



the ART of
ESCAPISM COOKING

a survival story, with intensely good flavors

MANDY LEE

wm

WILLIAM MORROW

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 2 FIRST, PANTRY 5
TOOLS 9 CONDIMENTS, SAUCES, AND PASTES 11

I

MY DAYS AS A
MA-JIANG LINE COOK 30
For Getting Out of Bed 33

2

NEW YORK, NEW YORK 76
For Slurping 79

3

MEET RICHARD 154
For a Crowd 159

4

THE BREAKUP 250
For Snacking 253
Shit I Eat When I'm by Myself 301

5

THE CHIMNEY 316
For Sweets 319

6

THE PUPS 358
For Pups 361

ACKNOWLEDGMENT 373
UNIVERSAL CONVERSION CHART 375
INDEX 377

INTRODUCTION

One hazy Beijing afternoon, one no more particularly dreadful than the others, I stood behind my closed kitchen window, stone cold, as I dragged a serrated knife through the body of a sandwich. I felt the unforgiving blade lacerate the wobbly stack of steaming pastrami short ribs tucked under a runny egg fried in browned butter and mustard seeds, watching its blood-like fluid weep into a layer of charred and pickled shishito peppers on top of still-warm rye bread anointed with mustard. I exhaled, tilting my head, as a cold rush of solace eased through my veins. Through the window a neighboring building disappeared, swallowed in the thickening soot outside. I knew I was next.

Yet there was a sense of calm in watching the heap of meat wiggle, an unstable formation of rendered fat and loosened muscle; I felt delight in the dark pink coloring of its flesh, a successful result of its silent four-day immersion

in a meticulously constructed brine. My head lowered along with my breaths as I listened to the soothing sound of my fingernails dragging across the crusty, goose-bumped skin of my homemade rye bread. With its body laid open and hollow, sacrificial, I counted the air bubbles in a cross section freckled with caraway seeds, an act that tenderly overran my urge to scream. For a second it felt strange, but nothing was out of the ordinary: neither the constant current of my bubbling discontent nor my surgical infatuation with a sandwich. It was just me making lunch, with each and every component composed from scratch, on a Tuesday.

This is not a moment of boasting.

Instead, this is the moment when I tell you that right then and there—that second, as if I were waking up from a deep neurotic trance—was when it hit me. Not how wonderfully the yolks lubricated the spice-encrusted sticky meat,

nor how the sandwich sang in a savory, spicy, and smoky symphony. But how . . . *sick* this thing had become. When and how had I gone from a moderately motivated home cook who hovered in the aisles of frozen pizzas and dumplings over the edge into an obsessive kitchen extremist? When and how had I stopped making meals but, instead, begun making fantasies? When and how did I no longer cook, but escape? Why did I spend six years of my life buried in a little corner that most people would call a kitchen, but that for me was a sanctuary?

I stared impassively at the hellish cityscape of Beijing outside, then down at the nirvanic pink meat sparkling with fat as the mustard-stained yolk bled slowly onto my pristinely white kitchen counter. . . .

I knew the exact answer to that.

But let's make one thing clear. That's not why you've picked up this book, to talk about me, an angry food blogger. Well, at least not entirely. The story of how cooking, my once harmless hobby, mutated into a recreational addiction after I moved from New York City to Beijing; how I crawled out of my expat limbo by splashing my rage with pain-inflicting chile sauces and ducked my head into a bucket of butter frosting to cope; or even how I became what I call an *escapist cook*—that will all be clear by the end of the book.

But first things first—we're here to cook. Not for necessity, not as a chore or responsibility, not for convenience. This book is written for those who share the same perverse

tendency to engage in cooking as a loner spends time with his Xbox or a teenager with porn—ultimately as a delicious evasion of unpalatable realities.

Escapism cooking.

It's not a passion; it's a drug. I'm not selling you a lifestyle; I'm telling you how I evaded one. If you need to know how to cook a chicken breast with one hand while you hold a baby in the other, sorry, I'm not about solving your problems. But I can show you how I cooked mine. This book is a memoir of recipes and stories that I documented during a desperately unpleasant time of my life, the delicious aftermath of how I cooked my way out of six miserable years in Beijing, my lemons and lemonade.

If you're still not sure that this book is right for you, then let me say this. Escapism cooking is about neither simplicity nor complication. I find equal rapture in nurturing a hunk of meat that is four days in the making as in cooking "Shit I Eat When I'm by Myself" (see page 301) in only minutes. When it comes to cooking, as far as I'm concerned, there's no hard or easy, new or old, real or fake. There is only good or bad. It's about orchestrating an idea, mapping the most sensible way to get there, chasing the high.

In fact, to me, cooking isn't even about love. As much as I would like to say that I cook to make other people happy, I don't. Truth is, I cook largely to make *myself* happy, as medication, as therapy. I cooked in Beijing because it was the one positive thing I could harvest from a place

abundant with negativity. In life, I guess, we're all after some sort of abstraction of happiness. Cooking, whether by choice or not, just turned out to be my medium. If you ask me, the most important thing in learning how to cook is not the techniques but how to harness curiosity and fulfillment from the process, the puzzles and the answers, the failures and the triumphs, the hunt. It's a deeply personal, ever-evolving, solitary sport.

The food that comes as a result—which I'm told has made a lot of others happy, too—is the pleasant byproduct, the overspilled muffin top. So, if you're experiencing thoughts of suicide along with the midnight urge to butcher a chicken, this book may be right for you, my friends—those of you who find yourselves, likewise, cooking for one reason and one reason only.

Happiness.

FIRST, PANTRY

Hey, look, we're all scared of the unfamiliar. We all huddle inside our comfort zones, passive, waiting for someone else to break the mold first. In some aspects of life, this may even be considered smart, safe, a vital animal instinct for survival. Nobody wants to be that moron in the movie who goes, "There's a curiously dark tunnel behind this tombstone. Let's check it out." *He dies.*

But when it comes to unfamiliar ingredients in cooking, come on, what have we got to lose?

One of the hardest things about writing recipes that use possibly unfamiliar ingredients is convincing people that the future of their happiness—or even the world's—depends on their using them. Just think what kind of a joyless world it would be if the Japanese hadn't convinced us to gnaw on raw fish? Or if the Koreans didn't make a good case for keeping a bag of stinking cabbage in our fridge? Or what if a few hundred years ago, the good people

in what is now the Sichuan region of China hadn't embraced the chilies brought in by the Spanish conquistadors? Or if the Italians hadn't welcomed the tomatoes brought in by the Spanish conquistadors? Or if the Europeans had shied away from chocolate brought back . . . by the Spanish conquistadors. Okay, you get my point. Spanish conquistadors were the founding fathers of many things we eat today, and also, *you need to try new things.*

So here's a list of ingredients that if you aren't at least willing to be *friendly* with by now, there's no hope for the future. And you should start apologizing to your children.

Chile Flakes

Not all chilies are created equal, and such truth passes down to chile flakes as well. Generally speaking, look for the right balance between two components: fragrance and heat level. Based on that objective, my favorite chile is a common

1

MY DAYS AS A MA-JIANG LINE COOK

Until then, cooking was never an interest of mine.

Sometimes when I look back on my cooking addiction—like a weathered alcoholic recalling the initial spark of love from her first sip of beer, I guess—I recall a period of innocence before I started abusing it as an antidepressant. There was a time when I used to cook, purely and incandescently, for the simplest and most uncomplicated purpose.

Cash.

I started cooking at sixteen because I wanted to earn five dollars off my mother's ma-jiang table. It began as good old earnest greed for green, but little did I know that I was sowing the seeds of an obsession with cooking for the next twenty years to come. Back then, once a week (as claimed by my mother, but it was in fact closer to twice) (three times max, she says), a highly competitive assembly of four middle-aged Taiwanese housewives would gather in one of their homes and engage in the stationary sport of calculating tiles and outlasting one

another's sore asses. Sitting for ten to twelve hours straight on barely padded chairs, conducting high-risk management and gossip warfare, these aunties took their sport with all seriousness, allowing just one single meal break to fuel the fire. That's where I came in.

The rule was that each of these fine ladies would pay five dollars to fund their meal, and if I could manage to feed them on twenty dollars or less, I got to keep the change. Easy, right? I mean, how hard could it be to feed a pack of middle-aged housewives? Well, that depends on how much you know about 1990s-era Vancouver.

It wasn't just a city vibrant with Asian immigrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Vietnam; at its prime it was notoriously *the* Chinatown of all North America, a renowned status earned by a supreme standard of Asian cuisine that some say superseded that of its countries of origin. It was a breeding ground for

a colony of jaded connoisseurs whose taste buds were sharpened by years of immersion in top-notch ingredients—Dungeness crabs, geoducks, British Columbia sea urchins, and young, supple pigeons—the master-level preparations of which flowed through the days like breakfast cereal. These ma-jiang housewives didn't just expect to be fed. They expected to be fed *well*.

As a teenage girl whose cooking experience amounted to counting calories and microwaving face masks, I quickly realized that I was in way over my head. Either naturally or through PTSD, I have lost all recollection of the first meal I cooked for them, but a few softly spoken words from one of the aunties as she slowly lowered her chopsticks burned into my memory like a hot iron on a slab of meat: "We could also order takeout next time."

Ouch, bitch. Now you've made it personal.

Typically, I'm all about quitting at any sight of an obstacle. I'm just easygoing like that. But that day, for some reason something propelled me the other way, onto an unfamiliar path I believe they call . . . *keep trying*. I started to take cooking seriously, which is ironic because until then, cooking was never an interest of mine.

Growing up, I watched my mother, a good cook who nonetheless automated this socially imposed task apathetically, year after year, sometimes with barely concealed aversion. I thought to myself then that if I were ever to spend this amount of time doing something—anything—it wouldn't be because I should, but because I fucking *liked* it. And who knew? It turned out that cooking is just what I like.

Cooking for the aunties soon became about more than just making money: there was curiosity, perhaps, and an exhilaration at making new discoveries. Soon I found myself spending three hours meticulously nursing a clay pot of oxtails braised in soy sauce and caramel, or crisping the skins of a silver pomfret, bothered more by a missed corner of imperfection than the occasional painful splatters of oil. In the end, my net profit was nil, if not bleeding red. But at an age when the friends around me didn't even know how to avoid Hot Pockets-related explosions in the microwave, I was proud and intrigued. That said, not even remotely did I think this episode of mine would change the rest of my life.



PANDORA'S BOX

I think the funny thing about growing up sandwiched between two polar-opposite cultures is that often I just couldn't tell if a particular idea that made total sense to one side would be found by the other to be equally awesome or utterly bizarre.

Take this thing called shibuya honey toast. It is an ingenious Japanese creation that basically involves cutting a whole loaf of sweet milk bread into humongous cubes, toasting them, removing the interiors, reprocessing them, then stuffing them back into the cubes and adding various toppings. To us Asians who are fanatics about milk toast—you know, those sweet, squishy, goosedown-pillow breads sold at Asian bakeries?—this is seriously genius stuff. But to the other side of me, raised to throw stones at people who eat bread that didn't bloom from a decade-old levain . . . a sweet white bread bowl? Bizarre.

So I guess this recipe is my effort to make ultimate sense of it all. It is shibuya honey toast, sort of. It is crème brûlée French toast, sort of. It even has a little bit of a custard-filled doughnut going on. The whole cube of crustless milk bread is encased in a shiny, shatteringly thin caramel shell, then filled with an enormous dollop of chamomile-infused vanilla bean custard. It's crispy, soft, pillowy, and creamy all at once, with a few pops of tart fresh berry to give it a little shout.

MAKES 2 BOXES/2 SERVINGS

CUSTARD

- 1 vanilla bean
- 2 cups (480 mL) whole milk
- 1 tablespoon loose chamomile tea
- 5 large egg yolks
- ¼ cup (60 mL) honey
- ¼ cup (50 g) granulated sugar
- 5 tablespoons (39 g) all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon custard powder (find online, or replace with another 1 tablespoon flour)
- 4 tablespoons (½ stick/54 g) unsalted butter

BOXES

- 1 approximately 11-inch (28-cm) loaf Hokkaido milk bread or rectangular brioche
- ¾ cup (180 mL) whole milk
- 1 large egg
- 2 tablespoons light brown sugar

⅛ teaspoon ground cinnamon

⅛ teaspoon salt

Granulated sugar, for coating

Unsalted butter, for frying

Tart berries—raspberries, strawberries, blueberries—to sprinkle on top

MAKE THE CUSTARD

1. Split the vanilla bean in half lengthwise, then scrape out all the seeds. Combine the pod, seeds, and milk in a medium saucepan and set it over medium-low heat, stirring occasionally to prevent scalding. When it is almost at a simmer, turn off the heat. Place a sieve over the saucepan so that it dips into the milk but doesn't sink to the bottom, then add the chamomile tea. Let steep for 5 minutes.

for getting out of bed 51

CRACKLING PANCAKE WITH CAMEL-CLUSTERED BLUEBERRIES

I disagree with stacked pancakes. They are juvenile nonsense for several logical (if not strictly scientific) reasons.

Reason Number 1: Gravity. All can agree that fluffiness is the goal in pancakes. To achieve that, we use flour with the lowest possible protein content, we add buttermilk and baking powder to the batter to create air, and we fold the batter as gently as we would comb a baby's hair. We do all that just so, at the end, the pancakes can be stacked and compressed to death by the sheer weight of one fucker sitting on top of another? Frankly, it's mind-boggling.

Reason Number 2: Texture. Typical pancakes are underachieving in textural contrast to begin with. But to make matters worse, we further nullify whatever sad crispiness a pancake has going on at the edges by laminating them while they are still hot, and thus steaming them cheek to cheek like human sardines at a sticky, overcrowded rave party? Just saying, it's very perplexing.

Reason Number 3: Practicality. Let's do some simple math. Each batch of batter produces about twelve to thirteen pancakes, and each pancake takes about six or seven minutes to cook. Let's just say that you can cook two pancakes at a time—who gets a hard-on at the thought of flipping pancakes for forty-five minutes in the morning just so you can sit down, finally, with two hot pancakes and ten cold ones? Squished to death, textureless, cold pancakes. Sure, keep them warm in a preheated oven, like that's a turn-on.

Stacked pancakes don't make sense.

What makes sense, in my reasoning, is a single-flip, stand-alone pancake that is tall and lofty with incredibly soft and airy crumbs throughout, but more important, suited in an entirely crusty, seriously golden-brown cake jacket that emits erotic sounds when cracked open by gentle force. Better yet, it takes only thirteen minutes in its glorious entirety.

You're welcomed, if not implored, to test this baby with your favorite fruit marmalade and fancy European butter. But here, to push our expedition further into the textural frontier, I'm pairing it with clusters of cold, sweet blueberries encased in a hardened web of shattering caramel, then drizzled with a dark, tangy, and floral balsamic and honey syrup. Hot and cold, crispy and soft, juicy and syrupy.

Pancakes don't deserve this. But you do.

MAKES 1 LARGE PANCAKE, TO SERVE 2 PEOPLE





for SLURPING

No one particular noodle dish is comparable to another. In fact, each is defined by and answers only to its own singular set of laws, matters, space, and time that make up its very own unique reality. If someone asks me whether I like Japanese ramen or Singaporean laksa more, that tells me they know nothing about science.

A bowl of noodles is its own little universe.

that comes with the immersion blender and add the reserved crispy fat bits and the truffles or truffle oil. Blend with an immersion blender until smooth. (The truffle lard can be made up to 2 weeks ahead of time, kept in an airtight container in the fridge until needed.)

TO FINISH

6. Twenty minutes before serving, preheat the oven to 210°F/100°C. Place 1½ tablespoons of the Ramen Seasoning and 1½ tablespoons of truffle lard in each of the serving bowls (however many you're preparing), then place the bowls in the oven. It's extremely crucial that the bowls be hot before serving.

7. In a small, deep saucepan (to accommodate the immersion blender) over high heat, bring the Chicken White Broth to a boil. Keep it at an active boil and cook until it's reduced down to 1½ cups (360 mL; or reduced by one-fourth).

8. Meanwhile, bring a large pot of water to a boil over high heat and have a sieve ready by the sink. Add the ramen and gently loosen the strands with chopsticks to keep them from clumping up. If the ramen is frozen, allow 30 seconds or so in the hot water for the strands to loosen before separating. Whether the ramen is

fresh or frozen, it will briefly stop the water from boiling. When the water comes back to a boil, turn the heat to medium to keep the water from boiling over, and cook for 1 minute *exactly*. *Do not estimate this; time it.*

9. Transfer the ramen to the sieve and rinse it under cold water for *just a few seconds*. The purpose of this is not to cool the noodles but to remove some of the starchy water and bring back the bounce. Drain the ramen thoroughly and place it in the hot serving bowls.

10. Insert the immersion blender into the Chicken White Broth and give it several stern pulses, until the broth is emulsified and slightly foamy. Pour the reduced base broth into the serving bowls, then top each with fennel pork belly (for more porky flavor, you can char the slices with a blowtorch), a Jammy Egg, sauerkraut, and onion. Sprinkle with white pepper and toasted sesame seeds. Add more black or white truffle (in whatever shape or form) if desired. Slurp immediately.

NOTE: *Toast sesame seeds in a small dry skillet over medium heat until lightly browned, stirring constantly.*



THE SOLOIST

We all love Xi'an-style Biang Biang noodles, as popularized in the United States by Xi'an Famous Foods in New York City. We all love that slick, full-body chewiness that defines what success should taste like when it comes to Asian wheat noodles. As a silver lining, Beijing happens to be a loving cradle of this type of noodle. Even in times when I've had to list Beijing as my permanent address—in what can only be described as a bone-chilling reckoning of regrettable life choices—I could look down on my proper bowl of Biang Biang noodles and say, “This doesn't fucking cut it, but it makes it better.”

You can make great Biang Biang noodles at home. In fact, I've published recipes for them on my blog, twice. But a nagging imperfection remains—not within the recipes but in the flow of execution. To stretch the noodles uniformly one after another and drop them into the boiling water as you go—which is usually how it's done in restaurants—requires skills not possessed by most home cooks, including myself. And to prestretch each noodle beforehand and let it lie flat and separate from other noodles to prevent sticking occupies too much counter space.

So ladies and gents, let me introduce you to The Soloist.

One noodle, one serving: a single super-wide and super-long flap of perfect chewiness all lubed up in a thick and spicy smoky eggplant sauce, then swathed in the indispensable My Ultimate Chile Oil. To go from tip to end, or divide and conquer? That's about as much freedom as one will enjoy in China.

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT: stand mixer with a dough hook

DOUGH (I strongly recommend measuring by weight)

2½ cups (363 g) flour with 10 to 11 percent protein (I like to combine 1¼ cups all-purpose flour and 1¼ cups bread flour)

¾ teaspoon (6 g) table salt

¾ cup plus 1½ tablespoons (200 g) water

Canola oil, for the dough

SMOKY EGGPLANT AND SPICY MISO SAUCE

2 medium (500 g) Asian eggplants

¼ cup (60 mL) canola oil

Loose ¼ cup (38 g) sun-dried tomatoes in olive oil, drained

3 garlic cloves, peeled

2 small shallots, peeled

¼ cup (75 g) medium/yellow miso paste

2 tablespoons gochujang (Korean chile paste)

¼ teaspoon ground cumin

¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

2 tablespoons rice wine

¼ cup (60 mL) packaged chicken stock

1 tablespoon fish sauce

¾ teaspoon light brown sugar

2 teaspoons unflavored gelatin

Pickled Chilies (page 25), diced

TO FINISH

My Ultimate Chile Oil (page 24)

Finely diced scallions



LAKSA-FLAVORED PAELLA

My perception of paella has evolved greatly over the years. It started with the overly wet, tossed, and hence illegitimate versions my husband and I had in random restaurants in New York, and went to the flat and crispy, beautifully caramelized real deal we came across in its homeland, Spain. I'm not saying any of that puts me in a position of authority to say what I'm about to say, but the truth is that across my search, regrettably, I haven't met a paella that I would crave eating again.

Don't get me wrong—when done right, paella is a beautiful thing. The shallow disk of short-grain rice that has fully absorbed a meticulous layer of flavors, left undisturbed to be caramelized and crisped all around the bottom and edges, forming that quintessential burned crust of what they call socarrat? That part is practically majestic. But what leaves a pothole of dissatisfaction in my despicably greedy heart is that none of the paellas I've tried packed the initial punch of heavy-hitting flavors that one could be forgiven for expecting from its dramatic and promising entrance. All that glorious brownness, redness, and even blackness (if squid ink is involved) somehow come up a bit short on the flavor front.

I'm not mad as I say this. I'm simply damaged. My taste buds have been irreparably ruined by the relentless madness of Southeast Asian flavors.

Take, for example, shrimp—the most common and widely used ingredient for flavoring paella. I mean, shrimp is shrimp, right? How can someone make shrimp more shrimp? Well, Malaysians and Singaporeans can.

If you haven't had a proper bowl of Katong laksa, the iconic Singaporean dish that originated in Malaysia that is rice noodles in curried coconut gravy, don't take my word for it. Book a flight, sit your ass down at a hawker center—a good one, obviously—and get a bowl. Then you'll bask in bafflement at how on earth a seemingly plain bowl of noodles could possibly cram in so much shrimpiness per square millimeter. Sure, you might see just a couple of shrimp in the bowl, or none at all—so where is all that flavor coming from?

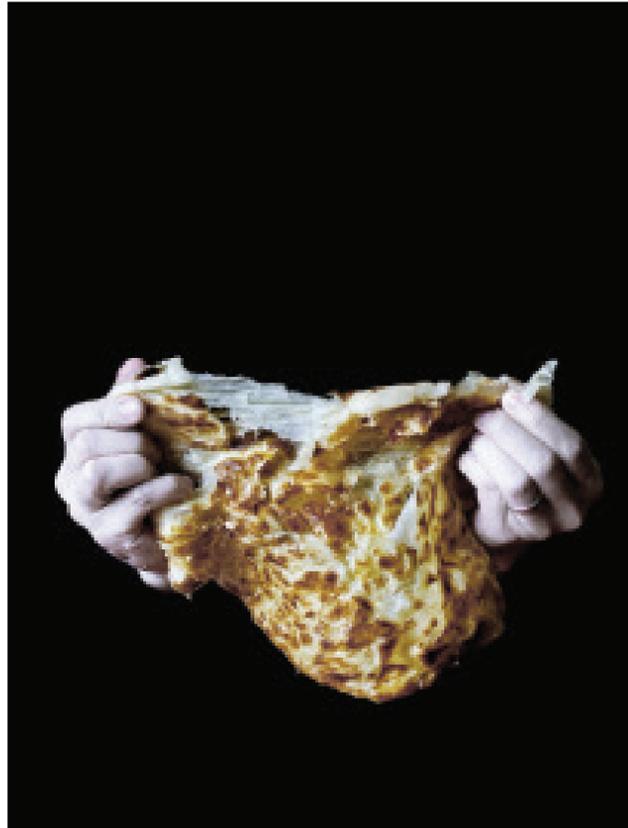
Behold dried shrimp: the quintessential dope that injects its subject with a much-needed boost of shrimpiness. This deeper, funkier, and concentrated aroma, when combined with coconut milk and Thai curry pastes, is what will make paella sing here, once and for all.

Unlike in the Semi-Instant Laksa Mix on page 143, I'm taking a shortcut here to mimic the flavor of laksa without making the paste completely from scratch.

Oh, and don't for a second think that I've forgotten about the socarrat. I've made it double sided.

MAKES 4 TO 6 SERVINGS





CHEWY LAYERED PARATHA

Here's another great use for and variation on Asian hot water dough. Some may know this type of layered flatbread as lachha paratha from India, or dabing from China, but here within my tender heart, it will always be known as my baby unicorn.

Behold, my culinary holy grail.

I'm not exaggerating. For as long as I've thought about food, I've been relentlessly after the secret of what makes this type of flatbread so incredibly crispy outside, with its wing-like lace, and so satisfyingly chewy and stringy inside, with its many completely separated, almost translucent layers. Many recipes out there produce a flatbread with one or the other quality, but I think that missing either of them renders it utterly trash. A few years ago, when I thought I'd gotten it right, I even published a recipe for flatbread on my blog. But in hindsight, it was close but not perfect.

What was missing? The hot water dough method.

My old recipe (which I called "layered roti") featured a dough that was too wet and too elastic, making it very hard to work with. And this is where the hot water dough method shines the brightest. It yields a dough that has a relatively low water content yet isn't tough. It removes some of the excess gluten, so it's a cinch to roll out yet still chewy at the end. And you can make small adjustments to it to adapt it for different applications. For example, because we're aiming for more chewiness in this dough, I'm switching out half of the all-purpose flour with bread flour. And because bread flour has a higher water absorbency than all-purpose, we need to add a tad bit more water than the previous recipe calls for. You see how it works?

To be frank, getting this recipe to exactly how I wanted it was already like, dude, my work here is done. But just for the sake of a bonus, it is served with a tapenade-infused, savory whipped cream. I know.

MAKES THREE 12-INCH PARATHAS



CRISPY WHOLE-FRIED SANDSTORM CHICKEN

A sandstorm is a very different animal from coal-related air pollution. The first, a natural phenomenon, is mostly annoying but otherwise unlikely to cause severe health problems unless you do something really stupid during the storm. It's characterized by a dark, murky, almost orange overtone that makes everything look as if you're wearing yellow-tinted sunglasses. The latter, on the other hand, is a byproduct of burning coal that veils the affected region with a diffuse gray to opaque white smoke made up of particles small enough to enter your bloodstream, which can lead to cardiovascular illnesses or, of course, lung cancer. The two might be mistaken for one another in, say, a photo, but they are easily distinguishable by people with intimate experiences of both.

Not to brag, but here you're looking at one of those people.

But the word sandstorm also has happier associations for me. I'm talking about an utterly overlooked culinary delight that the Cantonese call sandstorm chicken (okay, technically it's called "wind dust chicken," but let's be poetic about it). A whole chicken is marinated, then deep-fried until the skin is incredibly crispy, then served underneath a sand dune of fried garlic. It is literally and figuratively a force of nature.

Here I've adapted it to be more home kitchen-friendly with a technique of shallow-frying, and the skin is padded with a coating of potato starch that fries into a craggy, jagged suit of crispiness. Then instead of pure fried garlic, which can be a bit monotonous, I mixed in almost an equal amount of grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, plus dustings of Sichuan peppercorns.

Typically, this dish is cut to small pieces before serving, but I say, if one has fried a whole chicken, one has earned the primal pleasure of tearing it limb from limb, with fat running rampant and acting as an adhesive for the pungent, savory, salivatingly delicious "sand." You'll find there aren't a lot of things in life that are this satisfying to weather through.

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT: large, nonstick wok or deep skillet (4 inches/10 cm deep)

CHICKEN

1 small (2.3- to 3-pound/1.2-kg max) free-range chicken (weight without head or feet)

1 tablespoon Shaoxing wine

1 tablespoon fish sauce

1 tablespoon dried galangal powder or ground ginger (see Note on page 239)

1 teaspoon ground white pepper

½ teaspoon sea salt

Potato starch (see page 6), for coating

Canola oil, for frying



1/3 cup (70 g) dark brown sugar
2 tablespoons pink curing salt (see Note on page 248)
1 tablespoon pickling spice
7 garlic cloves, smashed
Three 3-inch (8-cm) slices (20 g) ginger
2 quarts (2 L) ice water

SPICE CRUST

1/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons (23 g) Sichuan peppercorns
1/4 cup (36 g) Korean chile flakes for medium spiciness, use more or less as desired
1/4 cup (32 g) black peppercorns
1/4 cup (16 g) coriander seeds
1/4 cup (41 g) mustard seeds
2 tablespoons white peppercorns
2 teaspoons ground cumin
1 black cardamom pod
2 tablespoons smoked paprika
3 tablespoons yellow mustard
2 tablespoons Sichuan broad bean chile paste (doubanjiang; see page 9)
1 teaspoon dark brown sugar
1/2 teaspoon liquid smoke
1 garlic clove, grated

TAHINI MUSTARD SAUCE

1/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons (90 mL) whole milk
1/4 cup (64 g) Japanese or Chinese tahini (see Note on page 248)
3 tablespoons Dijon mustard
2 1/2 tablespoons Garlic Confit Sauce (page 14)
3 tablespoons light brown sugar
1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon soy sauce
2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil
1/4 cup finely chopped cilantro
1/4 cup finely chopped scallions

FOR SERVING

Sauerkraut, store-bought or homemade
Slices of rye bread or steamed rice

CURE THE MEAT

1. Start 4 or 5 days ahead of time. Find a large pot that will fit the whole hunk of short ribs. Make sure it has a lid, and clear out a space in the fridge where the whole pot can fit. Set the pot on the stove and add the water, kosher salt, smoked sea salt, light and dark brown sugars, pink curing salt, pickling spice, garlic, and ginger. Bring to a simmer over high heat, whisking occasionally until all the salt has dissolved, then add the iced water to cool down the brine. When the brine has cooled to *room temperature*, sink the meat into the brine until *completely submerged*. Cover with a lid and set it in the fridge to brine for at least 3 or preferably 4 days.

COOK THE MEAT

2. Preheat the oven to 220°F/105°C. Remove the meat from the brine, rinse it clean under water, pat it dry, and set it aside on a large tray.
3. In a large skillet, combine the Sichuan peppercorns, chile flakes, black peppercorns, coriander seeds, mustard seeds, white peppercorns, ground cumin, and cardamom. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly, until the spices start to pop and smell fragrant. Pick out the black cardamom first and transfer it to a spice grinder. Grind until the cardamom is coarsely ground, then add the remaining spices and pulse until everything's coarsely but evenly ground. Stir in the smoked paprika and set aside.

for a crowd 247



the processor, scraping the sides and bottom several times in between, until the mixture is as smoothly pureed as humanly possible. Add the ice cubes one at a time and run the processor until each ice cube has completely melted/emulsified with the hummus. Stop adding ice once you've reached your desired consistency. Season with more sea salt if desired.

2. The color of the black hummus when it's just finished will look, well, not quite black, but more like an unappetizing concrete gray. Just let it sit for 30 minutes and the color will darken.

MAKE THE TOPPING

3. In a small skillet, combine the olive oil, sesame oil, cumin, and chile flakes and cook over medium-high heat for 1 minute, until fragrant. Add the chickpeas and cook for 30 seconds to warm them through.

TO SERVE

4. Spoon the chickpeas and spiced oil over the black hummus. Mix together the toasted sesame seeds and minced cilantro with an extra pinch of chile flakes and sprinkle all over the top. Serve with pitas or crusty bread.



SHIT I EAT WHEN I'M BY MYSELF

I don't cook for myself.

Or at least, not the way it looks on my blog or in the rest of this book outside this section. I don't know how it reflects on me as someone who's selling recipes, but in my view, cooking and eating are two very different, entirely separate areas of investigation. Cooking, to me, is about curiosity, the insatiable need to know beyond necessity, the compulsion in the process of unwrapping a question, rephrasing it again, moving on to the next, the hunt.

Eating is about comfort.

I rarely find enthusiasm in repeating the same recipes, answering the same questions. But I can eat the same things over and over again. These things don't involve a lot of thinking and rationalizing; they aren't even bothered by common decency or responsibilities. I eat them free of my own judgment.



MOCHI

I want to dedicate a few recipes in this chapter to something that I hold with absolute high regard in my heart: mochi, the softly chewy, slippery, smooth, and bouncy dough made with sticky rice that is a cherished culinary focus in pretty much all parts of Asia. It has dozens of different names and forms, but for good measure, here I'm going to call it mochi across the board.

I adore mochi. I adore it like dancers adore rhythm and painters adore colors, as a constant necessity that feeds inspiration. Which is precisely why it saddens me to see it underappreciated in the broader international food scene, as many from the West fail to understand what's its big fucking deal.

You see, mochi is a textural thing. It does carry a mild yet distinct sweetness from the sticky rice, but to fully understand its appeal, one has to be willing to recognize texture as a stand-alone culinary element, equal in importance to flavor. Just as one can gradually acquire a taste for whiskey, coffee, or more pungent cheeses, the slippery and chewy texture of mochi is an acquired appreciation that, once registered, is a lifelong source of satisfaction and endless possibilities.

I've incorporated a hint of this texture already in recipes like the mochi bread dough and sticky rice tortillas, but now we're headed into a full frontal dive. Here are three of my favorite ways to incorporate mochi into sweets.



for PUPS

So, actually, did I mention I had a company while I was living in New York that made and delivered home-cooked dog foods? Yeah, it was called Big Bone. Originally it was meant to be “Big Boned,” but I forgot to add the letter d when I filled out the LLC application. This not only completely erased the intended pun, it also made registering and marketing our website slightly tricky later on. Turned out, bigbone.com was a lot more popular among lonely adults than hungry canines.

Who knew.

To anyone who ever tried to Google my dog food service ten years ago but was instead flashed by unsolicited male parts, I deeply and sincerely apologize.



CHEESE COOKIES

If you've ever eaten a commercial dog biscuit, you'll understand the occasional sorrow and lonesomeness tinged with a trace of resentment you see in your dog's eyes. It's not the cat. It's you. So spend a few minutes of your life baking some delicious yet nutritious cookies for your dogs—buttery, mildly sweet, and boosted with flaxseed and caramelized Cheddar cheese. The effort involved is nothing compared to the devotion your dog has so generously offered you. Dogs will take a bullet for humans, man. It's possible that no one on earth loves you as much. I think that's worth a homemade cookie.

MAKES APPROXIMATELY 45 COOKIES, DEPENDING ON SIZE

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT: *cookie cutters*

6 tablespoons (78 g) unsalted butter, diced

2 tablespoons (40 g) molasses

2 large eggs, plus 1 large egg white, for brushing

1¼ cups (156 g) all-purpose flour or whole wheat flour

1 packed cup (100 g) shredded Cheddar cheese

½ cup (60 g) ground flaxseed

½ cup (50 g) rolled oats

¼ cup (40 g) cornstarch

½ teaspoon baking powder

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F/180°C. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

2. In a food processor, combine the butter, molasses, and the 2 eggs and blend until smooth. It's okay if the butter is in bits. Add

the flour, Cheddar, flaxseed, oats, cornstarch, and baking powder and pulse until the mixture comes together in an even dough.

3. Transfer the dough to a floured surface and roll it out into a ¼-inch- (0.5-cm-) thick sheet. Cut it into shapes with your favorite cookie cutters. Arrange the cookies on the prepared baking sheet and brush the tops with egg white.

4. Bake for 11 to 12 minutes, until the surface is lightly browned. Gather the dough scraps and roll out and bake more cookies until the dough is used up.

5. Let the cookies cool on a rack, then store in an airtight bag at room temperature for up to 5 days or in the fridge for up to 2 weeks.



UNIVERSAL CONVERSION CHART

OVEN TEMPERATURE EQUIVALENTS

250°F = 120°C	350°F = 180°C	450°F = 230°C
275°F = 135°C	375°F = 190°C	475°F = 240°C
300°F = 150°C	400°F = 200°C	500°F = 260°C
325°F = 160°C	425°F = 220°C	

MEASUREMENT EQUIVALENTS

Measurements should always be level unless directed otherwise.

$\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon = 0.5 mL

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon = 1 mL

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon = 2 mL

1 teaspoon = 5 mL

1 tablespoon = 3 teaspoons = $\frac{1}{2}$ fluid ounce = 15 mL

2 tablespoons = $\frac{1}{8}$ cup = 1 fluid ounce = 30 mL

4 tablespoons = $\frac{1}{4}$ cup = 2 fluid ounces = 60 mL

$5\frac{1}{3}$ tablespoons = $\frac{1}{3}$ cup = 3 fluid ounces = 80 mL

8 tablespoons = $\frac{1}{2}$ cup = 4 fluid ounces = 120 mL

$10\frac{2}{3}$ tablespoons = $\frac{2}{3}$ cup = 5 fluid ounces = 160 mL

12 tablespoons = $\frac{3}{4}$ cup = 6 fluid ounces = 180 mL

16 tablespoons = 1 cup = 8 fluid ounces = 240 mL

