


Grandma and Grandpa Chin's Home Recipes

Hilda Hoy rediscovers the flavors of her
Taiwanese childhood





When I opened my mailbox to find an envelope from my mother, I knew instantly what was inside. I had been missing the food I grew up on in Taiwan, and so when my mother mentioned she'd produced a collection of family recipes as party favors for my grandparents' 60th anniversary banquet, I insisted she send me a copy. Having just moved halfway around the world to Berlin, where I knew nobody and didn't speak the language, I couldn't be at that banquet. My hopes grew as I waited for the cookbook to arrive, and I pictured the splendid Chinese feast I would soon be making.

"This is amazing!" I imagined my table of fantasy friends exclaiming, talking with mouths full. "They're my grandmother's recipes," I would reply, beaming, trying my best to feign humility.

But when I saw what was inside the envelope, my heart sank. Postcard-sized and only 14 pages, it was just a photocopied booklet bound with red ribbon. Each recipe was only a few sentences long, taken down as informal dictation from my grandmother. Also, my Chinese reading skills were seriously rusty, so trying to read the characters was demoralizing. I stuffed the booklet into the back of a drawer, where it languished for years.

Fast-forward to this spring. I'm still in Berlin, eking out a living as a freelance writer, and yes, I did make some friends too. Over the years I built up a bit of confidence with Chinese cooking thanks to Fuchsia Dunlop's cookbooks, so when a fit of

decluttering unearthed my grandmother's long-buried recipe booklet, I was up for the challenge. A Chinese dictionary app helped me decipher all 14 recipes. There were a handful of simple snacks, like glazed roasted peanuts (*kao huasheng mi* 烤花生米), preserved yellow soy beans (*sun dou* 筍豆), or that ubiquitous old favorite, tea eggs (*chaye dan* 茶葉蛋). Also, *bangbang ji* (棒棒雞), a cold Sichuan appetizer of shredded chicken with cucumber and a spicy sesame dressing. Flipping the pages, I found a recipe for *cai baozi* (菜包子), steamed buns with a vegetable filling, and the greedy kid in me perked up. "Make those. And soon," she insisted. I vividly remember snacking on *baozi* as a child on the streets of Taipei. The vendor would dole them out in flimsy plastic bags, and I would ignore my scalded fingertips to take greedy bites, the yeasty-smelling steam billowing in my face.

I wasn't surprised to see only a few meat dishes in the cookbook, like spicy stir-fried beef strips (*lajiao niurou* 辣椒牛肉). I've always known my grandmother, a devout Catholic who's had a weak heart since a childhood bout of rheumatic fever, to be health-conscious. She was never big on meat, probably to the chagrin of my grandfather, a Kuomintang Air Force bombardier who developed a taste for steak while being trained on an Arizona military base in the 1940s. (He also brought back a lifelong love of cowboy hats and bolo ties.)

Oyster vermicelli soup (*ezai mianxian* 蚵仔麵線), a Taiwanese night-market favorite, is an unexpected addition. My grandmother is originally from Nanjing, and I'm surprised to see a Taiwanese specialty as one of her top


dishes. She did move to the island when she was young, though – just 18 years old and with her brand-new husband in tow. It was in 1949 and they were on the losing Nationalist side, retreating from the Communist forces to little Formosa island.

Also in the book are two sticky rice dishes: you fan (“oily rice” 油飯), and eight treasures rice (babao fan 八寶飯), cooked with sweet adzuki beans and dried fruit. I’ve eaten both these things. Was it my grandmother who made them for me? The only recipe I remember her making is red-braised beef (hongshao niurou 紅燒牛肉). Because my memory isn’t cooperating, I call my mother to ask about the stories behind the recipes. Does she remember eating dishes like these when she was growing up?

“Oh, no,” she says. “You know, I don’t really have pleasant memories about food. We ate mostly poor man’s food.” In the 1950s, that would have been rice cooked with sweet potato; lots of dried radish; and lots of eggs, steamed plain or scrambled with tomato. As she tells me about the salt-cured dried fish they often ate, braised with just a little bit of meat, the disgust in her voice is audible. “It was awful, so salty you wouldn’t want to eat very much, but just fill up on rice,” she says.

The family had to live frugally – that much I already knew. But there was another reason meals at home suffered. When my grandfather switched to a desk job with the Air Force after a plane explosion (he was the only survivor) left him too shaken to fly anymore, my grandmother took a job as a full-time bookkeeper. To keep her family fed, she biked to the market in the early morning, placed a few orders, then headed to work. The vendors would drop off the goods at the house in the afternoon – produce, a bit of meat, a bottle or two of fresh sugarcane juice – and often my grandfather had to deal with the cooking. I’m floored to discover my grandmother had had an entire career that I never knew about.

“Wait, so if she wasn’t cooking much back then, when was she making all the dishes in the cookbook?” I ask my mother. Not until she retired and immigrated to Canada in the early 2000s, apparently. In the intensely Chinese suburb of Richmond, British Columbia where she and my grandfather settled, she made a bevy of friends at the



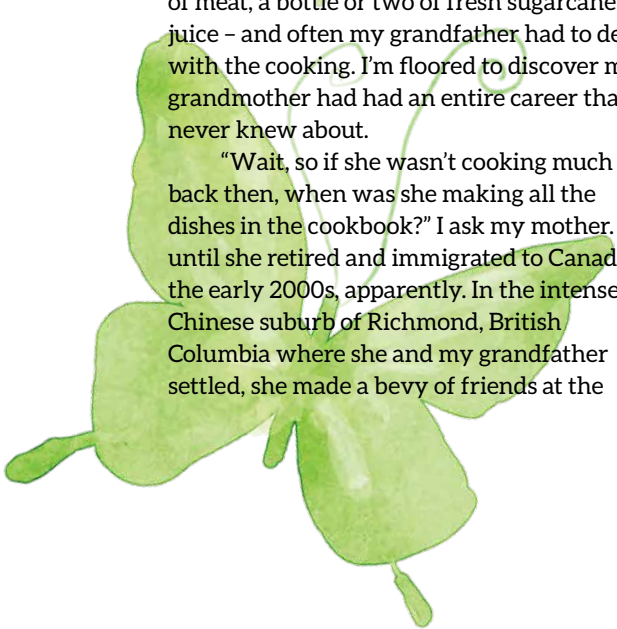
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local Chinese Catholic church. Whenever any of them came to visit, she would cook for them. Every time I’ve visited my grandparents in Richmond, some church friend materializes at the dinner table. Even the priest makes a regular appearance. Who could blame them when there’s red-braised beef on the stove?

Before I attempt that red-braised beef myself, I want to give the steamed baozi from the cookbook a go. But the recipe instructions leave me baffled:

One pound flour, baking powder (1 tablespoon), yeast (1 tablespoon), sugar (1 tablespoon), oil (3 tablespoons), knead 10 minutes, divide into small balls, let rise 20 minutes, form buns with filling. Steam 30 minutes.

I turn to the Internet and land on the YouTube channel of the Taipei First Girls High School Alumni Association, North California Chapter. I sip my morning coffee and watch an affable mom-type named Grace mix up baozi dough in her Sacramento



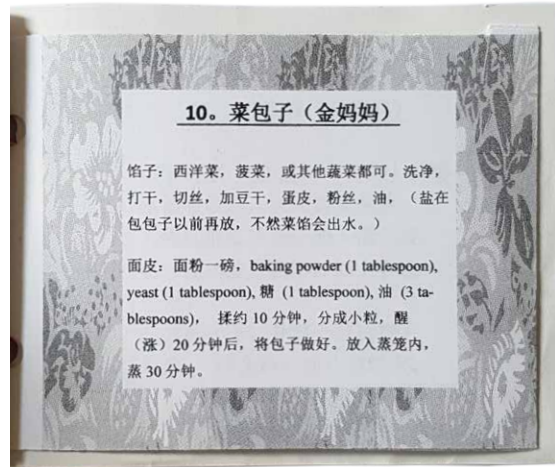


kitchen. She speaks Mandarin with that lilting, informal rhythm that is unmistakably Taiwanese and sounds so familiar to my ear. I take notes as she dissolves the yeast in warm water before mixing it into the flour. My grandmother's recipe lacks any water whatsoever, and I can't imagine how three tablespoons of oil could moisten all that flour. With a twinge of guilt, I set aside my grandmother's recipe and mix up a batch of Grace's dough instead.

My grandmother's bun filling, however, is a triumph. Grace uses just cabbage and carrots, but my grandmother's recipe combines vermicelli, dry tofu with five-spice flavoring (*dougan* 豆乾), and minced greens. She suggests watercress, but fat chance getting that in Berlin. The most exotic vegetable you'll find at supermarkets here is napa cabbage, and even the best-stocked Asian shops sell no more than a tiny segment of the vast spectrum of greenery that Chinese people consume. I settle for some Shanghai bok choy.

The recipe calls for seasoning only with salt, but I can't resist adding my own touches: grated ginger, cilantro, pepper, sesame oil. The dough is straining voluptuously against its cover and I punch the mound into submission. My stomach is rumbling, but the *baozi* still have a ways to go. I return to YouTube to bolster my confidence as I roll the dough into discs and wrap each around a spoonful of filling. "The first one always looks a little ugly, but you'll get the hang of it!" chirps Grace. Lies. Every single one of my *baozi* looks as ugly as the other, and the flabby creases only get more misshapen as the dough continues to rise.

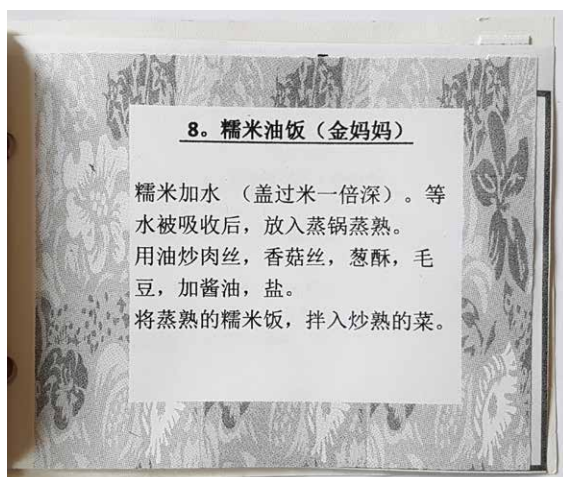
Despair sets in. If I were a contestant on a reality TV show cooking challenge, the camera would now zoom in on my frazzled, floury face and red eyes. "Get your act together!" I imagine an apoplectic Gordon Ramsay shouting at me.



Did my mother feel this woefully inadequate, I wonder, when she was learning to cook Western food in her mid-20s, having just moved to Vancouver with the brand-new Canadian husband she had met and married in Tainan. Her new mother-in-law had taken her under her wing, teaching her to make essentials like the roast turkey and trimmings that my mother made faithfully every Thanksgiving and Christmas thenceforth. I wonder if she felt culture-shocked or thrilled (or both) as she slapped raw meatloaf into a baking tin or stirred gobs of butter into mashed beige turnips. My mother still has some of the 1970s cookbooks she was given, collections of nostalgic Canadian recipes for homesteader Mennonite zucchini cake and bannock bread cooked over a fire. I remember flipping through one of them, a recipe for reindeer stroganoff catching my eye. Next to it, my mother had lightly penciled in two Chinese characters: 不好 - "not good."

Upheaval, relocation, and reinvention run in my family. I was born in Vancouver, moved to Taiwan at nine months, returned to Canada at 14 for boarding school, then stayed on for university. As a child in Taiwan, I hadn't felt like I belonged, thanks to the pale skin and gangly height that my father's British-Irish genes gave me. When you're constantly called a





waiguoren ("foreigner") as a child, you believe it. So I wanted to be like the blonde, blue-eyed girls that I read about voraciously in *The Baby-Sitters Club* and *Sweet Valley Twins*. Those girls ate pizza in their white-picket-fenced homes in suburban Connecticut and California, not noodles doused in fermented bean paste or fried radish cakes dotted with pungent, beady-eyed little shrimp.

I drifted to Europe in my early 20s, ending up in Berlin. In this place where I had no connections and could define myself however I chose, I found myself increasingly homesick for my Taiwanese roots. Whenever I was asked where I was from, replying with "Canada" increasingly seemed wrong.

Feeling Taiwanese for the first time in my life, I began craving the food I grew up on. I missed the *zhajiang* noodles with bean paste and minced pork, those fried radish cakes, beef noodle soup, bowls of hot soy milk for breakfast, the millet congee and steamed pork dumplings we ordered every Sunday evening at the hole-in-the-wall restaurant around the corner from the church we attended. I dreamt most of all about the *xiaochi* snacks sold on the street: the steamed buns and *zongzi* sticky rice dumplings dangling in their bamboo leaf wrappers inside big steamers, flaky *bing* pancakes layered with slivers of green onion, and *douhua*, pudding-soft silken tofu in sugar syrup with boiled peanuts. Hardly any of that was available in Berlin, and any restaurants I did try never tasted like home. And so I began to cook. And cook and cook.

By the time the first batch of *baozi* emerges from the steamer, I've been slaving in the kitchen for four hours. I wolf down three buns, pausing mid-bite to mix up a dipping sauce of soy sauce and black vinegar. They look like something sculpted in a preschool arts and crafts session, but they taste delicious. Next time, I'll skip the dough rigmorole and wrap my grandmother's filling in store-bought dumpling skins. I'll add some minced shiitake mushrooms, too. And maybe some garlic chives ...

The steamer barely has time to cool before it's back in commission. I've got a dinner guest coming over in mere hours and I have two more dishes to make, starting with the *bangbang* chicken. I steam two chicken breasts as directed, then puzzle over the scant instructions:

Combine cucumber, minced garlic, minced ginger, minced scallion. Add sesame oil, chili oil, sugar, adjust seasoning.

The lack of vinegar has to be a clerical error – I cannot imagine this dish without a tangy note bringing up the rear. I go with my gut and add a generous glug of rice vinegar.

By the time my guest rings the doorbell, I've scarfed another bun, told the little Gordon Ramsay devil on my shoulder to go fuck himself several times, consulted Google repeatedly and used pretty much every dish in my tiny kitchen thrice. I let her into my apartment and collapse onto the bed like a Victorian woman on a fainting couch.

"You okay?" she asks.

"I'm exhausted. And freaking out!"

"Uh, are you doing that thing again where you think you're not Chinese enough? You know that's ridiculous." She follows her nose into the kitchen to check out the buns. "You made these?" she shouts from the other room, voice muffled with a mouthful of dough. "These are amazing!" A pause. "They could use some salt."

She polishes off two *baozi* while I summon the strength to resume position in front of the stove. The final dish on the menu is *you fan*, sticky rice with pork slivers and shiitake. As

the rice hisses on the back burner in a makeshift steamer I've rigged up with aluminum foil, I begin searing the pork and the kitchen fills with familiar smells.

Use oil to fry meat strips, shiitake mushrooms, shallots, edamame, add soy sauce, salt. Stir in the cooked rice.

I garnish the finished dish with a fistful of chopped cilantro, a Taiwanese essential as far as I'm concerned, and we sit down to eat. My friend takes a few bites and looks at me solemnly. "This is, like, one of the best Chinese meals I've ever had. You have earned the golden chopsticks," she says.

My inner critic can't agree, but still, I'm pleased with my handiwork. The sticky, soy-sauce-stained rice is comfort food extraordinaire, and the tender shreds of *bang-bang* chicken pair nicely with the freshness of the cucumber and the spicy sesame dressing. The next day, I bring the leftovers to work and eat alone in the kitchen, hoping my conservative German officemates can't smell the microwaved shiitake from their desks.

A week later, I return to the cookbook for a second round. It's time to take on the red-braised beef. My grandmother's *hongshao* recipe is unlike any other I've seen, with lots of carrot and daikon stewing amongst the meat. The radish is a unique addition, perhaps a tradition my grandmother brought with her from Nanjing.

Cut beef into pieces. Bring to a boil then pour off water. Cook a second time with wine, sugar, soy sauce, salt, star anise, ginger, garlic, tomatoes (two), carrots, radish, simmer on low heat for 1-2 hours.

I let my instincts take the reins. A generous splash of rice wine, a shake of sugar, two glugs of soy sauce: eyeballing ingredients is probably the technique employed by grandmothers everywhere. This time, I go by the book and leave out the Sichuan peppercorns and cassia bark that other recipes use. I want to taste my grandmother's version, unadulterated.

For Proust, it was the taste of a crumbly madeleine that famously stirred his memories. For me, it's the smell of star anise simmering with soy sauce and rice wine. Darkly spicy and pungent, this is the exact scent that takes me back to my grandmother's kitchen and my mother's, to steamy night market alleyways in Taipei and Kaohsiung,

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to every convenience store and gas station in Taiwan where a slow cooker at the end of the counter stews eggs and tofu and pig guts for hours in this aromatic liquid. And now, that smell is billowing through my little apartment in Berlin, stirring my hunger and nostalgia in equal measure.

After a few hours, the pot of broth on my stove has gone dark and glossy with collagen rendered from the sinewy beef shank. As a child, I wouldn't touch the gooey bits of tendon, which my grandmother and mother always said would prevent wrinkles. Now, perhaps because I'm courting wrinkles myself, I relish them. I ladle glistening cubes of beef, carrot, and daikon onto a bowl of noodles, stretching out the broth with some noodle cooking water the way my mother does. With the very first slurp, I know I've mastered my grandmother's signature dish. It tastes just like home, even if my home now – and hers as well – is a long way from where we began. 🍴

