

BRAISED PORK CHEEKS AND OCTOPUS

With wet polenta, gremolata, and white soda bread



10 years ago one of my favourite restaurants – Jason Atherton’s Pollen Street Social – opened its doors, and they held a recipe competition. To my great delight I won that competition, and this is the recipe I created! Pork cheeks are a sustainable and cheaper forgotten cut, but the flavour and texture when cooked right is incredible – dark and glazed with pull-apart tender pink centre. Here they are paired with octopus tentacles as surf n’ turf, with a fragrant and flavoursome sauce and wet polenta. Most polenta recipes involve boiling on the stove, but this can result in polenta quickly becoming stodgy and lumpy. By starting with cold milk and stock, the polenta will absorb the liquid gradually, resulting in an even cook and smooth texture. I have included a recipe for white soda bread, but if you don’t want to make your own then any plain white bread will do (ciabatta, focaccia, flatbread etc) – it’s a vehicle for mopping up all the lovely sauce. It is a richly flavoured dish without being overly heavy, then the gremolata adds some freshness and acidity to balance the dish. If you are not a fish eater then the octopus can be

omitted – just add the lemon zest, garlic, thyme and ground coriander at the stage of sweating down the onions for the pork cheeks. Similarly, for any pescetarians the octopus quantity can be increased, cooking the onions and marinade ingredients from the pork cheek recipe before adding the marinated octopus.

Ingredients

For the octopus

600g octopus, cleaned
1 lemon, zest and juice
3 garlic cloves, crushed
3 sprigs fresh thyme (or lemon thyme)
1 tsp ground coriander

For the pork cheeks

8 pork cheeks, trimmed of fat and sinew
1 tsp ground ginger (fresh or pureed ginger also works) 1 tsp ground cinnamon
1 tsp mixed spice
1 tsp ground coriander
2 tbsp clear honey
2 tbsp dark soy sauce
2 tbsp olive oil
salt and freshly-ground black pepper
50ml red wine vinegar
3 tbsp olive oil
2 onions
2 bay leaves
2 star anise
400ml red wine
1 x 400g tin plum tomatoes
500ml chicken stock

For the soda bread

450g strong white bread flour (plus extra for rolling)
1 tsp bicarbonate of soda
1 tsp salt
1 tsp caster sugar

350-400ml buttermilk (or fat-free natural yogurt)

For the gremolata

160g (2 large-sized bunches) flat leaf parsley
juice and zest of half a lemon
1 large garlic clove, or 2 small
1-2 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
white balsamic vinegar (to taste)
salt and freshly-ground black pepper

For the wet polenta

175g quick-cook polenta
500ml milk
500ml chicken stock
2 sprigs fresh thyme
25g unsalted butter
25g (1 small sachet) grated parmesan
salt and freshly-ground black pepper

To serve

Green salad

White soda bread (see recipe) (NB If you do not want to make your own bread then any fresh white loaf will do just as well (eg ciabatta, baguette))

•

Method

For the octopus

1. Freeze the octopus for at least 48 hours then defrost it in the fridge overnight – this will help to tenderize it.
2. Rinse the octopus well under cold water then pat dry. Chop into 1-2 inch pieces, then place in a bowl with the lemon zest and juice, garlic, thyme sprigs, and ground coriander until well combined. Cover with clingfilm and chill in the fridge to marinate for 1 hour.

For the pork cheeks

3. In a bowl combine all the ground spices with the honey, soy sauce, olive oil, and seasoning, then add the pork cheeks and mix until the marinade is well rubbed in. Cover with clingfilm and chill in the fridge to marinate for 1 hour.
4. Heat a large saucepan, then add the pork cheeks (reserving the marinade and star anise) and fry until well browned (about 4-5 minutes), then remove and set aside.

5. Immediately deglaze the pan with the red wine vinegar, scraping up any brown bits round the side with a wooden spoon. Remove from the heat.
6. Heat the 3 tbsp olive oil in a frying pan and fry the onions for 3-4 minutes, or until softened (N.B. the reason for frying the onions separately is because otherwise the frying oil will not properly emulsify together with the vinegar in the pan juices).
7. Stir in the marinated octopus and fry for 2-3 minutes.
8. Add the fried onions and octopus back to the original large saucepan with the pan juices, along with the reserved pork cheeks marinade and star anise, then stir in the browned pork cheeks, 2 bay leaves and red wine. Bring to the boil and cook until the volume of wine has reduced by half.
9. Add the chicken stock and tomatoes and stir until well combined, crushing the tomatoes with the back of the spoon. Return to a simmer then cook gently for 1- 1 1/2 hours, or until the pork cheeks and octopus are very tender. During cooking skim off any impurities that rise to the surface, and also make the bread, gremolata and polenta. Once the octopus and cheeks are tender, strain off the sauce, keep the pork cheeks and octopus to one side, then discard the bay leaf and star anise. THEN return strained sauce to pan and slowly reduce the sauce until it has become dark and thickened. Once the sauce has reduced, add the cooked pork cheeks and octopus to it and stir to glaze/coat thoroughly.

For the white soda bread

10. Pre-heat the oven to 250°C/482°F.
11. In a large mixing bowl, combine the flour, bicarbonate of soda, salt and sugar, then pour in 350ml of the buttermilk and combine everything together using a hand-held or standing machine mixer with a dough hook, until well combined. If the mixture doesn't come together then add a little more of the buttermilk – the final dough should be soft but not sticky.
12. Turn the dough out onto a floured surface and shape into a round (or oval/long if preferred). Try not to kneed or overwork the dough or it will become dense. Make a criss-cross pattern across the top of the loaf (this will give you a wonderful crunchy crust), only a few millimetres deep.
13. Place on a baking tray then cook in the pre-heated oven for 25 minutes, or until the crust is golden brown. Turn the oven down to 200°C/392°F and cook for another 30 minutes, until the base sounds hollow when tapped. Remove from the oven and leave to cool on a rack.

For the gremolata

14. Combine all ingredients in a blender until well combined. Put in a bowl covered with clingfilm and leave in the fridge until ready to serve.

For the wet polenta

15. Put the milk, chicken stock, thyme sprigs and polenta into a saucepan and bring to a gentle simmer (do not boil), then slowly whisk over a low heat for 15 minutes, until the polenta has become very soft.
16. Stir in the parmesan and butter and season, to taste, with salt and freshly ground black pepper.

To serve

17. Spoon some polenta onto each of 6-8 serving plates, top with the pork cheeks and squid, spooning the sauce around, and sprinkle some gremolata over the top. Serve with wedges of the white soda bread and a green salad on the side.

-

Comments