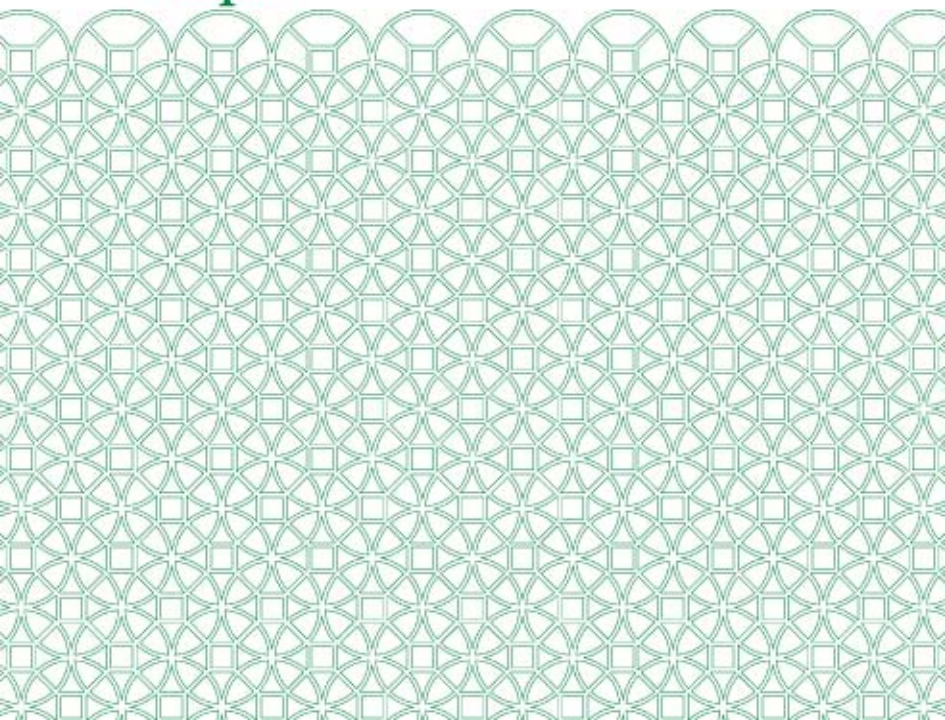




madam choy's  
cantonese recipes



madam choy's  
cantonese  
recipes



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# madam choy's cantonese recipes



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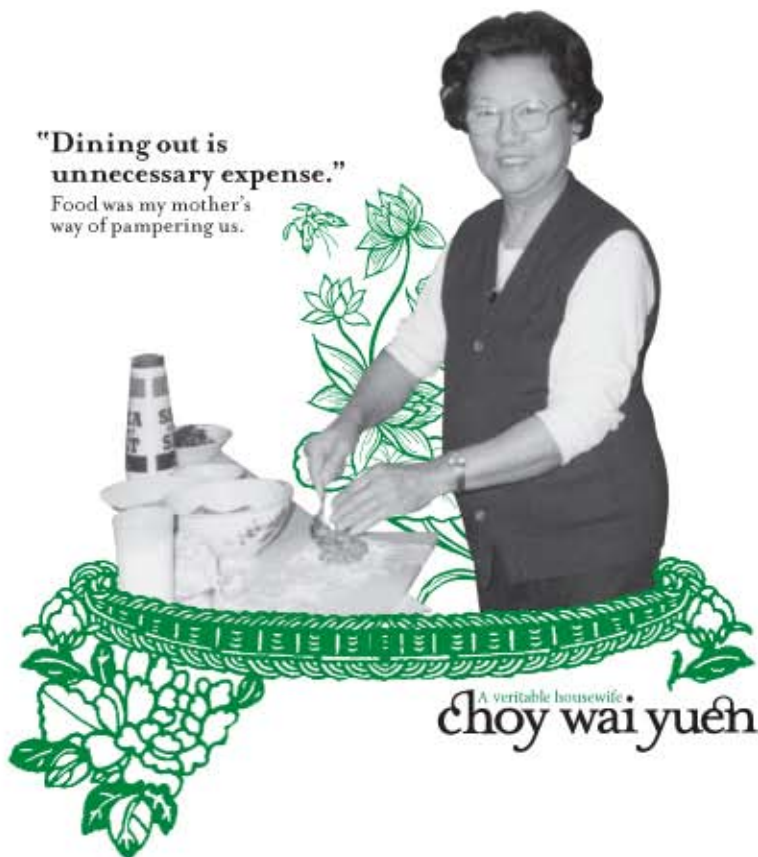
# wok of life

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**"Dining out is unnecessary expense."**

Food was my mother's way of pampering us.



A veritable housewife  
**choy wai yuén**

---

MY MOTHER WAS BORN 85 years ago in Kuala Lumpur of parents who emigrated from Guangdong province in China. They would soon move to Seremban, in the Malaysian state of Negri Sembilan, where eleven other children followed in quick succession. Only seven, including my mother, survived and the family occupied the corner terrace house just outside the town where my grandfather became a prominent businessman. Besides the family, there were several *mui jye*, young bonded maids from China who came with my grandmother when she got married, a handful of adopted daughters, and in later years, several servants hired from the town.

The Chooi household (my mother's surname was changed to Choy by an inept bureaucrat) was large and noisy, under the command and control of my grandmother. The children led carefree lives while being educated in schools that put little if any pressure on them. The elder daughters were matched in their mid-teens with prospective husbands and the boys were sent to prestigious schools in Penang and groomed to take over the family business.

The dinner table was always bountiful, and soon every family member was a food critic commenting on every mouthful, from simple snacks to exquisite banquet dishes. It was little wonder that my mother soon learned what good food was. But with maids and servants handling all the work, she did nothing in the kitchen and showed little interest, and never learned even to boil water!

At 16, my mother, then a slip of a girl and still in school, married my father, Loke Seck Cheong, and moved to Singapore, where she found herself in a terrace house off Jalan Besar. Here, my paternal grandmother ruled the house, including the kitchen, a tiny cubicle with a charcoal stove. A stern matriarch

who doted on her son and grandsons, Grandma Loke discussed the daily menu with our black-and-white amah, *ng chay* (fifth sister). Breakfast before school was rice with fish, meat and vegetables. Ham was unheard of, although my father had three soft-boiled eggs every morning, a practice that stopped when cholesterol crept into our vocabulary. Daily meals were simple but tasty enough.

Back in Seremban, the situation was the complete opposite. At year's end every year after the War, my mother took us – two girls and two boys – to Seremban to join our numerous cousins, who had grown in number after another aunt and uncle got married. Grandma and Second Aunt who married Mother's younger brother, with help from two maids and the now-elderly former maids who visited frequently, churned out huge meals several times a day. Visiting daughters like my mother would help in simple tasks. Together, they served up mid-morning and afternoon snacks and supper, plus the three main meals. As the extended brood grew, it became clear the tiny kitchen between the inner hall and the toilet at the back was inadequate.

Around the late 1950s, Grandpa Chooi bought the empty land next to the house and built an enormous kitchen the size of a small flat. It had a row of burners, a big round table that could seat a dozen or more, and numerous storage shelves and cupboards. Here, the women folk gathered to peel and pluck, stir-fry and simmer to feed the holidaying hordes at regular meal times and in between. This was when we kids picked up the art of food tasting.

Second Uncle had the most discerning palate and would comment on every dish. Even the cow's milk, delivered each morning in bottles by dhoti-clad men on bicycles, then



boiled and served salted or sweetened slightly, was deemed either “rich and full-bodied” or “flat and not fragrant”. Others would pitch in, especially when the food was below par.

From the time we third-generation children could walk and talk, we had learned that texture and fragrance were as important to food as taste. Noodles should “spring off the teeth” (*darn ngah*) which is more descriptive than the Italian *al dente*. Fried dishes must have *wok hei*, long before western food writers called it the “breath of the wok”. Steamed fish should be smooth (*wah*) and just cooked, indicated by a slight redness near the bone. The dough of prawn dumplings (*har gau*) should be translucent and springy, and not stick to the teeth. Shark's fins, in those pre-conservation days, should have sufficiently firm body (*gau sun*) which meant a bite that was not hard like a stick of carrot nor soft like jelly, and different from *darn ngah* noodles. And the crackling of roast suckling pig must have a light crispness (*soong chooi*). We also knew that sweet (*teem*) was not necessarily sugary and *gum*, which sounded like the word for gold, was a tangy taste that had no equivalent in English.

Street and fast foods were not spared; from roadside apom pancakes to A&W's curly-cue fries, they all came under scrutiny. One house specialty was love letters, the crisp coconut and egg biscuits, made every year as gifts for the Chinese New Year. The production line was set up in the air well. Three open charcoal fires baked the paper-thin sheets in three flat cast-iron clams, operated by three aunts or maids for days on end. Each sheet would be peeled from the open clam and folded with a chopstick into triangles and fitted into large Milo tins. When cool, they were feather light, and when bitten, released a wonderful coconut fragrance. The sheets were so fragile that when rolled into cigar shapes, they broke easily in the tins. Family con-



noisseurs would walk by and grab a handful “to make sure they were of the usual high standard” they claimed. Today, no store-bought love letters can match those – in texture or fragrance.

During the durian season, Second Uncle would come home with an industrial-sized basket of the spiky fruit and Grandpa would open them one at a time. Uncle would taste a seed from the first fruit and comment on the fragrance, texture and taste. If it was deemed good, we would all dive in. If not, the whole fruit would be tossed aside and another cracked open. Durians that were not overly ripe were described as having yellow flesh in a dry pouch (*wong yoke gon bau*). Small, shrunken seeds were known as seed-sucking good (*jueet wut*). Bitter-sweet (*foo teem*) was an acquired taste and came only from good durians. If the flesh was wet (*siok*), unripe (*sarng bau*) or bland (*tarm*), it would be discarded. One by one, the whole basket of durians would be polished off with the rejects untouched.

Back in Singapore, meals remained the predictable meat, fish and vegetables, until 1957 when we moved to a big house with a long, large kitchen. It had sky-blue cabinets that reached the ceiling, a double sink at one end, a gas hob with an oven below, and a round marble-top table that could seat six. For the first time, my mother felt she had a kitchen of her own. The meek newly-wed girl had meanwhile grown into a confident, though less svelte, woman and began experimenting with dishes she had learned from Seremban. Together with a neighbour, an excellent cook who made melt-in-the-mouth Swiss rolls, my mother went to cooking classes. She kept recipes from newspapers and magazines, expanding her repertoire by adapting them to her own taste.

While *ng chay* continued to produce the standard fare, my mother began turning out fancy dishes like double-boiled



soup with whole chicken stuffed with bird's nest for special occasions. Whenever there was steamed chicken or braised duck, it would be one of our birthdays (but no cakes and candles nor presents). The dinner table would be covered with dishes, almost always with a soup. When we had dinner guests, the finest crockery was brought out and the meal would be a *tour de force* that left us groaning. But we were not allowed to moan that we were full. Grandma would scold us as being *moh yee sek* which meant something like “lacking in eating decorum.”

Looking back, I think we took for granted some of the most delicious dishes that my mother no longer makes today because of the high cost. Among these are chicken with cordyceps soup, braised abalones in oyster sauce, and bird's nest soup. They are included in this book for those with deep pockets. Until just a few years ago, the highlight of my mother's culinary year was the Chinese New Year reunion dinner which always included shark's fin soup. Nature conservation awareness has put paid to this family favourite, which has been replaced by bamboo fungus. The preparation of the fins from the dried whole fin into crunchy golden strands is a pain-staking process and is not described here for the same reason shark's fin soup is left out.

Mother's skills in the kitchen were not her only assets. A veritable housewife, she was among the first women in Singapore to earn a driver's licence in the early 1950s, zipping around in her black Morris Minor driving us to and from school. She sewed all my sister's and my clothes, including our school uniforms, and curtains for the new house and planted beds of orchids in the garden. She managed the big two-storey detached house with just one elderly maid and a part-time gardener.

With four growing children, she made sure we toed the line and was a strict disciplinarian. Speaking only a smatter-



ing of English words, she must have been frustrated when her children rattled in an incomprehensible language that she had tried but failed to learn. Perhaps because of her own conservative upbringing, she was at a loss when it came to her children's social life. More out of fear than disapproval, she frowned on single dates, worse when with a non-Chinese, as was my Eurasian boyfriend. Afraid of the possible clash of culture and language, she objected vehemently, until Grandma Loke, the domineering matriarch who had mellowed into a frail old woman, approved. When we were married, as if her objections never happened, my mother doted on my husband and would prepare his favourite dishes at family dinners.

Food was my mother's way of pampering us. Anything we asked for would appear on the dinner table. Today, sadly, my mother's bad back has reduced her cooking to a minimum, supervising the maid rather than picking up the spatula herself. With four married children, seven grandchildren and five great-grandchildren – and more on their way – she can no longer cope with family dinners. Reluctantly, and after years of protests against "unnecessary expense", she now agrees to hold Chinese New Year reunion dinners in a restaurant.

Learning to cook from my mother is frustrating. To her, cooking is more art than science; nothing is measured and every ingredient is added by instinct. Some ingredients are optional, depending on one's preference. "More or less" or "up to you" were her frequent replies to my queries on the portions. Or she would say "one dollar's worth should be enough". She constantly tasted what she was cooking as she went along, adjusting the seasoning, making it difficult to know exactly how much salt or sauce she was using. For some dishes, she would stick her finger into a bowl of raw meat and suck the finger to



test the seasoning, a habit that would horrify food hygienists.

The measurements in these recipes are just a guide. To find out the proportions that suit you, try the recipe and adjust the seasoning to your liking. Even the size of the servings is subjective because a dish could feed two or ten, depending on what else is on the dining table.

Apart from the proportions, the quality of the ingredients and seasoning can affect the taste. Mother would swear by particular brands of soya sauce or rice flour. Choosing food items is another skill that goes beyond fish with bright red gills. For instance, bitter gourds with broad ridges are less bitter. I have tried to include as many of these tips as possible.

There are other tips on getting the correct texture and taste such as in the braising of sea cucumber and the seasoning of mushrooms. Some instructions are difficult to describe, such as the wrapping of rice dumplings (*jung*). Without watching her do it, or a video, the only way to find out is to buy one from the market and open it carefully to see how the bamboo leaves are wrapped around the filling and tied.

Getting the Cantonese terms for ingredients and dishes was also a problem, until help came from my sister Loo Pin. Together we managed to name them all, albeit with some unconventional transliterations.

My family owes my mother a great debt for all the fabulous meals she produced, but nothing makes her happier than to see people enjoy her cooking. When discussing this book with her, she was often self-deprecating and brushed aside any suggestion that anyone would want to try her recipes. I hope you will prove her wrong.

**Lulin Reutens**  
December 2007



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## madam choy's cantonese recipes

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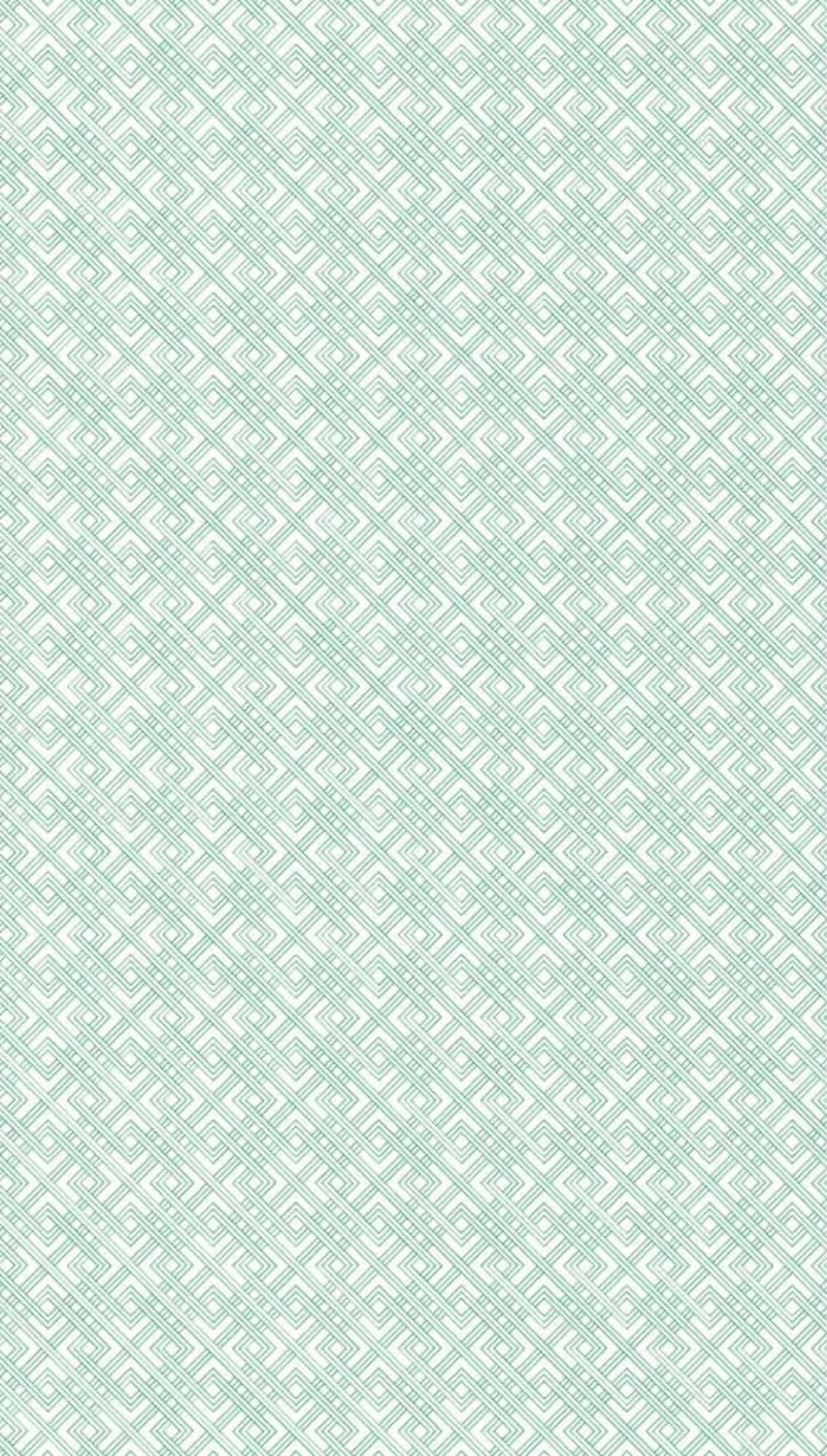
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P14/Soups

## SALTED VEGETABLE SOUP

HARM CHOY TONG

- 2 pieces salted pickled mustard green, soaked for 15 minutes
- 2-3 preserved plums
- 500 g pork bones, blanched
- 2-3 tomatoes, quartered
- salt and pepper

Place all the ingredients in a large pot and add enough water to cover.

Bring to boil and simmer for 1½-2 hours. Season to taste.

### Tips

Choose pork with soft bones which are crunchy and edible.

If the soup is too salty for your taste, you may soak the salted vegetable longer to remove even more salt, or use fewer preserved plums.

### Variation

The pork bones may be replaced with half a duck cut into pieces.

P15/

## THREE-COLOURED CARROT SOUP

SARM SEK LOR BARK TONG



In fact, only one of the three is a carrot. The other two are radishes – white and green. For unknown reason, radishes used in Chinese food are called carrots, as in carrot cakes, the hawker stall favourite.

- 2 large carrots, cut into chunks
- 1 green radish, cut into chunks
- 1 white radish, cut into chunks
- 2 sweet corn cobs, cut into thick slices
- 500 g pork bones or 2 chicken breasts with bone, blanched
- 6 dried scallops, soaked and shredded; keep the water
- 2-3 Chinese Kam Wah ham, blanched and diced
- salt and pepper

Put all the ingredients, including the soaking water, into a large pot. Add enough water to cover. Bring to boil and simmer for 2 hours. Season to taste.

### Tips

Green radishes are similar to white radishes but with green skin. If not available, replace with white radish.

For extra taste, you may replace half the water with chicken stock.

### Variations

These are endless, using different vegetables and pork bones. Some examples: carrots, tomatoes, corn and large onions; carrots, barley, large onions; hairy marrow; pumpkin and carrots.



P16/Soups

## OLD CUCUMBER SOUP

LOE WONG GUA TONG

This is not the same as the green cucumber but are much larger with a rough, reddish-brown skin. After cooking, the flesh is soft and easily scooped with a spoon, delicious when drizzled with a little soya sauce.

- ½ large dried squid
- 1 old cucumber, about 1kg, seeded and cut into large pieces with skin
- 10 red dates, soaked and deseeded
- 500 g pork bones, blanched
- salt and pepper

Cut the squid into 2cm pieces and wash them thoroughly.

Place all the ingredients in a large pot and add enough water to cover. Bring to boil and simmer for 2-3 hours.

To serve, transfer the ingredients into a serving plate and pour the soup into a tureen.

### Tips

*Dried squid (jiong yu) are about 20-25cm long with short tentacles. Do not mix them up with octopus (muck yu) which has long tentacles.*

*You may use a slow cooker at the automatic setting.*

### Variation

*The old cucumber can be replaced by lotus root, which appears as a separate recipe on page 13 only because it is a family favourite and has a completely different taste and texture from old cucumber.*

P17/

## WATERCRESS SOUP

SYE YONG CHOY TONG

Mother used to double-boil this soup. Now, she uses the slow cooker instead, grateful for its convenience. If there is a difference in the result, we have not noticed.

- 500 g watercress
- 2 dried duck gizzards, quartered and soaked overnight
- 3 fresh duck gizzards
- 500 g pork bones, blanched
- 50 g sweet almonds, soaked and peeled
- salt and pepper

Cut off about 6cm from the ends of the watercress stalks and discard. Cut the stalks where the leaves begin, about 10-12cm and tie the stalks with twine into a bundle. Wash the bundle and the leaves thoroughly.

Clean the fresh gizzards by cutting open the pouches and washing off the sand and peeling off the yellow skin inside. Cut each gizzard into two and score the thick muscles, slicing about three-quarter ways but do not cut through.

Put all the ingredients, except the leaves and the bundle of stalks into a large pot. Add enough water to cover and bring to boil. Transfer to a double-boiler or slow cooker set at automatic. When the soup is simmering, add the stalks, cover and cook for 2 hours. Add the leaves and continue to cook for a further 30 minutes. Season to taste.

Discard the bundle of stalks. When serving, include some almonds and strands of leaves in each bowl.

### Tips

*Be sure to buy the watercress that has long stalks and roots, usually sold in large bundles, and not the small bundles of short-stalked variety.*

*The water must be boiling before adding the stalks and leaves or the soup would be bitter.*

*Sweet almonds, also known as apricot kernels, are not the same as the normal almonds used in baking.*

*If you have neither a double-boiler nor a slow cooker, you may cover the pot tightly and steam it in a wok, but be careful not to let the water in the wok dry up. Or just simmer over very low heat, tightly covered.*



## WINTER MELON SOUP

DONG GUA TONG

---

Guests are always impressed when the soup is served from inside the whole melon.

- 5-6 dried Chinese mushrooms, soaked an hour, stalks removed; keep the water
- 1 tbs oyster sauce
- 4 fresh duck gizzards
- 10 small dried scallops, soaked and shredded; keep the water
- 2-3 slices Chinese Kam Wah ham, blanched and finely diced
- oil for frying
- soya sauce
- pepper
- 1 medium-sized winter melon
- salt
- 2-3 cups chicken stock
- 5-6 water chestnuts, peeled and diced
- 1 chicken thigh with drumstick, boned and roughly diced

Simmer mushrooms and soaking water in a small saucepan. Add the oyster sauce and simmer until the liquid is almost all evaporated. Cool and dice.

Cut the gizzards open and wash away the sand inside. Peel off the yellow skin lining the inside. Finely dice the cleaned gizzards.

Transfer the scallops into a bowl and decant the water into another bowl, discarding any grit.

Heat some oil in a wok and fry the mushrooms, gizzard, diced ham and scallops with soya sauce and pepper to taste.

Slice off the top of the melon about 2cm deep and keep the cut-off piece as the cover. Scoop out and discard the seeds, taking care not to scoop the flesh. Rub the inside with a little salt.

Transfer the fried ingredients into the melon. Add the diced chicken, water chestnuts, scallops soaking water and chicken stock till 2cm from the rim and cover with the cut-off top.

Place the melon into a large bowl and steam for 2-3 hours. Serve the whole melon in the bowl with a large ladle.

### Tips

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*Some restaurants cut the top in a zig-zag manner — very fancy but really, it's more trouble than it's worth.*

*When dishing out the soup and ingredients, include scoops of the melon flesh. Eventually the melon will puncture and the soup will leak into the tureen, so be sure you have a tureen that is deep enough to hold the soup.*

### Variation

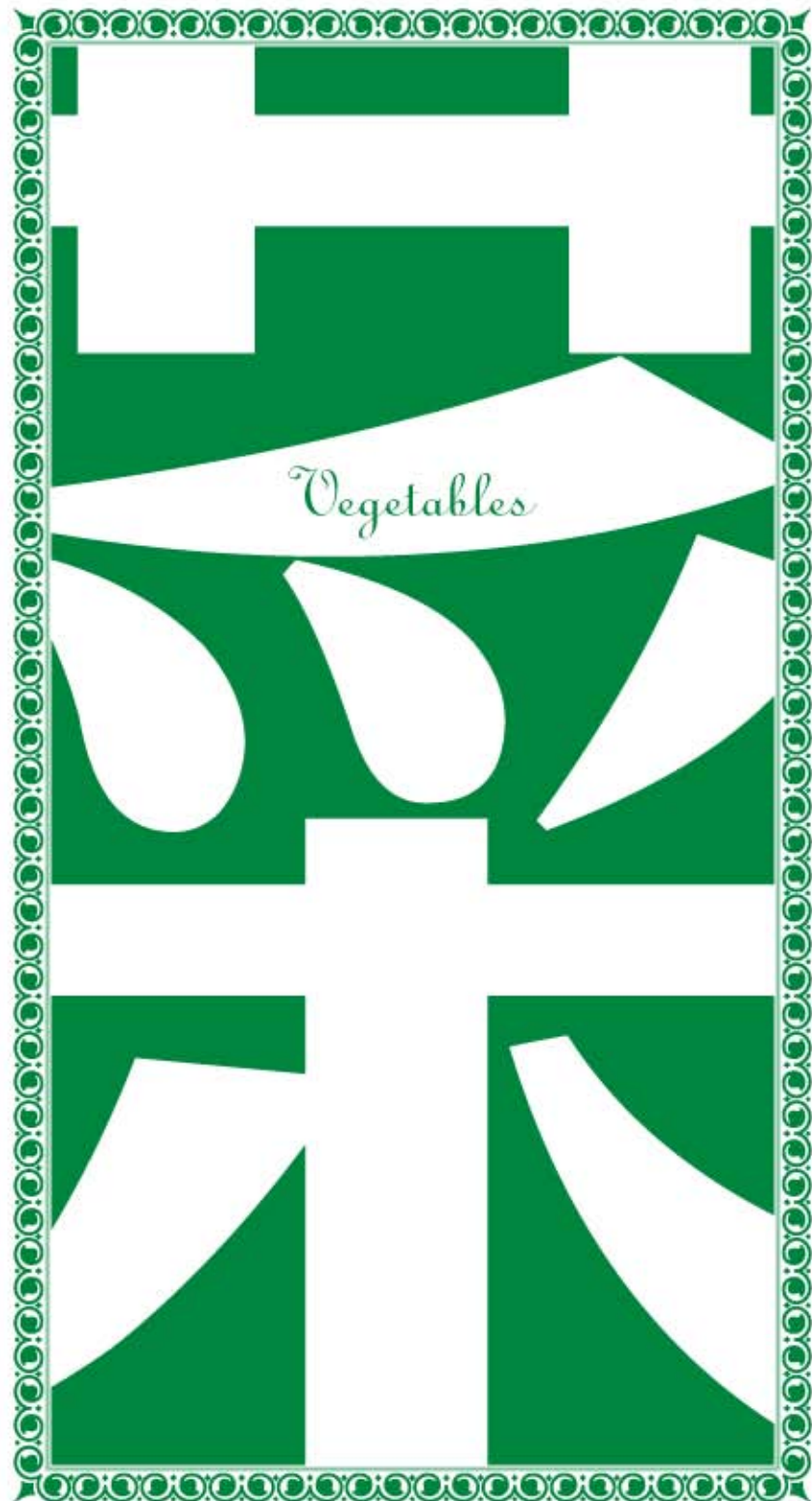
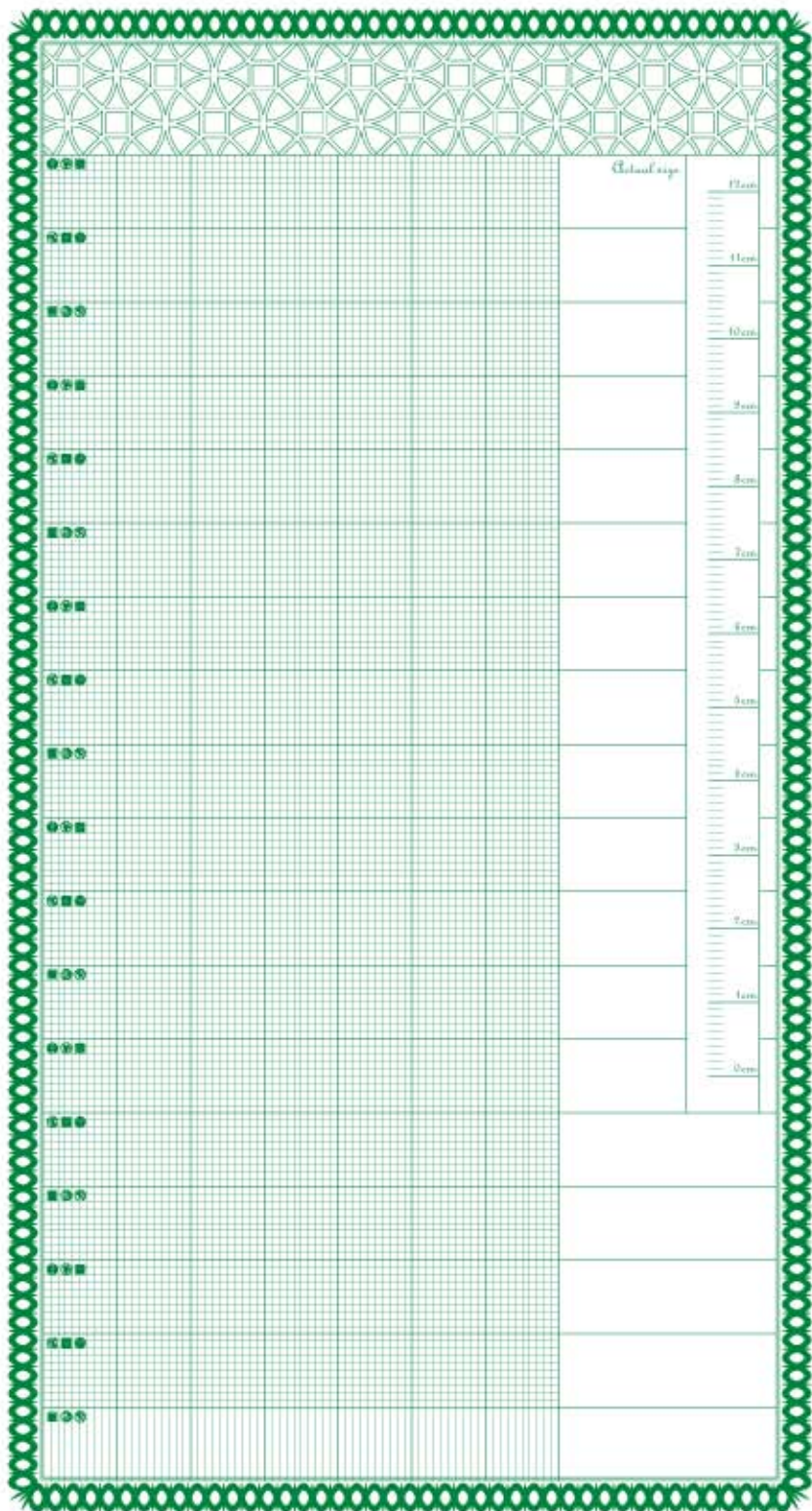
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*A simpler method is to cut the melon into large chunks, cut off the skin and cook the chunks with the ingredients in a large pot.*











P78/Vegetables

## BOXTHORN IN SUPERIOR STOCK

GAU GAE SIONG TONG

This is a simple home dish that has become a fancy restaurant item with the addition of century eggs and salted egg yolks.

- 300 g boxthorn
- 1½ cups superior stock
- 1 egg
- 8-10 wolfberries
- salt and pepper

Pluck off the leaves and wash. Discard the thorny stalks.

Simmer the stock in a saucepan and add the leaves. Add the wolfberries and bring to boil for a minute.

Beat the egg in a bowl with a tablespoon of stock. With the stock boiling, pour the egg mixture in slowly, stirring all the time, so the cooked egg is in strands.

Season with salt and pepper to taste and serve in a deep dish.

### Variation

*To replicate the restaurant version, you need:*

- 2 century eggs
- 2 salted egg yolks

*Cut the century eggs and salted egg yolks into pieces. After stirring in the egg-stock mixture, drop in the salted yolk pieces and simmer for 30 seconds until they are cooked. Toss in the century egg pieces and serve in a deep dish.*

P79/

## HAIR SEAWEED WITH CLOUD-EAR FUNGUS

FATT CHOY WAN YEE

This is a must for Chinese New Year as the Cantonese name for hair seaweed sounds like the term for prosperity.

- 20 g hair seaweed
- water
- oil for frying
- 4-5 dried Chinese mushrooms, soaked and quartered;  
keep the water
- 2 tsp oyster sauce
- ¾ tsp sugar
- salt and pepper
- 10-15 lily bulbs, soaked
- 5 pieces cloud-ear fungus, soaked and blanched
- 5 pieces wood-ear fungus, soaked and blanched
- 10-15 lotus seeds, soaked and peeled, centres removed
- soya sauce
- 2-3 tbs chicken stock
- 1 tbs starch mixed with 2 tbs water

Wash the seaweed several times to rinse off the sand. Squeeze dry. Bring a pot of water to boil and add a little oil. Blanch the seaweed in the water. Drain and discard the water.

Transfer mushrooms and soaking water into a small pot and add 1 teaspoon oyster sauce, ¼ teaspoon sugar, salt and pepper. Simmer over medium low heat until very little liquid is left.

Simmer the lily bulbs in a small pot of water till they start to soften.

Heat some oil in a wok. Add all the ingredients followed by 1 teaspoon oyster sauce, ½ teaspoon sugar, salt, pepper, a drizzle of soya sauce and the chicken stock. Stir-fry and adjust the taste. Add the starch-mixture slowly while stirring over high heat until the sauce thickens.



P80/Vegetables

## MUSHROOMS WITH OYSTER SAUCE

HOU YAU MUN DOONG GOO

- 10-12 dried Chinese mushrooms, soaked; keep the water
- 2 tbs oyster sauce
- 1 tsp sesame oil
- 1 tsp soya sauce
- water
- 6-8 chicken feet, optional
- 1 tbs brandy or Chinese cooking wine, optional
- salt and pepper
- 300 g Chinese spinach, blanched

Transfer the mushrooms and soaking water to a saucepan. Add the oyster sauce, sesame oil and soya sauce, and enough water to almost cover the mushrooms. If using chicken feet, clean them and remove the outer skin and add to the saucepan now.

Bring to boil and simmer uncovered for 30 minutes to reduce the liquid by half. Stir every 10 minutes or so to prevent the mushrooms from sticking to the bottom of the pan. The sauce should thicken and take on a slightly sticky consistency. If it dries too quickly, reduce the heat and add some stock or water. If using liquor, add it now and simmer for a further 5-10 minutes, adding salt and pepper to taste.

Serve the dish by arranging the spinach on a serving plate followed by the chicken feet and the mushrooms on top with the caps facing down.

### Tips

*The quality of the mushrooms will dictate the quality of this dish. The best mushrooms have caps that are thick with deep cracks. These are known as flower mushrooms. Because of the thickness, they take a long time to simmer till they are soft. When cooked, the mushrooms should be firm yet easy to bite into, neither rubbery nor too soft.*

*Chicken feet give the sauce a gummy texture that is part of the appeal of this dish. Without the chicken feet, you would have to thicken the sauce with a starch-mixture.*

### Variation

*You may replace the mushrooms with slices of canned abalone. Or have both.*

P81/

## HAIRY MARROW WITH VERMICELLI

DYE YEE MAR GAR LOI

The Cantonese name of this dish is peculiar; it means "Mother's elder sister's daughter's wedding". No one seems to know how this name came about, but the dish is tasty and light.

- 1 hairy marrow, peeled
- oil for frying
- 20 medium-sized dried prawns, soaked and shelled; keep the water
- 50 g vermicelli, soaked
- $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp soya sauce
- $\frac{1}{8}$  tsp sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp oyster sauce
- salt and pepper

Cut the marrow in half vertically and scoop out the seeds. Cut the flesh into strips about 4cm long and  $\frac{1}{2}$ cm thick.

Heat a little oil in a wok and fry the soaked prawns a few minutes. Add hairy marrow strips and prawn soaking water and stir-fry till the strips are soft. If it becomes too dry, add a spoon or two of chicken stock or water.

Add the vermicelli and season with soya sauce, sugar and oyster sauce. Stir-fry for a further minute or so. Add salt and pepper to taste. Transfer to a serving dish together with the sauce.



## STUFFED HAIRY MARROW

YONG JEET GUA

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- 2 hairy marrows, peeled
- 6 Chinese mushrooms, soaked; keep the water
- 4 water chestnuts, peeled and finely diced
- 300 g minced pork
- 1 tsp soya sauce
- ½ tsp sesame oil
- salt and pepper
- 1 tsp starch mixed with 2 tsp water, plus 1 tsp extra

### Mushroom seasoning:

- 1 tsp oyster sauce
- ½ tsp soya sauce
- ¼ tsp sesame oil
- ¼ tsp pepper

Cut off about 1cm from each end of the marrows and cut cross-wise into 2cm thick sections. Cut away the pulp inside with a knife to form short tubes. Rub some starch on the inside and on the cut edges.

Simmer the mushrooms in a small saucepan with the soaking water and the mushroom seasoning until it is almost dry. Cool and dice finely.

Transfer the minced pork, diced mushrooms and water chestnuts to a bowl. Add the soya sauce, sesame oil, salt and pepper, and 1 teaspoon starch. Mix thoroughly.

Fill the tubes with the pork mixture and spread some stuffing over the cut edges.

Place in a deep dish, cut sides up and steam for 10-15 minutes.

Transfer the tubes to a serving plate and pour the juices into a small saucepan. To make a sauce, simmer and season with sesame oil, soya sauce, salt and pepper. Stir in the starch-mixture and continue to simmer until the sauce thickens a little, and pour it over the marrow.

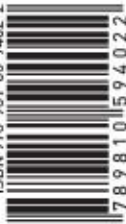
### Tip

*If the stuffing is not enough to fill all the tubes, the unstuffed tubes can be thinly sliced and fried with a couple of beaten eggs.*

### Variation

*Bitter gourds and cucumbers can be used for this dish, although they don't have the sweetness of hairy gourds. Zucchini, which were not available during Mother's time, would make an interesting change.*

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