



Fire Chicken

NIBBLEDISH CONTRIBUTOR

Ingredients

1 Chicken

I don't have ready access to all the traditional Korean ingredients so I don't generally use them, but for those that can, I've included the Korean ingredients in italics.

Chicken Marinade

2 tbsp Sake or *Cheong Ju*

1 tbsp Soy Sauce

1 tbsp Olive Oil

1 tbsp Sugar

1 tbsp Honey or *Mul Yut*

Fresh Ground Black Pepper

Sauce

3 tbsp Kochukaru (Korean Chili Powder)

1 tbsp Kochujan

2 tbsp Soy Sauce

1 tbsp Sesame Oil

2 tbsp Honey or *Mul Yut*

1 tbsp White Sugar

2 tsp Karashi Mustard (or other hot mustard)

Hot Chillies (to taste)

3 cloves Garlic

1/2 large Onion (peeled and cut into chunks)

1/2 large Nashi Pear (peeled and cut into chunks)

Instructions

Let me start by saying that this is one of my favourite things to eat in the entire world. My friends and I would often start our weekend unwind by meeting in Shin-Okubo (Tokyo's Koreatown) after work on Friday nights and sinking a few beers and chamisuls while working over a big plate of this chicken. This would be the meeting point and the chicken was always an appetizer before heading out to another restaurant for a meal.

The dish is called Buldak in Korean (*bul* = fire, *dak* = chicken), and while it's a really old dish, I'm told it's been gaining popularity in Korea at the moment as a beer snack. I can definitely see why.

From a cook's perspective, this is a really interesting dish too. The sweetness and hotness each come from a number of different elements - sugar, honey, kochujan and nashi for the sweet, and chili powder, fresh chili and karashi for the hot. When layered together, this diversity of sweet and hot flavours creates a really complex and delicious combination. This dish also really illustrates the way heat itself adds to the flavour of a dish. I love chili, but I'm not usually one to test my machismo by eating the hottest curries or most fiery hot sauces. With this dish though, the chili really turns on the flavour. Anyone who tries it admits that the hotter it gets, the more tasty it is. For that reason, when I make this I make it as hot as I can. It hurts, but it hurts good.

Now for the method...

First joint the chicken and cut into small pieces. Choose an older chicken if you can, as the flavour is much better and the toughness of older birds really suits the dish. Of course, you can use simple breast meat or thigh meat as well, but personally I like to cook this on the bone. With meat only it tends to be a little soft in my opinion. To joint the chicken I take off the wings and drumsticks (halving the drumsticks) and then take the whole chicken in half, discarding the neck, spine and bum. Then I halve each half again to a breast portion and thigh portion before chopping each to pieces about the same size as the wings. Sorry if this doesn't make much sense, I don't really know the butchery terms. Then marinade the chicken pieces in the chicken marinade ingredients for at least 1/2 an hour.

While the chicken is marinading, make the sauce. There's quite a lot of ingredients but the method is simple - just blend it all together. Korean chili powder is not particularly hot, so the main source of heat is in the fresh chilies that you add. As I said, I like this to be really hot and so I generally use about 5 really hot small chilies. If you don't think you can stand the heat, you can use less either in number or intensity, but I do recommend bumping the spiciness up above what you're used to. This is Fire Chicken after all.

To cook everything, take a large frypan and start the chicken pieces over medium heat.

The chicken will blacken quickly as the sugar and honey caramelise but don't get concerned; this really adds to the flavour. Reduce the heat a little and cook for about 10 minutes until the chicken is maybe two thirds done. Then add in the sauce, stir it together and cook a further 5 minutes. The sauce will darken to the deep red you see in the picture. When it's all finished transfer everything to a plate and scatter the chicken with some chopped spring onion, sesame seeds or - my preference as in the picture - a good amount of aonori.

Serve this with some simple pickled daikon (cubed pieces of daikon pickled in a simple brine of salt, sugar, white vinegar and water) and a kind of coleslaw (shredded cabbage and onion shaved on a mandolin, with a big dollop of mayonnaise swirled with kochujan. I'd suggest going to the extra effort to make these traditional accompaniments, as they match with the chicken perfectly. Also, you're going to need them to cool down your mouth if you've made the chicken as spicy as you should.

The easiest way to eat this off the bone is with 2 forks that you can use to tear away the meat. I prefer this as the sauce makes eating this with fingers a pretty messy prospect.

What I really like about this dish is that it goes superbly with booze. Chamisul is a great match and really helps cool down your mouth. Beer also goes really well and so if you're anything like me, go for both.

I think this would also make a great BBQ dish, maybe just using drumsticks. To do that I would cook the sauce separately for about 10 minutes or so and marinade the chicken before leaving. Then the chicken could be done on the BBQ and then mixed with the sauce in a large aluminium foil packet and then baked right on the BBQ top. I'm definitely going to try doing that next time I go to a BBQ.