

SOR PLOUNG

While it is fun to watch some cooks come to life, arms flailing with utensils and pans, buzzing from one heated surface to another, there's a calming quality about methodical and steady-paced chefs. Sor brings her shelf-stable ingredients stored in reused jars with brightly colored lids in a recycled box that fits under her arm. The ingredients are the condiment pillars of Cambodian



cooking; palm sugar cubes, fish sauce, oyster sauce, Golden Mountain seasoning sauce, pepper, and garlic. MSG is included, and though it has fallen out of favor with cooks in many parts of the world, some chefs still use the ingredient to achieve an umami flavor, and there are alternatives that deliver a similar sensation without the side effects. She takes a carton of smooth white eggs and neatly wrapped slender pork belly slab from the fridge and collects the equipment: several small bowls, a substantial stockpot, tasting spoons, and a spatula. She is making *kaw sach krouch*, and unlike in the U.S. where warm soups are usually reserved for cooler months, this hearty soup is enjoyed year-round in Cambodia. Our previous guest chef from the neighboring country of Thailand described Cambodian food as having more



The artful arrangement of pre-measured ingredients and balanced spacing of eggs and spices shows the value of presentation by many Southeast Asian cooks during all stages of the dish.

sweetness compared to the spiciness that predominates Thai dishes, despite the countries being neighbors. While the eggs boil, she carefully measures the condiments into shiny metal and glass bowls and slices the chilly pork slabs into rustic chunks that contrast against the twinkling thin stainless steel bowl. The ingredients are arranged as if reporting for duty. She tosses the star anise into a hot pan, where they dance around with the spatula for a minute and create an aroma with Glade PlugIn strength. A splash of water followed by the caramel-colored palm sugar lozenges fall into the pan, eventually forming a shiny syrup.



All other ingredients follow into the pot to create a sticky, fragrant glaze for the pork chunks. It takes considerable muscle to consistently tumble the pork chunks until they're completely bathed in the deep brown sticky glaze. Sor silently works in the demonstration kitchen but normally listens to her favorite type of music while cooking at home:

Cambodian pop from the 80s.

When prompted, she shares her culinary wisdom that boils down to two principles that do not include knowing how to read a recipe; carefully think about each ingredient and what it will add to a dish, and use ingredients you like. "If you like more, put some more; if you like a little bit, then put a little bit." Why does this intuitive advice seem so difficult for many cooks to follow? It's very clear a strong foundation in cooking skills begins with genuine curiosity and is refined by time and practice. Sor began cooking around 11 years old, partly due to necessity as she helped care for her four younger siblings. She grew up with a loving mother who cooked three meals a day for a family of seven in between shifts of agricultural labor, but it was the enticing dishes at weddings and temple celebrations that piqued her interest in making food. She would observe cooks labor over these special foods served in mob quantities and ponder what combinations and ratios of ingredients gave each dish a balanced taste. Her love and interest in growing and cooking food for her daughters, son, and grandson remains strong, even after being in the U.S. for 20 years. Whether she's staying up late after her second job to assemble eggrolls or



Every year since arriving in the U.S., Sor has maintained a low-tech garden space that provides essential produce like melons, lemongrass, kaffir leaves and long beans.

batch-cooking 20 pounds of fried rice for a family gathering, her food is made with sincere effort, concern for the diner's experience, and true love of the process.



Salted eggs and smoked fish add fat and protein to rice porridge, a staple breakfast in Cambodia.

PREP TIME: 1 hour
COOK TIME: 45 min
SERVES: 8-10

INGREDIENTS:

- 7-8 c. of water
- 1 dozen boiled eggs, peeled
- 4 c. canned bamboo shoots, drained and rinsed
- 2 ½ lbs of pork belly, skin on, and cut into roughly 1" chunks
- 8 cubes of palm sugar
- 1 ½ Tbsp fish sauce
- 2 ½ Tbsp oyster sauce
- 1 pod of garlic, minced
- 1 Tbsp MSG or alternative flavor enhancement such as Po Lo Ku Mushroom Seasoning
- 2 Tsp Golden Mountain seasoning sauce
- 8 pods of star anise
- 1 Tbsp pepper
- 1 Tbsp salt

EQUIPMENT:

- Large stock pot
- Small saucepan
- Cutting surface
- Bowls for separating ingredients
- Sharp knife
- Spatula
- Ladle

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Braised Pork Soup (Kaw)



-KEEP IN MIND-

- This hearty dish takes time for flavors and colors to develop, and ideally should have about three hours to simmer.
- Taste and adjust the sweet and salty flavors to your liking; the flavors change over the course of simmering. The amounts listed in the ingredients are a starting point; add more or less according to your tastes.

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Braised Pork Soup (Kaw)

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Toast star anise on medium-low heat in a small saucepan until fragrant by continuously tossing around in the pan with a spatula to prevent scorching, remove from heat.
2. Add 2 Tbsp water to a large stock pot on medium heat, then add palm sugar cubes and constantly stir to prevent burning for about 8 minutes or until completely melted and sticky.
3. When sugar is melted, add garlic, black pepper, MSG or alternative seasoning, fish sauce, and Golden Mountain sauce, stirring to incorporate between each additional ingredient.
4. Add pork chunks and continuously stir to thoroughly coat and prevent burning.
5. Add oyster sauce and continue stirring.
6. Increase heat to medium-high for 1 minute, continue to stir.
7. Add bamboo and continue to stir until lightly caramelized.
8. Enjoy with warm rice.