



Dumpling Day

NIBBLEDISH CONTRIBUTOR

Ingredients

Basic Filling Mixture

- Minced Pork
- Onion (or spring/green onion)
- Minced Garlic
- Grated Ginger
- Salt
- White Pepper
- White Vinegar
- Shaoxing Wine
- Soy sauce
- Cornstarch

Dumpling Wrappers

Premade wrappers are fine, but if you want to make your own it is not too hard. When buying premade wrappers, Gowgee, Jiaozi and Gyoza all refer to the same thing, but they are just the Cantonese, Mandarin and Japanese pronunciations respectively. Wonton skins could also be used, depending on the type of dumpling you're trying to make.

Flavourings

- Chinese Cabbage
 - Prawns
 - Shiso (Perilla)
 - Nira
 - Or anything else you like
-

Instructions

I'm crazy about dumplings of any kind, and one of my favourite things to do on a rainy weekend is to make a whole bunch of dumplings of various flavours. They freeze extremely well and after a relaxing afternoon of dumpling making, you have a well stocked freezer and the security of knowing that for the next few months you are just minutes away from a delicious homemade dumpling feast at any time. Dumpling Day should be a national holiday.

The secret to a good dumpling is the texture of the filling. The filling should be firm, consistent and springy. Too many homemade dumplings suffer from fillings that are separate and grainy, and which do not offer sufficient resistance to the teeth. To make a delicious, springy dumpling we need to look at a chemical process called *thermogelling*. In a nutshell, muscle fibres in meat and fish contain myofibrillary proteins known as actin and myosin. In solution, these proteins form a gel which, when heated, traps water, fat and starch creating a springy and tender texture. Creating a strong gel depends on a number of factors, including the concentration of these proteins, the temperature of the solution, its acidity and its salt content.

So how does this translate to Dumpling Day? It's all about creating the right environment for the formation of the gel, and ensuring that your filling has the right amount of water, fat and starch to create the right texture.

First, we need start in the morning with a basic pork mixture. Take minced pork (I used about 1.5 kilos of medium fatty mince and ended up with more than 100 dumplings). If you feel so inclined, you could run the meat through a mincer once or twice more to make sure it is very well minced. The fattier the mince the more tender the filling will be, but if the mince is too fatty then there will not be enough actual meat (muscle) to release its myosin for creating the gel that gives the filling the right springiness. Add to the meat some white vinegar (4 tbsp), shaoxing wine (2 tbsp), salt, white pepper, soy sauce (2 tbsp) and cornstarch (2 tbsp). In a small food processor (or you could just finely chop everything together) I pureed half a large onion (you could finely chop a small bunch of spring onion instead), 4 or 5 cloves of garlic and 5cms of grated ginger and added it to the pork. Using your hands, mix everything together and knead the mixture very firmly for about 20 minutes. The kneading process is vital, as it releases the myofibrillary protein from its muscular organisation and allows the creation of the gelatinized network that gives you a springy filling. Set this aside in the fridge while you prepare your flavourings.

Of course, you can just make plain dumplings, but I like to have a bit of variety. Any

kind of additional flavouring is fine. Today, I made separate batches with prawn, shiso (perilla), nira (I think this is called 'chinese chives' in the west), and Hakusai ('bai cai' or 'chinese cabbage'). You could also use shiitake, chili, water chestnuts, bamboo shoots, coriander, pea shoots... anything really.

Finely chop the prawns, almost to a puree. I used a food processor. Roughly chop the chinese cabbage and boil in salted water for around 5 minutes. Drain, transfer to a board and very finely chop. Then place the mixture in a clean tea towel and squeeze out all the remaining liquid. For the nira, I chopped it to around 2 cms in length, boiled for 2-3 minutes and again squeezed out all the moisture. The shiso doesn't need to be pre-cooked and you can just slice this very finely. To do this, halve a stack of leaves along the rib, roll up each stack of halves (lengthways) and very finely julienne.

Separate your flavourings into separate bowls and add to them the basic pork mixture. Now take turns with each flavouring, transferring it to your big mixing bowl and kneading until the flavourings are all combined and the mixture becomes springy - around 5 minutes for each batch. Transfer all your bowls of mixture to the fridge and let it rest for a few hours to allow the gel network to form. The saltiness of the mixture and the acidity of the vinegar provide a suitable environment for this process. With the prawns, you have added additional myosin from the prawn meat, so you may notice this mixture becoming very springy, almost to the point of being 'bouncy'.

After a few hours it's time to make your dumplings. I won't go into dumpling folding methods (maybe another time), but you can make wontons, jiaozi, pleated gyoza or simple dumplings for boiling... whatever takes your fancy. For me, I usually make these dumplings in broth so I use a very simple fold that looks fine in soup or boiled. If you wanted to make dumplings for frying (like gyoza) or steaming (like xiaolongbao/shourumpo), then you may prefer a slightly more attractive shape. You can even just leave them as half moons, like some Japanese or Korean dumplings.

My method is to take a gyoza wrapper, place about a teaspoon of dumpling filling in the centre. Dip your finger in a bowl of water and wet the top half edge of the wrapper and fold the bottom half up into a half-moon shape, making sure that the filling is centred, and that there is no air trapped in the wrapper. Then wet the very top of the half-moon and fold each end up to the centre. Store on a tray (making sure they don't touch each other) and then when each batch is finished, transfer the tray to the freezer.

When they're well frozen, transfer each batch to a large ziplock bag marked with the corresponding flavour and continue to store in the freezer.

To cook, you can boil the frozen dumplings in salted water or stock for about 10 minutes, or steam them for about 12-15, or even fry them (as for gyoza) or deep fry

them. Bear in mind though that the difference between these and commercially frozen dumplings (aside from tasting much better and not containing any of the chemical additives) is that firstly, they don't contain preservatives so they will not last as long in the freezer and secondly, the filling is not pre-cooked, so you need to make sure they are cooked all the way through.

Personally, I usually steam or boil them for a snack served with some chili oil and black vinegar, or add them to broth for a dumpling soup breakfast. There's nothing quite like a homemade dumpling, so set aside a day of your weekend for the mental therapy of Dumpling Day.