

## Culinary 581

Chapter 581: Getting the Sauce Dish! The Indistinguishable Real and Fake Jiang Tuan! \_2

To swim in these waters, a debt is eventually owed!

Dai Jianli glanced at the chef beside him and asked,

"Can we start now?"

"Yes, we can."

"Then let's get started. We'll go from stir-frying the ingredients to step-by-step production and explanation, striving to let Lin Xu learn it all in one go."

Although Lin Xu had come specifically for the dry dip, he couldn't help feeling a little apprehensive at the sight of the stir-frying machines and grinding machines in the room.

If he managed to learn this time, would he also need to buy a stir-fry machine and a grinding machine?

The head chef and two assistants started up the stir-fry machine, turned on the heating function, and poured three bags of salt into it before adding peanuts and soybeans. As the machine spun, the stir-frying began.

Lin Xu had always thought that soybean powder was used in the dry dip mix; only now did he realize that it was actually soybeans. It seemed they would be roasted until fragrant and then ground into powder.

One has to admit that this method of roasting ingredients with salt does indeed enhance their aroma. Especially when using well salt, large-grained sea salt, or Qinghai salt, the aroma of the salt is maximally released. How could the ingredients not be aromatic when stir-fried with such salts?

Stir-frying is a long process, but nobody in this fragrant, spice-filled room found it boring because Dai Jianli was unveiling the secret behind what made the dry dip delicious.

After stir-frying for a while, they adjusted the temperature to maintain a low heat, allowing the ingredients' flavors to slowly roast and emerge. Not long after adjusting the temperature, they began adding the prepared spices into the stir-fry pot.

After stir-frying for another ten minutes, once the spices had released their aroma, they gradually added various dried chilis from the workspace into the pot. First went the thick-skinned Lantern Peppers, followed by thread chilies, then bullet-head chilies, and finally Chili.

Before the chilies were added, the aroma wafting from the stir-fry pot was fragrant, even reminiscent of braising spices. But after the chilies were added, the smell gradually became pungent. Even with the exhaust hood set to maximum and the room's ventilation fans turned on, it was overwhelming.

The two experienced chefs responsible for the stir-frying, put on gas masks and also handed masks to Lin Xu and the others.

When the chilies were almost done, they broke open two monk fruits and tossed them into the mix.

If Lin Xu wasn't mistaken, these sweet ingredients were likely added to enhance the flavor.

As the cooking time lengthened, the chilies' pungency gradually transformed into a fragrant spiciness. The scent became less irritating to the nose, yet richer in aroma.

Dai Jianli said to Lin Xu, "To make a good dry dip, you must stir-fry out all the harshness from the ingredients. Only then will it be mild and not make you choke. Otherwise, you'd sneeze with every bite, and you wouldn't be able to enjoy your meal."

Lin Xu nodded, taking note of Chef Dai's instructions.

About half an hour later, all the ingredients on the workspace had gone into the pot.

Dai Jianli turned off the stir-fry pot's heating function but did not turn off the machine. Instead, he let the stirrer continue to rotate slowly in the pot. The advantage of this was that it effectively prevented

the ingredients from clumping together and scorching. It also allowed the various seasonings to meld, raising the quality of the dry dip and intensifying its aroma.

Witnessing this, Song Dahai completely gave up on the idea of mass-producing the dry dip.

"Damn, this is so complicated! I'll just come and pick it up in the future."

Lin Xu also hadn't expected the process to be this intricate. No wonder the Perfect Level method sold for three million points in the points mall—such a complex process was indeed worth the price.

As the temperature of the stir-fry pot gradually decreased, they poured out all the contents. First, they spread it out on the workspace to dry and cool, allowing ingredients like peanuts, White Sesame, and soybeans to become fragrantly crispy.

Looking at the spices laid out on the table, Lin Xu curiously asked, "Is it enough to just grind these ingredients into powdered seasoning, Chef Dai?"

Dai Jianli laughed and waved his hand. "We're far from done. Just wait, there's still a lot more to come."

As he spoke, two more assistants came in, each carrying a few bags. Dai Jianli placed a large tray on the workspace, and they immediately dumped the contents of the bags onto it.

Lin Xu saw there were dried minced scallions from a dehydrator, garlic crisped in an oven, crushed Aged Tangerine Peel, and various dried fruit bits. All were processed with either an oven or a dehydrator and were completely dry and moisture-free.

"The secret to a delicious dry dip lies here," Dai Jianli explained. "By adding dried scallions, garlic, Aged Tangerine Peel, and fruits, the spicy flavor of the dip becomes even more irresistible."

Once cooled, they poured the ingredients, along with the salt used for stir-frying, into a low-speed grinder and slowly ground them into a slightly granular powder.

During the grinding process, the rich aroma was so tempting it made one want to grab a steamed bun and dip it right in.

It was incredibly fragrant.

This stuff wouldn't just complement cooked meat; even raw meat dipped in it wouldn't taste bad at all.

Song Dahai scooped a little from the outlet with a disposable chopstick, licked the end, and exclaimed, "You rascal, you actually didn't hold back this time! It's exactly the same as the dry dip you made before... Master Lin, have you learned it? Do you need Chef Dai to go over all the ingredients and their proportions?"

There was no need to mention the ingredients; with the Eye of Discrimination, all nearly forty of them were clearly identified.

As for the proportions...

He thought for a moment, then looked at the outlet and silently mouthed something.

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"Use the Cooking Learning Card!"

Just as Lin Xu muttered that, the system's prompt sounded in his mind: "Learning target: Zhang Xiaojun. Current Skill: use and maintenance of the Constant Temperature Intelligent Stirring Pot. Do you want to learn?"

Lin Xu was completely baffled. Damn, can't business practices like this really be learned with a Skill Card? If that's the case, the only way to acquire it would be to exchange points for it. Three million points for a dipping sauce Technique... that kind of hurts.

As Lin Xu was thinking this, Dai Jianli took some dry dipping powder from the outlet and said, "Actually, this is still a semi-finished product. To improve the flavor, you can reduce the spiciness and enhance the fragrance by adding more soybean powder. It'll taste much better."

As he spoke, he turned on an adjacent stove, placed a stainless steel pot on it, and began to toast a small half-bowl of soybean powder. Once it was aromatic, he poured the previously ground dipping sauce ingredients into the pot. He continued to stir-fry until the dipping sauce's own fragrance fully developed, then poured the contents of the pot into a nearby tray.

As Dai Jianli poured it into the tray, Lin Xu used the Cooking Learning Card again.

The system prompt finally normalized: "Learning target: Dai Jianli. Current Skill: Dry Dip Dipping Sauce Technique. Do you want to learn?"

"Learn!" Lin Xu shouted excitedly in his mind, and a flash of gold swept through his thoughts.

"Consumed one Cooking Learning Card. Acquired Perfect Level Dry Dip Dipping Sauce: Home and Commercial Dual Methods. Congratulations, Host."

Woohoo! Dual methods? I've used the Cooking Learning Card so many times, but I never expected such a huge harvest! Even if the restaurant fails and closes down, I could make a comeback by selling seasonings. Hmm, Perfect Level dipping sauces... if I mass-produce and sell them online, won't they sell like crazy? But then again, Lin Ji's Food is doing so well right now, with professional managers handling it; it'd be pretty hard for it to suddenly go bankrupt. And even if Lin Ji's Food went under, Ziqiang Shengjian is still there to back me up. Even if Ziqiang Shengjian closed down, I could just go home and inherit the scenic area. Plus, I have a father-in-law worth billions and the Divine Artifact, Dundun... I have so many trump cards. There's no need to treat one dipping sauce recipe like a lifesaver.

While Lin Xu was feeling sentimental, Song Dahai suddenly handed him half a steamed bun. "You hungry too? Have a bite. And while you're at it, taste Old Dai's dipping sauce. See if it's exactly the same as before—don't let that rascal skimp on quality and try to fool us."

Lin Xu chuckled, took the bun, tore off a piece, dipped it into the freshly made sauce, and popped it into his mouth.

Mm, fragrant! The moment it entered his mouth, he could detect a rich fragrance. This aroma, combined with the spiciness and various other spices, transformed the otherwise plain white steamed bun, making it taste almost like savory meat. Holy crap! This dipping sauce is insanely good!

The bun wasn't large, and with such an outstanding dipping sauce, Lin Xu finished it in just a few bites.

Just as he was about to go find another steamed bun, Xie Baomin and Guo Weidong sauntered in.

"Old Dai," Xie Baomin began, "just watching might not be enough for my junior disciple to learn. Later, get him ten to twenty pounds of this dipping sauce to take back. Let him study it properly so he doesn't just half-learn it and embarrass the Fishing Platform."

Lin Xu was speechless. People say Chef Dai at least *\*steals\**, but you, sir, have gone straight to outright robbery! Truly worthy of being one of the Fishing Platform's villainous duo.

Seeing Song Dahai watching the unfolding drama with amusement, Lin Xu shot him a pointed look. Farming Hero, you'd better awaken and unleash your special powers soon, or those little green vegetables you've been growing won't be safe!

Now that he had acquired the Technique and achieved his goal, Lin Xu took advantage of everyone chatting to slip out.

He sniffed himself and caught the faint aroma of spices clinging to his clothes. It felt as if he'd been thoroughly marinated in them while watching the ingredients being stir-fried earlier.

Wandering to the seafood section, he saw two Jiangtuan fish swimming cheerfully in an aquarium. Qiu Zhenhua, whom he hadn't seen for a few days, was there, taking photos of these two Jiangtuan with his phone.

Curious, Lin Xu approached and asked, "Chef Qiu, isn't this type of fish common in grilled fish restaurants? Chef Song almost beat up Chef Dai over them just now..."

He had wanted to ask if Chef Qiu was really *\*that\** interested in photographing them, but on second thought, he decided to bring up Song Dahai. After all, Chef Dai had stolen someone else's fish—and had been caught red-handed on surveillance footage, no less.

Qiu Zhenhua said, "It seems Master Lin isn't very familiar with Jiangtuan. These are genuine Jiangtuan, not like those impostors you find in grilled fish restaurants."

Oh? Is there really a difference? Lin Xu wondered.

Qiu Zhenhua continued, "The so-called 'Jiangtuan' in grilled fish restaurants are often actually a fish called 'pincer fish'—scientifically, *Ictalurus punctatus*, or channel catfish. While they are a type of catfish, their taste and texture are quite different from true Jiangtuan. The real Jiangtuan is *Leiocassis longirostris*. It's hailed as the 'Fourth Delicacy of the Yangtze River.' Even farmed ones have a flavor that vastly surpasses the channel catfish found in those restaurants."

Is that so? Hearing this, Lin Xu grew even more eager to try it. Not only did he want to taste it, but he also felt an urge to ask Chef Song where he'd bought them. If they were from Old Huang, he'd reserve ten or so immediately. The Mid-Autumn Festival was just around the corner; it was the perfect time to treat his family to a fish feast.

While Qiu Zhenhua was still busy photographing the fish, Guo Weidong also arrived, clearly eyeing those two Jiangtuan as well.

Taking advantage of both head chefs being present, Lin Xu curiously asked, "What's the best way to cook these Jiangtuan?"

Guo Weidong laughed and replied, "Steamed, of course! Steamed Jiangtuan is one of the top ten famous Sichuan dishes, isn't it?"

Lin Xu had never tried such a high-end dish before. He asked with genuine interest, "Is it steamed with Scallion and Ginger and Steamed Fish Sauce?"

Guo Weidong shook his head. "It's much more complicated than that. After all, it's one of the top ten Sichuan dishes; how could it be simple? You need to steam it with exquisite ingredients like Sea Scallop, dried scallop, Jinhua Ham, and similar items. Only then can you create true Steamed Jiangtuan. Chef Dai will probably show off his skills later; you can watch and learn then."

Sea Scallop? Dried scallop? Jinhua Ham? Are they steaming fish or making Buddha Jumps Wall?

Lin Xu's curiosity was thoroughly piqued.

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Before long, everyone had come out of the room where they were preparing dipping sauces.

Xie Baomin asked with a smile, "Where are those two Jiangtuan? Take them out, and let old Dai show everyone his skill... Junior Brother, watch closely. The steaming Technique in Sichuan cuisine is completely different from that of Cantonese cuisine."

Cantonese cuisine values freshness and advocates for the natural flavors of the ingredients.

That's why the preparation of Steamed Sea Bass is so simple: steam it, pour away the broth, add Scallion and Ginger strips, drizzle with Steamed Fish Sauce, pour hot oil over it, and it's ready!

Whether it's a street stall, a night market, or a regular household, they all can make this dish tasty and appealing.

But Sichuan cuisine is different; in Sichuan cuisine, steamed dishes are major dishes.

Jiangtuan is rich and delicious and has been a tribute since ancient times; such rare ingredients naturally demand an array of exquisite accompaniments to highlight their status.

Dai Jianli said, "Right, Lin junior, pay close attention to the routines and Techniques of steamed major dishes. In case you need them later, consider it gathering some experience."

He was quite excited.

The two Jiangtuan "borrowed" from Building 15 were superior in both quality and size.

They were a notch above the cultured Jiangtuan that old Huang had managed to get, which was also why he had dared to "borrow" them this morning.

Since Brother Lin was here, he had to be treated to something good.

Song Dahai, the original owner of the Jiangtuan, looked helplessly at old Dai, "You dog, using my Jiangtuan to curry favor."

While he was complaining, Lin Xu asked curiously, "Chef Song, where did you buy this Jiangtuan? Is it still available?"

"I got these from a few friends who stumbled upon them while traveling near the Min River. They used an oxygenator all the way to Beijing. I had a hard time convincing them to give me a few, and this scoundrel stole half of them."

As Dai Jianli scooped the Jiangtuan out with a net, he said, "You are wrong, old Song. You can't hog all the good stuff to yourself. If I were like you, would any of you have dipping sauces to use?"

When the other head chefs heard this, none of them echoed his sentiment.

You dog, you've robbed and stolen so much from us and still put on a facade of selflessness. Your skin is almost as thick as Xie Baomin's.

After the Jiangtuan was scooped out, everyone went into the kitchen to watch Dai Jianli cook the Steamed Jiangtuan.

The kitchen was already prepared with the ingredients needed for Steamed Jiangtuan.

The Ham was already cooked, the Sea Scallops had been soaked till soft, and the Fish Belly was also ready.

Besides these exquisite ingredients, the kitchen was also equipped with premium mushrooms—small flower mushrooms, and dried bamboo shoot products—Yulan slices to enhance flavor and fragrance.

Lin Xu watched, a wave of emotion washing over him. Jiangtuan is already so flavorful. If these ingredients are added and cooked together, how incredibly delicious would that be?

As Dai Jianli cleaned the Jiangtuan by the sink, he asked, "Should we steam both of these or make another dish too?"

Xie Baomin answered, "Let's steam both. It's been a long time since I've tasted the broth of Steamed Jiangtuan. I plan to drink more today because who knows when I'll have it again."

Everyone present basically knew how to make Steamed Jiangtuan.

But such good ingredients are hard to come by, so they decided to enjoy them while they could.

As Dai Jianli cleaned, Lin Xu rolled up his sleeves and went over to help.

Jiangtuan have small eyes and a long mouth, appearing like a rat from the front, so in the Yangtze River Delta region, this fish is also nicknamed the 'rat catfish.'

This species has no scales and is covered with mucus, feeling slippery to the touch.

Lin Xu curiously asked, "Chef Dai, should this mucus be rubbed off with salt?"

Dai Jianli shook his head, "Salt alone won't work; it won't clean thoroughly. The Jiangtuan need to be scalded. You scald the skin to remove the mucus completely, which ensures the steamed Fish will not have any fishy smell."

Scald? Lin Xu immediately recalled the method used for preparing catfish.

In the Northeast, when stewing catfish, they also scald the catfish's surface with hot water to remove the mucus.

"For fish with scales, just scraping the Fish Scales off is enough," Dai Jianli said. "But for scaleless fish, it's best to scald them because they generally live at the bottom of the water and have a stronger fishy odor."

While speaking, Dai Jianli split open the fish's belly.

The innards of the Jiangtuan were cleaned out, among which the visibly thick Fish Bladder stood out as noteworthy.

Dai Jianli pulled out the Fish Bladder and put it aside, laughing, "This is great stuff. Once dried and made into Fish Belly, it has been a tribute for generations. Historical records state that Jiangtuan used to be sizeable, and the prepared Fish Belly was also substantial, unlike nowadays, where not only have they become smaller, but they're so overfished they're nearly protected animals..."

Looking at this Fish Bladder, Lin Xu couldn't help but think of the Fish Belly that had been prepared. Those Fish Bellies were probably from sea fish. Using ingredients from marine fish to prepare a freshwater fish dish—now that's attention to detail!

After cleaning the fish, the innards were given to the head chef to make Pickled Peppers fish offal. Dai Jianli threaded a rope through the mouth of each Jiangtuan, then carried them to the stove.

It was time to scald the skin.

Guo Weidong said to Lin Xu, "Scalding aquatic products like this requires specific water temperatures. It must not be below 80 degrees Celsius, as the skin won't come off. However, it also mustn't exceed 85 degrees, or you'll cook the Fish."

Is it that strict?

Before long, tiny bubbles started forming at the bottom of the pot, a sign that the water had reached 80 degrees.

Having worked in the kitchen for so long, Lin Xu had grown accustomed to judging water temperature.

For example, when dense small bubbles appear around the pot edge, the water is around 70 degrees. When small bubbles start forming at the bottom, the water is at 80 degrees, and when large bubbles begin to form, it's usually around or above 90 degrees.

Dai Jianli held the two Jiangtuan above the pot, scooping water from the pot with a ladle and pouring it over the fish bodies.

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As soon as the hot water was drizzled on, the slime on the fish's surface immediately solidified into a film-like layer, much like a facial mask.

After scalding it this way several times, Dai Jianli picked up the fish and swished it in the pot again, ensuring its skin was thoroughly soaked by the hot water.

After scalding, the fish was immediately removed and placed under the tap. The mucus on the Jiangtuan was quickly washed off, and the fish was simultaneously cooled with cold water to prevent the loss of flavorful compounds.

Once these steps were completed, the fish was patted dry and placed on the cutting board to be scored.

Scoring the Jiangtuan was simple: he made cuts every two to three centimeters along the thickest parts of its back, each over a centimeter deep, allowing the marinade to fully penetrate.

After scoring the fish, he began to prepare the marinade.

Jiangtuan flesh is delicate, so salt could not be directly rubbed onto it for marinating; otherwise, moisture would be drawn out from the fish, reducing its quality.

Dai Jianli fetched a bowl and added Scallion and Ginger water, pepper powder, salt, and two small spoonfuls of Rice Wine.

He stirred it well until the salt completely dissolved, then smeared the mixture all over the Jiangtuan with his hands.

After smearing, he cut some Scallion and Ginger, flattened the pieces, and stuffed them into the fish's belly. Then, the fish was placed in a basin. Finally, the remaining marinade was poured over the fish, and it was set aside to marinate.

While the fish marinated, Dai Jianli began to prepare the other ingredients.

Cooked Jinhua Ham was sliced thin. This prime cut, which in Jiangnan cuisine could easily be the star of a dish like Honey Roasted Square, merely served as a garnish, a supporting element, and a seasoning in Sichuan cuisine.

"Besides adding umami, the main purpose of the Ham is to season the Jiangtuan, enhancing its flavor and avoiding the use of too much salt, which could make the ingredients taste less fresh," Dai Jianli explained.

His explanation surprised Lin Xu.

To think they'd be so extravagant as to use Ham for salt! No wonder everyone was looking forward to this dish with such anticipation; the thought alone was enough to whet one's appetite, Lin Xu mused.

After the Ham was sliced, the other ingredients were prepared in turn.

Then, about half a pot of stock was added and brought to a boil. Sea Scallops, Yulan slices, and Fish Belly were then blanched one by one in the pot.

The umami of the stock was used to remove any off-flavors from the ingredients, while its heat also helped awaken the flavorful compounds within them.

There was an order to blanching: Fish Belly came first, followed by Sea Scallops, and finally Yulan slices and shiitake mushrooms. The mushrooms were placed last to effectively prevent their flavor from transferring to the other ingredients.

Once all the ingredients were blanched, the stock in the pot was brought back to a rolling boil over high heat.

Then, two pieces of pork caul fat were added and blanched in the stock for a minute.

Later, during steaming, these pieces of pork caul fat were to be wrapped around the fish. Therefore, they were blanched in advance to prevent any gamey pork flavor or unwanted odors from transferring to the fish.

With these ingredients ready and the Jiangtuan sufficiently marinated, the fish was taken out of the basin. The Scallion and Ginger were removed, and the fish was arranged in the shape of the Yin Yang Dual Fish in another large dish suitable for steaming.

After arranging it, thin slices of Jinhua Ham were inserted into the scores on the fish's body, followed by a layer of pork caul fat.

Lastly, the remaining Ham and other ingredients were added to the dish, along with half a dishful of Clear Soup previously used for preparing boiled cabbage.

Seeing this, Lin Xu thought, Forget the Jiangtuan; with all this, even a couple of random tree leaves cooked in there would taste more than decent!

After adding the Clear Soup, cling film was placed over the dish to prevent condensation from dripping in.

Dai Jianli used a toothpick to poke a few holes in the cling film for ventilation, then carried the dish to the steamer and began the steaming process.

"This method... is truly high-class!" Lin Xu exclaimed, witnessing this technique for the first time.

However, high-end dishes are all about the harmony of aroma and umami. In this dish, the umami elements clearly outnumbered the aromatic ones. Could the aroma really come through? Although the two pieces of pork caul fat contained a fair bit of fat, they seemed somewhat meager compared to ingredients like Ham, he wondered.

Adhering to the principle of asking when in doubt, Lin Xu voiced his question.

As a result, the several head chefs present all gave him a look that seemed to say, You obviously haven't eaten Jiangtuan before, which only made Lin Xu more confused.

"Junior Brother, Jiangtuan is different from other fish. Its flesh contains a large amount of fat, and its natural aroma is rich. That's why we only added pork caul fat to this dish," Xie Baomin commented. Just as he finished, Song Dahai added,

"Among the eight major Chinese cuisines, Sichuan cuisine is probably the one that uses pork fat the most. Old Dai is being so restrained with it precisely because Jiangtuan itself is already rich and fatty."

Oh... I see! Lin Xu was relieved. He was glad he hadn't pretended to have eaten Jiangtuan before. Otherwise, he would've been cringing hard enough to dig a hole through the kitchen floor with his toes right now!

Next, to welcome Lin Xu and as a gesture of appreciation for Song Dahai's contribution of ingredients, Dai Jianli prepared several other representative Sichuan dishes.

He made dishes like Clear Soup with Fatty Intestines, and Ginkgo Stewed Chicken, along with a few other uncommon Sichuan specialties not typically found in ordinary Sichuan restaurants. It was truly an eye-opening experience for Lin Xu.

「Forty minutes later.」

When lunch was almost ready, the Steamed Jiangtuan in the steamer was also perfectly cooked.

Upon opening the steamer cabinet, Dai Jianli took out the dish with the Steamed Jiangtuan. He removed the cling film, and a rich, savory aroma wafted from the dish.

The broth in the dish remained clear but now had an added layer of glistening oil on its surface.

This was likely from the pork caul fat, the Ham, and the natural oils rendered from the fish during steaming.

The broth was limpid, the fish meat perfectly intact; it looked incredibly appetizing.

But what was most enticing was the rich aroma and profound umami, the two scents intertwining, making one's whole body relax just from the smell, Lin Xu thought.

Lin Xu couldn't resist taking a deep, appreciative breath.

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Heavens! This is absolutely soul-stirring.

"Is the Jiangtuan steamed and ready now?"

He was a bit impatient to taste it, but the response he got was, "Not yet, just wait a little longer."

Dai Jianli brought over a basin and carefully poured out the broth from the steamed Jiangtuan. Then, he picked out the incompletely melted caul fat and threw it away.

He then rearranged the Fish in the basin to make its appearance even more perfect. He also repositioned the slices of Ham in the basin.

Then, he poured the previously extracted broth back into the pot, brought it to a boil over high heat, and added a small spoonful of white sugar and a teaspoon of pepper to bring out all the savory and aromatic flavors of the broth.

After seasoning, he poured the broth back into the basin holding the Jiangtuan.

As the hot broth entered the basin, the slightly cooled Fish was reinvigorated by the heat, and the rich, savory fragrance was released again. The savory aroma became even more intense, even more exquisite than when it had just been taken out of the steamer.

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

Dai Jianli carried the basin toward the private room. On his way out of the kitchen, he turned back to instruct the head chef, "Don't forget to bring us some ginger vinegar. You can't have Jiangtuan without it."

Ginger vinegar? Isn't that the condiment used for meat dishes or Hairy Crabs? They use it for Jiangtuan too?

Seeing the puzzled look on Lin Xu's face, Guo Weidong explained, "The Jiangtuan's Fish is naturally fatty. With such rich ingredients and broth, the fatty sensation becomes more pronounced. So, when you eat it, you dip it in ginger vinegar just like you would with crab or other rich meats. This not only cuts through the fat but also enhances the fresh taste of the Fish to the fullest."

Another trick learned!

When he arrived at the private room, Xie Baomin couldn't wait to pick up a piece of the Jiangtuan's fin and try it. "There's nothing like Jiangtuan! The flavor, the texture—absolutely fantastic."

Everyone then picked up soup spoons to first taste the broth. It was incredibly savory but not at all greasy, offering both the unique freshness of river delicacies and the savory flavor of the other ingredients. The layer of oil floating on top also gave this delicious broth a rich texture. The taste was truly exceptional.

Lin Xu, impressed, finished a small bowl of the fish soup just as the waiter brought in the ginger vinegar.

Ginger was crushed into a paste and marinated in aromatic vinegar. This blended the spiciness of ginger with the sour fragrance of the vinegar. Then, a little sugar and a bit of salt were added to create the indispensable ginger vinegar for eating Hairy Crabs.

Watching the others start eating, Lin Xu also picked up a tremulously tender piece of Fish Belly from the Jiangtuan, dipped it in the ginger vinegar, and then brought it to his mouth.

The rich Jiangtuan Fish and the ginger vinegar had a perfect encounter in his mouth. The Fish Belly of the Jiangtuan had a jelly-like texture that could become cloying after a few bites. However, the ginger vinegar not only diluted the greasiness but also brought out the fresh taste of the Fish.

"What do you think, Brother Lin? The taste of this Jiangtuan is great, isn't it?" Dai Jianli asked with a smile.

Lin Xu gave him a thumbs-up. "It's truly one of the top ten famous dishes of Sichuan cuisine; the flavor is simply wonderful. Thank you, Chef Dai, for letting me experience such a delicious dish."

"Oh, it's nothing. Later, when Old Song or anyone else has good ingredients, I'll help you borrow some, and we can taste them together. After all, Director Liao said you are now a distinguished guest of Fishing Platform and asked us to maintain a good relationship with you."

TSK-TSK. No wonder he was using my name to 'borrow' fish early this morning. It seems Director Liao from the Dining Department had spoken.

Lin Xu had helped Fishing Platform win a cooking competition, thwarting the ill-intentioned moves of other foreign-related hotels in Yanjing City. He also used his own contacts to turn Fishing Platform into the collaborative partner of "Flavours of the World."

Now, Liao Jinming's reciprocation in providing special treatment to Lin Xu was completely reasonable.

As for Dai Jianli going to 'borrow' fish... Who would have thought of that?

The flavor of Jiangtuan was unforgettable. As Lin Xu ate, he made up his mind to buy two Jiangtuan when he was less busy and steam them in the same way to let his family also taste their freshness.

While eating, Xie Baomin said, "Old Dai's marinated dishes are quite good. Junior Brother, take some back with you later."

Guo Weidong joined in, "Old Dai's sweet-skin duck is really well-made; don't forget to take a few."

Qiu Zhenhua chimed in, "Sichuan's oil-braised dishes are exceptional. Take more when you leave. They're delicious with both drinks and meals."

He Baoqing nodded, "And the Shadow Beef! It's terrific with drinks."

Song Dahai placed a Jiangtuan head into his own bowl. "And the spicy rabbit heads! I need to eat five or six to be satisfied. Try more; this Building 18 is full of treasures."

Lin Xu felt delighted upon hearing this. Chef Dai indeed has great popularity at Fishing Platform! Look at how enthusiastically everyone is praising him.

Dai Jianli, not annoyed, said with a laugh, "If you see anything you like, Brother Lin, just say the word, and I'll pack more for you later."

Go ahead, keep urging Brother Lin to take things from here. Whatever he takes away today, I'll 'borrow' just as much from your kitchens later.

After finishing the Jiangtuan, Lin Xu tasted other dishes. Each one was exquisitely delicious, leaving one craving more.

After lunch, he loaded 20 pounds of dipping sauces, six sweet-skin ducks, a whole box of various marinated duck products, and a bag of spicy rabbit heads into his car. After saying goodbye to everyone, he drove off.

He arrived at Yingchun Street around mealtime. After parking the car, Lin Xu called a young helper, and the two of them carried the items up to the kitchen.

Just as they finished, Chen Yan approached. "Didn't you go to Fishing Platform to learn how to make dry dip? It feels like you went on a shopping spree."

"Chef Dai was too hospitable. He insisted on giving me food, and I couldn't refuse, so I brought some over for you all to try. This box is filled with various marinated duck products, and that bag is all spicy rabbit heads."

What? Spicy rabbit heads?

Chen Yan, who had eaten her fill and was ready to return to the company, suddenly perked up with interest. "Brother-in-law, hurry and give me two... No, make it four! I'll help you check if they're seasoned right."

Lin Xu was momentarily speechless. Do they all like cute little rabbits \*that\* much?

He nodded and then instructed the young helper, "Get some beef bones. Use the pressure cooker to make some Beef Bone Soup; it's needed for tonight's dinner."

Upon hearing about the Beef Bone Soup, the young helper immediately asked curiously, "Boss, are you making a new dish?"

Chen Yan's eyes also lit up with anticipation. She hadn't expected her brother-in-law to manage learning new dishes while he was out getting supplies—he was just so efficient!

Lin Xu said, "I plan to make a 'Mapo Tofu'... without tofu!"

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Mapo Tofu without tofu? What kind of dish is this?

Chen Yan, who had just agreed to diet with Shu Yun and Dou Wenjing at noon, became interested. Although dieting is important, to help improve my brother-in-law's cooking skills, I'll postpone my diet until tomorrow. After all, my cousin will need my brother-in-law's care in the future, so his cooking skills can't be lacking.

Chen Yan, momentarily forgetting even the spicy rabbit heads before her, curiously asked Lin Xu, "How do you make Mapo Tofu without tofu, brother-in-law? Are you planning to create a new dish again? I must try it to make sure nothing goes wrong."

Why bother finding excuses if you want to eat?

Lin Xu had noticed that the biggest difference for girls who decide to diet is this: before dieting, they eat openly; after deciding to diet, they eat sneakily. In any case, their appetite doesn't change.

To let his sister-in-law enjoy her food with a clear conscience, he cooperated and said, "I was worried I wouldn't have anyone to help me taste-test, so I'd really appreciate your help, Sister Yan."

"No trouble at all, we're family after all. It's normal to help each other out."

Chezai came over and asked, "Boss, don't you just add water to make Mapo Tofu? Do you really need to use Beef Bone Soup?"

Lin Xu replied while packing some spicy rabbit heads into a disposable container for Chen Yan, "Mapo Tofu made with Beef Bone Soup has a richer aroma, and the sauce reduces down better, making it far superior to using water."

The system task requires a Perfect Level dish, so every step must be flawless. Besides, it's for family, so of course, I'll make it taste as good as possible. If this dish were served in the restaurant, I'd have to carefully calculate the cost to avoid losing money just for show.

After scooping out four rabbit heads, Lin Xu worried that it wouldn't be enough for his sister-in-law, so he also packed a large box full of various Sichuan-style braised snacks, like well-known duck items and Chicken Feet.

He then closed the lid and put it in an opaque bag.

This way, no one would see it was food, and she wouldn't have to feel guilty every time someone spotted her carrying it.

These gestures warmed Chen Yan's heart.

My brother-in-law is so thoughtful!

"Thanks, brother-in-law. I'll come over to help you check things out after I finish work this afternoon, so you can make the most perfectly delicious dish."

She took the bag and went downstairs, planning to find an old movie to watch while eating back in her office.

Downstairs, she saw Dundun sprawled out on the roof of his cat house, fast asleep. In high spirits, Chen Yan reached out and ruffled the little guy's head twice. "Silly Dundun, your auntie is going back to work! They all fooled me, saying that paying respects to you brings good luck. HMPH, I'm not falling for that..."

Dundun, who had been snoring softly, was jolted awake by the ruffling. He swatted Chen Yan's arm a few times with his paw. After swatting, he even huffed at Chen Yan before darting into his little house.

"Why did you have to tease him?" Shu Yun walked over, reaching into the cat house to soothe the grumpy little darling, still full of sleep inertia.

Chen Yan said proudly, "The more Yueyue and Lele praise Dundun, the more I want to annoy it."

Shu Yun: "..."

You're quite the rebel, aren't you?

She saw Chen Yan carrying a bulging bag and couldn't help but ask curiously, "What are you carrying? Something to eat?"

"No, nothing like that. I just casually took some tomatoes from upstairs to eat as fruit for my diet... That's it, I'm going back, see you tonight."

Chen Yan originally planned to tease Dundun a bit more, but Shu Yun's question suddenly made her feel very guilty.

Just half an hour ago, I swore this diet was serious! Now I'm carrying a box of braised snacks. If anyone sees this, how will I ever show my face again...

Manager Chen hurriedly left the shop, planning to drive back to the company and enjoy her treats.

Meanwhile, Shu Yun couldn't help but look up toward the kitchen.

That spicy aroma... Don't tell me the boss actually packed a bunch of rabbit heads from Building 18?

「In the kitchen.」

Lin Xu took out the braised snacks he'd packed to let them air a bit. He picked up a spicy rabbit head, glistening and coated in Red Oil, and took a bite. He was immediately captivated by its spicy flavor.

Damn, this numbing and spicy flavor...

The high-end Sichuan dishes he'd eaten at noon were all delicious, but they weren't numbing or spicy. After eating a lot, they started to feel a bit bland. Now, tasting the Red Oil from the surface of the spicy rabbit head, his taste buds were instantly awakened.

They say numbing and spicy Sichuan cuisine is for the common folk. Looks like they're talking about me!

He sucked the Red Oil from the surface of the rabbit head, then ate the small, tender morsels of meat around the eye sockets. The more he ate, the more addicted he became to the numbing and spicy taste. He then pried open the rabbit's mouth and broke the head in two.

First, he ate the few bits of meat on the chin, then started on the rabbit brain.

Skinned spicy rabbit heads didn't have much meat. The main attraction was the fragrant, tender, and succulently numbing and spicy brain inside.

Previously, when eating duck heads, Lin Xu thought the duck brain was the most delicious part, but there was so little of it, just one small mouthful.

Now, eating a spicy rabbit head, the rabbit brain—more than ten times larger than a duck's—filled his mouth, and a wave of blissful satisfaction almost overflowed from his mind.

Damn, no wonder so many people love eating rabbit heads! This flavor is truly fantastic.

The meat on the rabbit head was good. Besides the brain, only some odds and ends of meat remained, but even these pieces were much larger than those on a duck head.

So, compared to gnawing on a duck head, eating a rabbit head brought a much stronger sense of accomplishment.

Especially when picking out a small piece of meat from the crevices and corners—that feeling was as thrilling as finding a Level 3 Helmet in an inconspicuous, dilapidated shack in a video game.

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So satisfying!

After gobbling down a rabbit head, Lin Xu took a sip of water, the delicious taste still lingering. Just as he was about to grab another, he saw Shu Yun approaching the entrance.

"Are you really packing them up?"

"Head Chef Dai insisted; I couldn't refuse."

"Was Manager Chen talking about rabbit heads just now?"

"Yes, besides rabbit heads, there are also goose gizzards, sheep's feet, and other such things. He'd packed a whole big box of them."

Lin Xu filled a takeaway box with a few rabbit heads, then walked to the door and handed it to Shu Yun, who was secretly gulping, "It's best to eat these with disposable gloves, or your hands will be burning. I was just about to go wash mine."

Shu Yun pulled a pair of individually wrapped disposable gloves from her pocket, "I got them ready when I came upstairs."

After taking the meal box, the beautiful general manager trotted over to a booth, ready to enjoy the delicious food.

However, the thought of eating them directly made her feel a bit uneasy. So, she found an old photo of herself washing tomatoes in her phone's album and posted it to her social media, "Starting today, I'm eating tomatoes to lose fat!"

After posting, the mental block finally disappeared.

Gloves on, time to eat!

In the kitchen, Lin Xu glanced at the packed rabbit heads. It had seemed like a lot when he was packing them, but if everyone just tried one, they'd likely be gone in a single round.

To prevent Shen Jiayue from missing out after work, he picked up a large takeaway box. He filled it with a few rabbit heads and other braised items, along with a cup of Sour Plum Soup and some other snacks.

Then he packed the bag neatly and used his phone to request a courier service.

Since there was a chance the rabbit heads wouldn't last until the end of the workday, he decided to arrange a Chinese-style afternoon tea for his own good, cute, and beautiful Baobao during her work hours.

It was also a chance for her to taste the braising skills from Building No. 18 at the Fishing Platform.

And to give her a little surprise.

After a courier accepted the order, Lin Xu handed the packed meal box to a passing server, asking her to take it to the service desk on the first floor.

He then washed his hands and began to prepare dishes according to the order sheet.

「On the other side.」

In the Dongming Building on the West Third Ring road.

Shen Jiayue was sitting at her desk, headphones on, intently watching an online tutorial on how to make Milk Yellow Mooncakes.

Hmph, if you won't let me learn, then I'll just make them secretly. Just wait until I make those mooncakes and make your jaw drop, Xu Baobao!

She focused with the same intensity she used when studying for her College English Test Level 4, continuously writing and sketching in her notebook, recording the ingredient ratios and baking times for the Milk Yellow Mooncakes.

Just as she was engrossed, a shout came from the doorway, "Shen Jiayue, your delivery!"

Huh? What's going on?

Shen Baobao took off her headphones. Confirming that the courier at the door was indeed calling for her, she hurried over.

At this hour... what would a courier be bringing me?

When she reached the door and saw the neatly packed bag, her heart leaped with joy. That way of tying the knot—wasn't it exactly how Xu Baobao packed food?

Could it be food inside?

Back at her seat, Shen Jiayue quickly opened the tightly sealed packaging bag.

"Yueyue, didn't you just come back from Lin Ji's? Did Boss Lin make you something delicious again?"

Many of her colleagues had officially become "Lin Ji boys" and "Lin Ji girls."

Seeing Shen Jiayue unpacking a bag from Lin Ji's Food, they couldn't help but tease her.

"I don't know! It's so strange. He hasn't sent me food recently, and besides, he isn't at the store today. He went to the Fishing Platform to learn about dipping sauces..."

As she was speaking, the package opened.

She took out the contents one by one. Only then did everyone see that it was a large box of braised dishes, a drink, and two types of snacks.

Inside, there was also a little note written on a slip of kitchen paper:

"Brought over some food from Building No. 18. See if you like it. If you do, I'll find a way to practice making it. I'll make sure you can have it every day. I didn't get you the 'first cup of milk tea of autumn' back at the Start of Autumn, so today I'm sending you the 'first rabbit head of autumn.' There's another new surprise after work too, muah."

Looking at the word "muah," Shen Baobao couldn't help but laugh, "No one uses that term anymore, you silly Xu Baobao! Just wait until I'm off work; I'll kiss you until you cry!"

She took out an Hermès wallet from her bag and was about to stuff the note deep inside it when she suddenly thought, I should show this off! My Xu Baobao's handwriting is so beautiful; it deserves some praise, right?

Under her colleagues' envious gazes, she placed the note on top of the food items, took a picture, and immediately posted it to her social media, "While others are already on their 99th autumn milk tea, my Xu Baobao is only just remembering this. Love you! Wish I could fly to your side right now and throw myself into your arms."

After posting, Shen Baobao tucked the note into her wallet like a treasure, then said to her colleagues, "Come on, everyone, sharing is caring! These are braised delicacies from Building No. 18 at the Fishing Platform. Give them a try. If they're good, I'll have Xu Baobao add them to the menu at Lin Ji!"

She no longer cared what the rabbit heads tasted like.

The emotion and love conveyed by that note were far more important than any braised delicacies.

While everyone was sharing and eating the braised snacks, she secretly pulled out the note to look at it again.

There's another new surprise after work... What could it be? I'm so excited!

「In the Huixuan Building.」

Chen Yan sat in front of her computer, enjoying a delicious rabbit head and watching "Your Name" play on her 32-inch 4K monitor.

As she was getting really into the movie, she wiped her hands, picked up her phone, and planned to share her interpretations and feelings about the film on her social media.

However, as soon as she opened the app, she saw Shen Baobao's post.

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The note, with its sugar content equivalent to over a thousand plus signs, along with the love practically overflowing from his cousin's screen, made all of Chen's sentimentality vanish without a trace.

Even the rabbit head on the table didn't seem appetizing anymore.

After a good while, Chen, who had been metaphorically choked by their overwhelming public display of affection, finally recovered enough to silently post an update on his social media:

"The tomatoes these days are really sour!"

「At three in the afternoon」

The kitchen staff were tasting the braised dishes and rabbit heads. Meanwhile, Lin Xu moved half a box of Chicken Breast and several pounds of Pork Fat from the cold storage. He also soaked some pea starch, preparing to make Chicken Cake.

The process of making Chicken Cake isn't highly difficult, but it is very tedious and requires considerable patience.

Luckily, Lin Xu was blessed with the Skill from making Qingshui Furong, which made the step of preparing the Chicken Meatball both fast and effective.

Once the Chicken Meatball mixture was ready, the remaining steps became relatively simple.

He finely minced the Pork Fat into a paste. Then, similar to how he handled the Chicken Breast, he used a knife to press the minced fat into thin sheets, checking for any unminced bits.

After checking, he combined it with the Chicken Meatball mixture and beat them together.

To prevent the Chicken Cake from falling apart during cooking, Lin Xu intentionally added a bit more Water Starch, which improved its binding.

But he couldn't add too much, or else these Chicken Cakes wouldn't be tofu-like, but rather jelly-like. While this would make them less likely to fall apart, it would mean losing the characteristic soft and tender texture of Chicken Cake. Moreover, the dish he was preparing today using Chicken Cake was Mapo Tofu, not Mapo Tofu, so too much starch would only be counterproductive.

But... Mapo Tofu?

That might be a new research direction.

If today's Mapo Chicken Cake didn't turn out well, he could just switch to Mapo Tofu. That way, he could prevent his Perfect Level Technique from dropping to Superior and save his eighty thousand points from going down the drain.

After the meat paste was ready, he took some small trays and brushed them with Pork Fat. He then covered them with cling film and placed the trays into the steamer basket set on the wok, beginning the steaming process.

Chicken Cake cannot be steamed over high heat, so the steaming cabinet was out of the question. Even a standard steamer wasn't quite right for the job. So, Lin Xu simply placed the steamer basket on top of the wok. This method didn't create a tight seal, allowing steam to escape from all directions.

This might not be ideal for steaming buns, but it was perfectly suited for steaming Chicken Cake.

Before long, the Chicken Cake was ready.

Lin Xu took it out for inspection. He found that it was steamed quite well, a bit chewier than Dai Jianli's batch at noon. In terms of texture, it was closer to the Plaster Tofu used for Mapo Tofu.

Once the Chicken Cake was steamed, he set it aside to cool.

Seizing this Kung Fu, he grabbed a handful of Sichuan peppercorns and placed them in an oil-free wok, slow-roasting them over low heat.

When the Sichuan peppercorns became fragrant, he placed them on a cutting board, crushed them with a rolling pin, and then transferred them to a bowl. This became the essential Sichuan peppercorns to be sprinkled on Mapo Tofu before serving.

With the Sichuan peppercorns ready, Lin Xu cut a small piece of beef from the cold storage and brought it over.

Mapo Tofu requires beef for frying the seasoned minced meat, which enhances the dish's aroma. Using minced pork instead would greatly diminish the effect.

He sliced the beef, then cut it into shreds, and finally diced it into small pieces the size of mung beans.

Although many recipes mention chopping beef into a mince, the correct method is to cut it into small, mung bean-sized pieces. When fried, these pieces achieve the 'crispy' quality prescribed by the eight-character mantra for Mapo Tofu.

The beef granules are fragrantly crispy and delicious, melting on the tongue. Only such a texture can be referred to as 'crispy'.

The eight-character mantra, also known as the eight-point requirements, are the rules to follow when making Mapo Tofu. These eight characters are:

Numb, spicy, scalding, aromatic, crispy, tender, fresh, lively!

The first seven characters are generally undisputed. However, the last character, 'lively,' has various interpretations: some say 'enveloping,' others 'binding,' still others 'intact,' and some argue it should be 'crunchy.'

Thus, the eight-character mantra somehow became a twelve-character one.

Well, if the 'Top Five' universities can actually number over a dozen, then an eight-character mantra having twelve characters doesn't seem too hard to accept.

After cutting the beef, he put it into a bowl and sprinkled a tiny bit of salt. Then, he added some Light Soy Sauce, Cooking Wine, and pepper powder, stirring and pounding it a few times before setting it aside to marinate.

Normally, when preparing beef, one should not add salt or Cooking Wine directly, as this can make the beef tough and stringy.

But this dish aims for crispy and fragrant meat granules, so salt and Cooking Wine are required to dehydrate and ferment the meat to achieve this effect.

The art of cooking truly is ever-changing.

After the beef granules were set to marinate, Lin Xu scooped two spoonfuls of Doubanjiang onto a chopping board and finely minced it with a knife.

In this dish, Doubanjiang serves to add color, flavor, and aroma. To bring out these effects quickly, it needs to be minced finely.

The finer it's chopped, the faster Doubanjiang releases its fragrance and flavor, and the Red Oil effect is also better.

Once the Doubanjiang was prepared, he cleaned a garlic sprout and chopped it into small segments.

The garlic sprout corresponds to the 'lively' part of the mantra. Its bright green color and fresh taste infuse the dish with vibrant energy and reduce its greasiness.

Finally, Lin Xu took a small dish and filled it with some coarse chili powder.

The chili powder and Doubanjiang both pertain to the 'spicy' part of the eight-character mantra.

The spiciness of the Doubanjiang and the chili powder together create the overall spiciness of the tofu. The spiciness is not harsh or overpowering; on savoring, one can detect a rich fragrance within the heat. This is the 'spicy' element of Mapo Tofu.

With all ingredients ready, Lin Xu set up the wok, pouring some salad oil and Pork Fat into it, preparing to briefly fry the Chicken Cake in oil.

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When making Mapo Tofu, there is a step that involves blanching the tofu.

However, Chicken Cake cannot be blanched; it can only be passed through hot oil. This not only increases the Chicken Cake's surface elasticity but also enhances its aromatic fragrance.

While the oil was heating, Lin Xu cut the almost-dried Chicken Cake into 1.5-centimeter square cubes, the standard requirement for Mapo Tofu.

The cut Chicken Cake was carefully placed into a large slotted spoon and then submerged into oil heated to about 90 degrees Celsius, beginning the deep-frying process.

This step could not be rushed; it had to be fried slowly to dry out the moisture on the Chicken Cake's surface. Otherwise, one would literally "be too anxious to eat hot tofu."

When it was nearly done frying, the Chicken Cake was lifted out and then rinsed with hot water to wash off the grease on its surface.

After rinsing, it was set aside for later use.

Next came the cooking segment.

Lin Xu set a wok on the stove. He first seasoned it, then added cooking oil to the wok.

After the oil was hot, he quickly stir-fried the beef cubes, pressing them against the wok with the back of a spoon to help their internal moisture escape faster, achieving the goal of quick drying.

Stir-frying the beef cubes required patience. He flipped them until a sizzling sound could be heard when they were stirred, indicating that the surface had crisped.

He was then ready for the next step: Lin Xu poured the prepared chili powder into the wok.

He continued to stir-fry, bringing out the dry and pungent notes of the chili, until only its spicy fragrance remained.

After the aroma emerged, Doubanjiang was added.

Adding Doubanjiang at this point not only prevented the chili powder from burning but also enhanced the effect of the Red Oil.

Once the Red Oil was rendered, he added a large bowl of Beef Bone Stock.

Using stock to enhance the fragrance of Mapo Tofu was in line with the eight-character maxim's requirement for "fragrance."

But the aroma of Beef Bone Stock alone was not enough; it was too plain. Additional fragrances from the beef cubes, Doubanjiang, Chicken Cake, garlic shoots, chili, and more were also needed.

All these fragrances combined constituted the true sense of "fragrance."

After adding the Beef Bone Soup, he poured in some Dark Soy Sauce to darken the base color, then added a spoonful of sugar to integrate the flavors.

After stirring, he poured the Chicken Cake from the large slotted spoon into the mix.

The most critical step was at hand.

Lin Xu gently pushed the Chicken Cake in the wok with the back of the spoon, afraid that the seemingly delicate Chicken Cakes would fall apart.

However, thanks to his good control of his strength and the well-executed step of oiling the wok before stir-frying, the Chicken Cakes simply slid around the bottom of the wok and then mixed with the sauce.

The first step was a success!

Lin Xu covered the wok, allowing the sauce to fully penetrate the Chicken Cake and the heat to transfer inside.

The eight-character maxim's requirement for "scalding" dictated that each bite of the main ingredient must be mouth-burningly hot when served; therefore, it was crucial to cook it thoroughly now.

If the Chicken Cake had any coolness at its core, it would indicate a complete failure.

Given the System's nature, it probably wouldn't even reach Qualified Level.

While the contents of the wok simmered, Lin Xu brought over the pea starch he had soaked while making the Chicken Cake.

After simmering, the most classic and difficult step of this Mapo Tofu variation was next: thickening the sauce.

For those who understood cooking, thickening a sauce wasn't difficult.

The difficulty lay in the fact that the sauce needed to be thickened three times, with each thickening serving a different purpose.

The intervals between each addition, the amount of starch slurry, and its concentration also varied each time.

Without an experienced master guiding them, one couldn't even begin to learn this dish properly.

Lin Xu lifted the lid. The pea starch in the basin had settled, separating from the water, so it needed stirring before use.

For the first thickening, he scooped up about half a ladleful of the settled starch and mixed it with the water above to create a Water Starch slurry.

After mixing, he scooped up half a ladleful of this slurry and poured it into the wok in a fan-like motion.

This step was to thicken the sauce somewhat, so a generous amount was required, and it had to be distributed evenly.

Immediately after adding it, he used the back of the ladle to gently push the Chicken Cake, stirring the sauce in the wok to ensure the Water Starch was evenly blended and could take effect.

Once the sauce in the wok had thickened, he dipped the ladle back into the Water Starch, digging into the settled starch at the bottom and stirring to make the slurry even thicker than before.

He scooped up a little less than half a ladleful and poured it into the wok again.

This step aimed to make the ingredients more tender, so he tried to pour it primarily onto the Chicken Cake in the wok.

He wanted the Chicken Cake pieces to be coated with the starch, which would lock in moisture and also make their surface tender and smooth. This achieved the "tender" aspect of the eight-character maxim.

Lin Xu stirred and flipped the contents of the wok a few more times. Finally, he used the ladle to scoop a little of the thickest starch from the very bottom of the basin, drained off any excess water from the ladle, and then incorporated this concentrated starch into the wok.

This step was to make the sauce cling to the ingredients.

It was a well-known technique in Sichuan cooking called "sauce-coating."

The so-called sauce-coating is a cooking method that involves the sauce enrobing the surface of the ingredients. Fish-flavored Meat Shreds is a classic example of this type of dish in Sichuan cuisine.

After this step, the sauce in the wok had completely reduced and thickened, tightly enveloping the Chicken Cake.

The lustrous red color and rich aroma were simply irresistible.

However, it still wasn't time to taste.

Lin Xu poured the chopped garlic shoots into the wok, stirred them a couple of times, and then transferred the dish from the wok into a large bowl.

The authentic version of Mapo Tofu must be served in a bowl to achieve the "scalding" aspect of the eight-character maxim. Only then will it retain the mouth-burning hot sensation while eating.

If it were served on a plate, the heat would dissipate quickly, losing the scalding sensation in just a few minutes, and along with it, the essence of Mapo Tofu.

Once plated, he used a small spoon to sprinkle the freshly ground Sichuan peppercorn powder on top. The "numbing" aspect of the eight-character maxim was now in place, and the dish was ready to be served.

"Damn! What is this dish?"

While Lin Xu was cooking, although Zhuang Yizhou and the others were watching nearby, no one dared to speak for fear of disturbing him.

Now that the dish was out of the wok, everyone felt as if they could finally breathe again.

"Damn, using Chicken Cake to make Mapo Tofu? That's simply divine!"

"I've witnessed a miracle!"

"This flavor is absolutely heavenly!"

Wei Qian sniffed and called out to someone not far away, "Chezzo, bring out the rice! Today we really need to appreciate the boss's cooking skills!"

Chapter 590: The Rice Killer's Reputation is Well Deserved! A New Special Item Has Spawned, Exchange!

Phew...

Finally, it's done.

When Lin Xu was cooking just now, all his nerves were tense.

Now that the dish was successful, he relaxed, and only then did he feel the fatigue in his body.

He focused his gaze on the bowl of Mapo Chicken Cake on the workbench, its ruddy color and rich spicy aroma captivating him. As soon as his attention settled, a line of text appeared before his eyes:

"A Mapo Chicken Cake made from ingredients such as Chicken Cake, beef cubes, and Doubanjiang, Grade: Perfect Level."

Wow, success on the first try. Should've popped open a bottle of champagne to celebrate.

Lin Xu blinked, and the prompt disappeared.

He was just about to taste how delicious the Perfect Level Mapo Chicken Cake was when suddenly the system's notification tone rang in his mind:

"Host has successfully made a Perfect Level innovative Mapo dish, completing the Skill Trial Task. The host permanently acquires the Perfect Level Cooking Technique—Mapo Tofu. Congratulations to the host."

"Host has successfully made a Superior or above Mapo Chicken Cake, completing the side task 'Dish Innovation.' You have earned a Perfect Level rare Sichuan dish draw. Would you like to draw immediately?"

The consecutive notifications made Lin Xu feel a wave of relief wash over him.

Finally, it's complete.

While he was feeling contemplative, Wei Qian and Zhuang Yizhou started making a ruckus, exclaiming in admiration:

"Holy moly! This Chicken Cake is unbelievably tender!"

"I regret it so much; I should have livestreamed just now. Such a perfect dish should have been witnessed by the netizens too."

"It literally melts in your mouth, it's so delicious!"

"It's fresh, tender, numbing, spicy, and burning hot. It has all the characteristics of Mapo Tofu—so satisfying!"

Wei Qian and the others each held a bowl of rice, spoon in hand, and scooped up a piece of Mapo Chicken Cake onto their rice, eating it together just like Mapo Tofu.

Although their mouths were burning hot, they couldn't help but continue eating.

"Boss, get some rice; you try it too," Che Zi said, bringing over two bowls of rice, each topped with a soup spoon.

It was clear that everyone knew the rule for eating Mapo Tofu—with a spoon.

The ingredients in this dish were all minced, so there was no need to worry about biting into whole Sichuan peppercorns, chunks of Doubanjiang, or large pieces of chili. You just scooped and ate whatever came up.

Under these circumstances, it was normal for the rice to not last long.

Lin Xu took a bowl and used a spoon to scoop up a piece of the Mapo Chicken Cake, coated in a thick sauce, from the Red Oil-laden dish. After blowing on it, he put it in his mouth.

"Damn, that's hot!"

Despite being mentally prepared, the moment it touched his mouth, it still burned.

At the instant of being burned, the sensations of numbness, spiciness, and aroma surged simultaneously into his mouth, activating his taste buds instantly. As it entered his mouth, his tongue could distinctly feel the tender smoothness of the Chicken Cake's surface.

Having been thickened three times, the smoothness was remarkably pronounced.

Taking a bite, the inside of the Chicken Cake was even hotter, but the unique umami flavor of the chicken also burst forth, distinctly detectable amidst the strong spicy aroma.

The tenderness and freshness of the Chicken Cake stood out more against the backdrop of the spicy and numbing taste.

It was like a lotus emerging unsoiled from the mud.

Such texture and flavor rendered the entire dish even more enchanting.

No wonder Wei Qian and the others were reacting this way. This dish indeed offered a novel experience that Mapo Tofu did not possess.

After savoring the Chicken Cake, another mouthful of rice was simply too delightful.

After tasting the Chicken Cake, Lin Xu scooped up some beef cubes to try them as well.

The beef had been salted to draw out moisture and marinated with Cooking Wine, resulting in significant dehydration. Despite being stir-fried until dry and then simmered in Beef Bone Soup, the beef still maintained its crispy and fragrant texture.

When tasted, it provided a stark contrast to the tender Chicken Cake.

In this dish, the crispy texture of the beef cubes contrasted sharply with the soft tenderness of the Chicken Cake. The umami flavor of the Chicken Cake, the spicy numbness of the sauce, the richness of the Red Oil, and the fresh taste of minced garlic—all these elements created intense contrasts.

It was no wonder that the whole dish tasted so good and was utterly irresistible.

Lin Xu scooped some more Chicken Cake into his bowl and started mixing and eating it with rice.

Indeed, this way of eating was the most satisfying.

"Lin Xu, are we going to introduce this dish at our restaurant?" Wei Qian asked, sitting down and eating at the same time.

The others also turned their heads curiously, wanting to hear the boss's answer.

Lin Xu took a bite of rice and smiled as he said, "We can't do that. The difficulty of steaming the Chicken Cake is so high, plus you have to pound the Chicken Meatball by hand. How much would we have to charge for this dish just to break even?"

The Mapo Chicken Cake couldn't be put on the menu. But Mapo Tofu, that was a different story. Even the previously thought-of Mapo Tofu could be tried out.

Lin Xu said to Che Zi, "From tomorrow on, we'll start serving Mapo Tofu in our restaurant. Remember to buy more Plaster Tofu. For Mapo Tofu, a softer tofu texture is better."

Soft tofu would allow the dish to feature that delightful contrast between the crispy toppings and its own tender texture.

If firm tofu were used, that contrast would be lost.

Having just heard from the boss that Mapo Chicken Cake wouldn't be served in the restaurant, everyone felt a hint of disappointment, as it meant they wouldn't be able to enjoy this delicacy often in the future.

But hearing that Mapo Tofu was going to be introduced, their spirits lifted again.

Mapo Tofu would be fine too; such a dish that pairs well with rice had low costs and was suitable for a new restaurant menu item.

Wei Qian shoveled his rice while discussing with Che Zi the ingredients to purchase for the next day, saying, "Apart from tofu, don't forget to buy more garlic shoots and beef. Oh, and Beef Bones as well. Since we're making it, let's make this dish to perfection."

In Beijing, there was no shortage of restaurants selling Mapo Tofu.

But those adding Beef Bone Soup were truly rare.