

Food & Drink

Method: Traditionally, sweet and sour pork is made with either a batter or a dredge.

Try it. Served at every Chinese restaurant, Sweet and Sour pork can be a tricky recipe to pull off at home.

BY A KADUMUKASA KIRONDE II

Sweet and sour pork must be one of the most popular items that is served in any Chinese restaurant. This spans from Kampala, to New York or London and takeaways in the Western world. To my annoyance, more often than not, it is frequently marred by cooks who use too much ketchup in the sauce.

This was one of the highlights of my meals when I was growing up in New York City during the 70s. It showed up in any number of the myriad of Chinese joints in downtown Chinatown that we would visit frequently, usually with several glossy, golden pieces of meat nestled between chunks of bell pepper and pineapple. Its tiny portion only made it more precious.

This unique combination was something that I looked forward to with much anticipation during these forays. The pork was always tender and juicy, the coating still crisp despite the sauce, and the whole thing had a sweet, tangy brightness which I came to relish and love to date.

Balancing the taste

Years later, with picky eaters at home and the usual weeknight dinner fatigue setting in, I found myself craving that same flavour and texture, with its balance of crispy and saucy, savoury and sweet. Recreating it at home turned out to be challenging. The coating had to stay crisp even after tossing the pork with the sauce, the vegetables needed to be tender but still have some bite, and the pineapple had to provide enough of its tropical punch without overwhelming the dish. And the sauce, arguably the heart of it all, had to strike the right chord: bright, fruity, sweet, and sour without tipping too far in any direction. The combination of crisp fried pork, bell peppers, and pineapple may feel distinctly Chinese American today, but the idea of pairing sweet and tangy flavours with pork has deeper roots. In Guangdong province, considered the heart of Cantonese cuisine, vinegar-and-sugar-based sauces have long been used to coat lightly-fried fish, prawns, and pork, and other proteins.

Pineapple, however, is a relatively recent addition. It rose to popularity in the mid-20th century, when fresh and canned pineapple became widely available



Sweet and sour pork. PHOTO/ KADUMUKASA KIRONDE II

Nail that Sweet and SOUR pork recipe

derness, baking soda to keep the pork tender and juicy, and salt for seasoning. Ground white pepper adds a subtle kick, while the eggs help the coating stick to the pork. A small amount of cornstarch helps the marinade cling to the meat, and a splash of oil helps everything mix evenly. The result is pork that fries up flavourful and crisp, ready to stand up to the bold sauce. The marinade lays the groundwork, but the real challenge is getting the coating just right.

Traditionally, sweet and sour pork is made with either a batter or a dredge. But after testing both approaches, the former tends to soften quickly once it hits the sauce. To keep the exterior shatteringly crisp for longer, a well-built dredge is the way to go. Potato starch is my go-to. It fries up lighter and crunchier than wheat flour, and holds its texture better over time. (If you do not have potato starch, use cornstarch.) A little baking powder adds aeration, giving the crust a delicate puff. The classic method for this dish often calls for a dredge-dipped approach: coating the meat in starch, dipping it briefly in cold water, then dredging it again. The water helps create an uneven surface, creating more opportunities for crunchiness. For many Chinese cooks instead of dipping the coated meat in water, you simply mix a bit of the marinade into the dredge. This creates small, damp clumps in the starch mixture that cling to the pork and fry into the crispy crust you want.

Method

To ensure the meat has an ultra-crispy, golden-brown exterior while remaining juicy and tender, it is important to fry the pork properly, which means double-frying, a technique used to prepare many Chinese fried dishes.

Start by frying the pork at a relatively low temperature (about 325°F/163°C), in two batches to avoid overcrowding the pan and dropping the oil temperature too much. At this stage, you are not looking for colour but want the dredge to begin to set, which takes about two minutes. Transfer the pork to a plate to rest. This pause lets the pork cool slightly and allows the surface moisture to evaporate, ensuring the second fry produces the crispiest possible crust.

The next fry is at 375°F (190°C). You fry the pork again, still in batches, this time just until the coating turns golden and deeply crisp. The high heat gives the exterior its signature crunchiness and creates a sturdy shell that holds up beautifully against the sauce. The result, pork that is juicy on the inside, crunchy on the outside, and still crisp even after it is tossed with the sweet and sour glaze. A texture that is well worth the extra step.

in Chinese restaurants abroad and gradually found its way into Cantonese kitchens in southern China and Hong Kong. Its vibrant colour and juicy, sweet-tart flavour made it a natural fit for the dish, and it eventually became an essential part of sweet and sour pork. The sauce was traditionally flavoured with dried hawthorn or salted dried plum, fruity and tangy elements that are hallmarks of Cantonese cooking, especially in dishes designed to complement pork.

Over time, many restaurants began using a combination of ketchup, sugar, and vinegar to mimic that fruit-forward profile while also lending the dish its signature glossy, red-orange hue. It is a clever shortcut, easy to put to-

gether and remarkably well-balanced. As for the pork, older recipes often call for pork neck, prized for its rich flavour and generous marbling. However, modern-day versions tend to favour leaner cuts, such as pork loin or tenderloin, which are seen as more workable for home cooks as well as being more readily available. I lean toward tenderloin because it is easy to find and work with. Also, it stays tender when prepared properly. You can also make this dish with chicken thighs.

As with many stir-fried meat dishes in Chinese cooking, the pork here gets a quick marinade before cooking. This step seasons the meat and improves its texture. This marinade uses Chinese cooking wine for depth and ten-



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Weekend Cuisine

Ingredients

350g lean boneless pork
Salt & pepper to taste
½ teaspoon ground Szechuan pepper
1 tablespoon Chinese rice wine or dry sherry
50g bamboo shoots
2 tablespoons plain flour
1 egg lightly beaten
Vegetable oil, for deep frying

For the sauce

1 tablespoon vegetable oil
1 garlic clove, finely chopped
1 knob ginger, finely chopped
1 spring onions, cut into short sections
1 small green pepper, seeded and diced
1 fresh red chilli, seeded and finely shredded
1 tablespoon light soy sauce
2 tablespoons light brown sugar
3 tablespoons rice vinegar
1 tablespoon tomato puree
½ cup or the reabouts basic stock or water