

LEITE'S CULINARIA



Gong Bao Ji Ding (Kung Pao Chicken With Peanuts)

by Fuchsia Dunlop
from Land of Plenty:
A Treasury of Authentic Sichuan Cooking
(W.W. Norton, 2003)
Serves 2 as a main dish

This dish, also known as Kung Pao chicken, has the curious distinction of having been labeled as politically incorrect during the Cultural Revolution. It is named after a late Qing Dynasty (late 19th century) governor of Sichuan, Ding Baozhen, who is said to have particularly enjoyed eating it — *Gong Bao* was his official title. No one can quite agree on the details of its origins: Some say it was a dish Ding Baozhen brought with him from his home province of Guizhou; others that he ate it in a modest restaurant when he went out in humble dress to observe the real lives of his subjects; still others, rather implausibly, that his chef invented the finely chopped chicken dish because Ding Baozhen had bad teeth. Whatever the truth of its origins, its association with an imperial bureaucrat was enough to provoke the wrath of the Cultural Revolution radicals, and it was renamed "fast-fried chicken cubes" (*hong bao ji ding*) or "chicken cubes with seared chiles" (*hu la ji ding*) until its political rehabilitation in the 1980s.

Gong Bao chicken is beautiful to look at: a glorious medley of chicken, golden peanuts, and bright red chiles. The sauce is a light sweet-and-sour base pepped up with a deep chile spiciness and a trace of Sichuan pepper that will make your lips tingle pleasantly. The ingredients are all cut in harmony, the chicken in small cubes and the scallion in short pieces to complement the peanuts. The chicken should be just cooked and wonderfully succulent; the nuts are added at the very last minute so they keep their crispness.

INGREDIENTS

2 (about 2/3 pound total) boneless chicken breasts, with or without skin
3 garlic cloves and an equivalent amount of fresh ginger
5 scallions, white parts only
2 tablespoons peanut oil
A generous handful of dried red chiles (at least 10), preferably Sichuanese
1 teaspoon whole Sichuan pepper
2/3 cup roasted unsalted peanuts

For the marinade

1/2 teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons light soy sauce
1 teaspoon *Shaoxing* rice wine or medium-dry sherry
1 1/2 teaspoons potato flour or 2 1/4 teaspoons cornstarch
1 tablespoon water

For the sauce

3 teaspoons sugar

3/4 teaspoon potato flour, or 1 1/8 teaspoons cornstarch
1 teaspoon dark soy sauce
1 teaspoon light soy sauce
3 teaspoons *Chinkiang* or black Chinese vinegar
1 teaspoon sesame oil
1 tablespoon chicken stock or water

METHOD

1. Cut the chicken as evenly as possible into 1/2-inch strips and then cut these into small cubes. Place in a small bowl and mix in the marinade ingredients.
2. Peel and thinly slice the garlic and ginger, and chop the scallions into chunks as long as their diameter (to match the chicken cubes). Snip the chiles in half or into 2-inch sections. Wearing rubber gloves, discard as many seeds as possible.
3. Combine the sauce ingredients in a small bowl — if you dip your finger in, you can taste the sweet-sour base of the *gong bao* flavor.
4. Season the wok, then add 2 tablespoons of oil and heat over a high flame. When the oil is hot but not yet smoking, add the chiles and Sichuan pepper and stir-fry briefly until they are crisp and the oil is spicy and fragrant. Take care not to burn the spices (you can remove the wok from the heat if necessary to prevent overheating).
5. Quickly add the chicken and fry over a high flame, stirring constantly. As soon as the chicken cubes have separated, add the ginger, garlic, and scallions and continue to stir-fry for a few minutes until they are fragrant and the meat is cooked through (test one of the larger pieces to make sure).
6. Give the sauce a stir and add it to the wok, continuing to stir and toss. As soon as the sauce has become thick and shiny, add the peanuts, stir them in, and serve.

Variations

The same dish can be made with cubes of pork, shrimp, or prawns. Cashew nuts can be used instead of peanuts for a grander version of this dish, although peanuts are more traditional.

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