two steps forward, stopping just outside the hoe's striking range.

"What are you planning to plant now, Old Song? You can't plant sugarcane this season, can you?"

Song Dahai wiped off his sweat and continued working. "I'm going to plant some baby bok choy. Can't let the ground lie fallow; otherwise, it starts growing weeds."

Baby bok choy? Xie Baomin suddenly perked up. "Once they sprout, send me some photos from time to time. I want to see how well they grow. If it's easy, I might plant some at Building No. 2."

Song Dahai looked up at him. "Why do I get the feeling you're eyeing my veggies, you dog? What brings you here today?"

Xie Baomin put away his smile and said seriously, "Remember to wear your State Banquet uniform and be at Building No. 1's banquet hall on Friday morning to support my junior. All of us from the Fishing Platform's Eighteen Arhats will be there. We'll have the upper hand, whether it's in cooking skills or a brawl."

Song Dahai was speechless. A perfectly normal competition, why does it sound like a gang fight coming from your mouth?

But he really had to be there that day. It was a competition concerning the reputation of the Fishing Platform, and they couldn't let their competitors look down on them.

「Front desk of Building No. 2.」

Shu Yun looked at the empty front desk and missed the chubby little cutie.

It's been several days since I've seen my dear Dundun! I wonder what that little guy is doing at home. Is he also wrapped up in his little blanket, fast asleep like he did at the Fishing Platform?

However, what she didn't realize was that Dundun was causing trouble at home at that very moment.

Although his senior brother had told him to rest at home, Lin Xu couldn't sit still. He set up his action camera and filmed a video on how to make garlic sauce. After filming, he felt the content wasn't substantial enough, and that minced garlic alone seemed insufficient to whet his fans' appetites. To enhance the video's impact, he went downstairs to Uncle Yu's supermarket to buy some large shrimp and glass noodles, intending to make garlic sauce glass noodles with butterflied shrimp.

But after he bought the shrimp, Dundun, who had been playing with a little toy mouse, suddenly pounced. Full of curiosity about the live shrimp in the water, the cat circled them for a while, observing attentively.

While Lin Xu was setting up filming equipment in the kitchen, the little rascal reached out a paw and fished a shrimp out of the basin. Watching the large shrimp hop around on the floor seemed to really get it excited. By the time Lin Xu came out of the kitchen, half the shrimp from the basin were lying on

the floor outside. Water was everywhere, Dundun's two paws were completely soaked, and plum blossom-shaped paw prints covered the living room floor.

"You little terror..." Lin Xu sighed.

Lin Xu picked up the shrimp from the floor and put them back into the basin, wiped Dundun's front paws with a paper towel, cleaned up the water on the floor, and then carried the shrimp back to the kitchen to continue filming.

"I'm not even married yet, and I'm already experiencing the chaos of having a mischievous child at home," he muttered to himself. "It's true what they say: once you have a cat, you don't want kids anymore..."

He soaked the glass noodles in water and cleaned the large shrimp to start cooking.

Garlic sauce glass noodles with butterflied shrimp is a relatively simple dish. The only challenge might be butterflying the shrimp, but with the right technique, this step isn't too difficult.

First, use scissors to cut off all the large shrimp's antennae. This makes the shrimp look more appealing and easier to eat. After trimming, wash the shrimp again to prevent any tiny bits of antennae from mixing with the meat, which could affect the texture.

Then, begin to prepare the shrimp. Pick up a large shrimp and lay it on the chopping board. Use a knife to slit the back of the shrimp, being careful not to cut through completely. After cutting, pull out the shrimp's vein. Then, lay the shrimp with its back facing up and tap it gently with the flat of the knife to make the back open up along the slit, allowing it to lie flat.

Steaming the shrimp this way easily infuses the meat with flavor, making it even more delicious.

Garlic sauce glass noodles with butterflied shrimp is a dish that easily impresses. There are various ways to butterfly shrimp, but the method Lin Xu used today was quite simple; almost anyone could do it.

After processing all the large shrimp, the glass noodles soaking in the basin were almost soft. He took them out, let them drain a bit, and then spread them evenly on a plate. Next, he arranged the large shrimp on the glass noodles with their heads pointing outward, forming a full circle. With a few shrimp left over, Lin Xu placed them in a smaller dish.

Well, when the old man eats shrimp, you can't just let the kid watch. These few shrimp in the small dish are Dundun's treat.

After plating, Lin Xu took the prepared garlic sauce and poured it evenly over the backs of the shrimp on the large plate. He left Dundun's small dish plain. Cats shouldn't eat food with seasonings.

He boiled some water. Once it boiled, he placed both the plate and the small dish into the steamer.

「Five minutes later.」

He turned off the heat and removed them from the steamer. Finally, he heated a bit of oil and poured it over the garlic sauce on the shrimp.

Done!

This dish was super simple to make, but its flavor was fresh and delicious. It also paired well with rice, making it one of Lin Xu's favorite dishes.

He brought the food to the dining table. He set up the action camera, then peeled the shrimp for Dundun and placed the meat in its small dish.

Time to eat!

Lin Xu picked up his bowl of rice and placed a large shrimp on top. The shrimp was perfectly steamed, and its rich, savory aroma, enhanced by the scent of garlic sauce, was incredibly appetizing and made one eager to eat. He tasted a piece of the shrimp. A fresh, sweet flavor immediately filled his mouth. The taste of the minced garlic didn't overpower the shrimp's natural sweetness; on the contrary, it

made the umami flavor even richer, and the shrimp's freshness, in turn, highlighted the fragrance of the garlic sauce.

After eating the meat from the butterflied shrimp, he scooped up a mouthful of perfectly steamed rice.

Ah, this is truly satisfying!

While Lin Xu ate his rice and devoured the shrimp, Dundun, beside him, was also enjoying its peeled shrimp. The delicious morsels made the little fellow's eyes narrow slightly, its tail gently swaying—a picture of contentment.

Once the video was shot, Lin Xu put away the action camera and continued eating his rice. After eating a few large shrimp, he picked up some glass noodles, soaked in savory juice, and put them in his mouth. The rich fragrance gave these glass noodles a delicious shrimp flavor. Eaten with rice, that sense of satisfaction was just too great!

After finishing his meal, he rested for a while, then edited the video on his computer, adding a message at the end:

"This Friday, I will be participating in a culinary competition for foreign-related hotels jointly sponsored by Yanjing Travel Channel, the Travel Association, China Travel Service Group, and National Travel Service Group. Those who wish to watch the event live can participate in the 'post-to-win-tickets' activity under the Lin Ji's Food topic. There are a total of fifty spots available—first come, first served, so hurry up!"

This giveaway was Zeng Xiaoqi's idea. She figured that since there were enough tickets, why not use them to drum up fan enthusiasm? Having fans at the event would generate buzz for the Lin Ji topic, and Lin Xu would gain more popularity—a triple win!

As for Zeng Xiaoqi herself, the greater Lin Xu's fame grew, the higher the chance of success for the food column she was planning. It was a win-win situation.

After finishing and uploading the video, he checked the time, changed his clothes, and, carrying Dundun, went downstairs and drove straight to Jingxi West Station.

This morning, Lin Hongqi and Chen Meijuan had boarded a high-speed train to Beijing. The couple had originally planned to wait until Lin Xu bought a house before discussing the engagement with his fiancée's family, but the young woman's side was so eager, they practically couldn't wait to get engaged. So, Lin Hongqi and Chen Meijuan hastily packed and came to Beijing for their son's engagement, also taking the opportunity to watch him compete at the Fishing Platform. They had watched the live stream of his last competition at home. Although Lin Xu had plenty of screen time, the couple couldn't get enough and had rewatched the broadcast several times. Now that they could be there in person, they were determined to enjoy it to the fullest.

Upon arriving at West Station, Lin Xu found a parking spot, parked the car, and then carried Dundun to the arrivals gate to wait quietly. People bustled all around. Dundun lay on Lin Xu's shoulder, looking left and right, eyes full of curiosity and wonder.

「After about fifteen minutes.」

Lin Hongqi and Chen Meijuan appeared at the exit. Lin Xu hurried to meet them.

His parents had finally arrived. The house he rented in Beijing finally started to feel like home. At this moment, Lin Xu felt all his efforts were truly worthwhile.

"Son, have you been waiting long?" Chen Meijuan approached, looking proudly at her son. "A few days ago, I noticed your restaurant's topic was trending high. How come it's dropped these past few days?"

She didn't know how to support her son's career, only feeling it was a pity the topic wasn't continuing to rise.

Lin Xu smiled and said, "Don't worry, Mom. One day, I'll be at the top of the trending searches."

These words were meant to comfort his mother. Who knew that the moment he finished speaking, he heard a system notification in his mind:

"Host aspires to top the trending searches, triggering the mainline task [Fame and Glory]: Help the Lin Ji's Food topic reach number one on the trending search list within three months. Upon completion,

rewards include: one Perfect Level Lost Culinary Dish lottery draw, one Perfect Level Dry Pot Cuisine lottery draw, one Perfect Level Raw Pickled Cuisine lottery draw, three Perfect Level Cooking Learning Cards, and one thirty-minute special prop Experience Card!"

Chapter 270: Wherever Mom and Dad Are, That's Home! Helping Mom Pays Off!

First place on the Yanjing Region's hot search list? Does it think that highly of me? Last time, breaking into the top ten was already quite difficult. The day after making it to the top ten, I was overtaken again. Now I'm firmly in thirteenth place on the Yanjing Region's overall hot search list, several million popularity points behind first place. Catching up will be much harder than it was to squeeze into the top ten last time. The system really knows how to torment people, doesn't it? It's only been a few days of rest, and here comes a task like this. If I'd known, I wouldn't have brought up the hot search with Mom. Luckily, this task has a three-month timeframe, so there's no rush to complete it.

"Why did you bring Dundun? With so many people here, what if he gets scared?"

Chen Meijuan took two steps forward and reached out to Dundun. The little fellow immediately straightened up, frantically stretching his front paws toward her. Clearly, he wanted Grandma to hold him.

Standing nearby, Lin Hongqi remarked in surprise, "Hey, this cat is just like a little kid!"

Lin Xu had also come back to his senses by now. He hurriedly handed Dundun over while taking the suitcase from his mom's hand. This isn't the place to chat, he thought, leading his parents toward the parking lot.

On their way to the parking lot, Lin Xu and his dad, Lin Hongqi, discussed recent events. Lin Xu also mentioned investing in a pan-fried bun shop. Lin Hongqi listened intently, occasionally asking a few business-related questions. Before founding the Longqi Mountain Scenic Area, he had been a minor official in the Commerce Bureau, so he had some understanding of business. If he hadn't, he wouldn't have resigned to start a scenic area. Listening to his son's explanations, he felt that investing in the pan-fried bun shop was a good idea. An investment of tens of thousands of yuan wasn't much to lose. However, the potential earnings were boundless, as such small shops are easy to manage, whether directly operated or franchised.

Lin Xu hadn't thought that far ahead; he just wanted to complete the task and, incidentally, help out Wang Ziqiang, since his skills in making pan-fried buns were learned from him.

The father and son walked and chatted. Chen Meijuan walked behind, holding Dundun. Looking at Lin Xu, who was now a few centimeters taller than Lin Hongqi, she suddenly felt a surge of emotion. My son has finally grown up. That little boy from the past, that somewhat shy little guy... In the blink of an eye, he's become an adult running a restaurant in Beijing.

When they arrived at the car, Lin Hongqi looked at the robust lines of the Mercedes G63, his eyes full of doubt. "Is this your car?" he asked. Did we come to the wrong place? This car must cost several million. Is it really his son's?

"Yueyue's dad was worried people might look down on me working at the Fishing Platform, so he specifically loaned it to me. I'll return it once I stop working there."

Although driving my father-in-law's car is thrilling, especially the strong sense of acceleration, the fuel consumption is too high, Lin Xu thought. Even though I'm not short on money now, I still feel that filling it up with 98-octane fuel would break the bank. In the future, I'll have to consider the economic cost when buying a car. After all, I haven't bought a house or anything yet. I need to save money wherever possible.

After Chen Meijuan's last visit, Lin Hongqi already knew that his son's in-laws were very pleased with him and frequently visited the restaurant. But he never imagined that these in-laws, whom he had never met, would be so good to his son. It's as if he were their own son, isn't it?

"Get in the car. I'll put your luggage in the trunk."

Lin Xu placed his mom's suitcase in the trunk, then also stored his dad's carry-on bag and both of their backpacks. Once everything was stowed, the family got into the car. Chen Meijuan sat in the back seat, holding Dundun. Lin Hongqi sat in the passenger seat, and Lin Xu drove out of the parking lot. He first turned onto the West Third Ring Road, then headed straight for Yingchun Street on the North Fourth Ring Road.

"You haven't eaten yet, have you?" Lin Xu asked. "We have beef and other things prepared at home. I'll cook something for you when we get there. Yueyue gets off work at 4:30 PM; she'll come over to see you both then."

Upon hearing this, Lin Hongqi immediately turned to Chen Meijuan and asked, "Should we withdraw some cash? When we meet our daughter-in-law for the first time, we should at least give her a red envelope. Even though this is Beijing, we can't abandon our hometown's customs."

In the Central Plains, it's customary for parents-in-law to give a red envelope when they meet their daughter-in-law for the first time. Now that their daughter-in-law was coming over after work, it was only appropriate to give her one.

"The red envelope is ready," Chen Meijuan said. "Just make sure you don't drink too much this time in Beijing. I'll take care of everything else."

After her response, she continued playing with Dundun. Meanwhile, Lin Xu kept driving. Let Dad give Yueyue the red envelope if he wants to, he thought. After all, my father-in-law gave me one too. Though my father-in-law didn't give cash, but rather a stack of property deeds for shops.

When they arrived at Yingchun Street, Lin Xu pointed to Lin Ji's Food, which was under renovation. "This is the new restaurant," he said. "It will probably take some more time before it's fully renovated."

Lin Hongqi took a look. My son is becoming more and more impressive, he thought. The small diner he started only a month ago has already expanded into a three-story restaurant. In the future, as it develops, the business will probably reach even greater heights, won't it?

The car turned into the residential complex and stopped in a parking spot downstairs. Lin Xu got out, and together with Lin Hongqi, they carried the luggage from the trunk and took the elevator upstairs. The air conditioning in the apartment hadn't been turned off, so the cool air inside was refreshing as they entered. After Chen Meijuan came in with Dundun, she put her handbag in her room, changed into comfortable clothes, and immediately began tidying up the apartment. My daughter-in-law will be here this afternoon; the apartment can't be messy!

While she was busy, Lin Hongqi picked up a cat toy from the coffee table, trying to bond with the little fellow. He was just like those grandfathers meeting their grandsons for the first time.