

Nanban: Japanese Soul Food

Buta Kakuni Manju Pork Belly Buns



Yield:
4 servings

Ingredients:

For the pork belly:
2 tbsp vegetable oil
500g pork belly, rind removed
water, as required

1 onion, cut into quarters
2 cloves garlic
10g ginger, sliced
2 star anise
2 bay leaves

1 stick (4-5cm) cinnamon
300ml dashi
30ml mirin

1 tbsp caster sugar

30ml soy sauce – use a really rich-flavoured one, like tamari, koikuchi or even kicap manis

To serve:

8-10 plain buns, sliced, for steaming
(check your Chinese grocer's freezer section – they will be labeled mantou or 'doubled slice')

½ leek, julienned

60ml hoisin sauce

½ cucumber, thinly sliced

hot mustard, to taste (optional)

Buta kakuni manjū are Japan's take on gua bao, the Taiwanese pork buns recently popularised by Momofuku and sometimes called 'Hirata buns'. This nomenclature isn't found in Japan; it actually comes from Masashi Hirata, the executive chef of Ippudo in New York. Pretty cheeky, if you ask me, slapping your name on a dish that has been around for aeons. Maybe I'll start calling cheeseburgers 'Anderson buns'. Anyway, these aren't exactly Japanese, but they are a common street snack in Nagasaki's Chinatown, where they're served directly out of big bamboo steamers, billowing their enticing aroma into the lantern-lit alleyways. I wanted to bring the Chinese roots of this dish to the fore, so I've used some aromatics in the simmering liquid that impart a captivating complexity to the pork. They will also perfume your house and make it smell like your favourite Cantonese restaurant.

For the pork belly:

Heat the vegetable oil in a deep casserole. Brown the pork belly over a medium-high heat on all sides. Remove the meat and drain the fat from the pan. Return the pan to the heat and put the pork back in. Cover with water and add the onion, garlic, ginger, star anise, bay leaves and cinnamon. You need to keep the pork submerged in the cooking liquid; I put a metal bowl weighted down with a bottle of water on top of the meat in the pan. Bring the liquid to the boil, and then reduce the heat to a bare simmer; it should only just be bubbling. Simmer for 2 hours, topping up with water if necessary. The pork should be quite soft, but not falling apart.

Remove the pork and drain off the cooking liquid (hold on to it if you want to – it's a pretty good stock base). Clean the pan, and pour in the dashi, mirin and sugar. Bring the liquid to the boil. Slice the pork belly into chunks, about 10–15mm thick. Add these to the dashi and reduce

the heat to medium-low – it should simmer a little more than the initial braise, but only just. Let the liquid reduce, basting the meat often, until it's syrupy, then add the soy sauce, and reduce a little more. Be patient here – it will take a good 30–40 minutes to reduce. Don't be tempted to turn the heat up, as this will make the meat go dry. The pork is done when it's coated in a sticky dark brown glaze. This is even better if you leave the pork in its glaze in the fridge overnight; it's like a sort of post-marinate. But it takes a fair bit of willpower not to indulge immediately!

To serve:

Steam the buns in a steamer basket lined with baking paper, or in a very hot oven with a tray of boiling water placed at the bottom. Gently reheat the buta kakuni in its own glaze. Stuff the pork into the buns along with the leek, hoisin sauce, cucumber and a thin spread of mustard, if you like. You can keep these nice and hot in the steamer until ready to serve.

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Taken from...

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