

My chicken bao

This recipe is inspired by an incredible dish I enjoyed at Little Bao, an edgy diner conceived by chef May Chow, and one of the hottest places to dine in Hong Kong. May is a friend and one helluva talented chef. She was named Asia's Best Female Chef 2017 by Asia's 50 Best Restaurants, an offshoot of the World's 50 Best Restaurants awards. May presents her bao like a hamburger. My version is shaped like a *gua bao*, a Chinese sandwich-style steamed bun. I've given the recipe for these buns below, or they can be found in the freezer section of Asian grocers.

500 g (1 lb 2 oz) boned chicken thighs, cut into 5 cm (2 inch) strips
2 eggs, beaten
300 g (10½ oz/2 cups) plain (all-purpose) flour mixed with
1 teaspoon salt
Oil, for deep-frying
1 large handful basil
1 large handful coriander (cilantro)

Pickled carrot

250 ml (9 fl oz/1 cup) white rice vinegar
100 g (3½ oz) sugar
200 g (7 oz) julienned carrots

Marinade

1 tablespoon light soy sauce
½ teaspoon Chinese five-spice
½ teaspoon chilli powder
½ teaspoon salt, to taste
½ teaspoon white pepper
1 teaspoon cornflour (cornstarch)

Sichuan mayonnaise

1 tablespoon Sichuan pepper oil
200 ml (7 fl oz) Kewpie mayonnaise

Bao dough

½ quantity bao dough (see char siu bao page 202)
Vegetable oil, for brushing

To make the pickled carrot, simmer the vinegar, sugar, 125 ml (4 fl oz/½ cup) water and 1 teaspoon salt in a small saucepan, stirring until the sugar dissolves. Cool completely, then add the carrots and refrigerate overnight.

Combine the marinade ingredients in a bowl, add the chicken and stir to coat. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 2 hours or overnight.

To make the Sichuan mayonnaise, combine the ingredients and set aside.

To make the *gua bao*, roll the dough into a cylinder and cut into 10 pieces. Roll each into a ball, then flatten with the palm of your hand. Sprinkle with flour and roll each into a 15 cm (6 inch) oval. Brush with oil, fold in half and press gently. Place on squares of baking paper and leave to prove until doubled in size (about 1 hour). Steam the buns in batches in a steamer until puffed (8–10 minutes).

Meanwhile, combine the beaten eggs and 125 ml (4 fl oz/½ cup) water in a bowl. Place the seasoned flour in a shallow bowl. Dip the chicken pieces in the eggwash, then the flour, shaking off the excess.

Heat oil in a deep-fryer or wok to 180°C (350°C) or until a piece of bread browns in 10 seconds, and deep-fry the chicken in batches until golden and crisp.

Remove with a slotted spoon and drain on paper towel. When all the chicken is done, deep-fry the basil for a couple of seconds until crisp. Drain on paper towel. To serve, stuff the chicken pieces into the split bao with carrots, fried basil and coriander, and top with mayonnaise.

BAO DOUGH

60 g (2¼ oz) caster (superfine) sugar
250 ml (9 fl oz/1 cup) lukewarm water
1½ teaspoons dried yeast
430 g (15¼ oz) cake flour
3 teaspoons baking powder
2 tablespoons vegetable oil
½ teaspoon rice vinegar

To make the dough, dissolve the sugar in the lukewarm water, stir in the yeast and set aside in a draught-free place for 10 minutes until it turns foamy.

Sift the flour and baking powder into a bowl. Make a well in the centre, add the yeast mixture, oil, vinegar and a pinch of salt, then, using a wooden spoon, stir until well combined. Turn out onto a lightly floured bench and knead for 8–10 minutes until the dough is soft and pliable (this can also be done in an electric mixer with a dough hook attachment).

Place the dough in a lightly oiled bowl, turn to coat evenly, cover with plastic wrap or a tea towel, and set aside in a draught-free place until doubled in size (1–2 hours or up to 3–4 hours on a cold day).

Hong Kong Food City by Tony Tan (Murdoch Books, £20). Photography by Greg Elms.