Sticky Rice Wraps

Taiwanese: *bah-tsàng*（肉粽）
Mandarin: *zòngzi*（粽子）

By far the hardest recipe I've made the entire project. You have been warned. Half the difficulty is in the time required–it takes two fairly packed days to make this, including preparing the *lóo-bah* which is used as the filling, so serious schedule-clearing is required. But making *bah-tsàng* also requires great precision and attention to detail, to the point where I had major difficulty even writing the recipe in a coherent way. I think they're worth the effort to make, though; they're just that tasty.

Ingredients (makes 30-40 *bah-tsàng*[1])

5 lbs. sticky rice
lóo-bah, made previously
80 bamboo leaves
1/2 cup dried shrimp
20 dried shiitake mushrooms
Chicken broth (?)
Soy sauce (?)
Fried shallots, to taste
1/4 cup vegetable oil
1 ball kitchen twine

Procedure

Day 1

1. Make *lóo-bah*. Place in the refrigerator overnight.
2. Soak dried shiitake mushrooms in water to reconstitute. Cut off the stems, which are inedible.
3. Soak bamboo leaves in hot water and weigh them down to make sure they are completely covered.
4. Soak sticky rice in water. Leave this, bamboo leaves, and shiitake mushrooms overnight.

Day 2

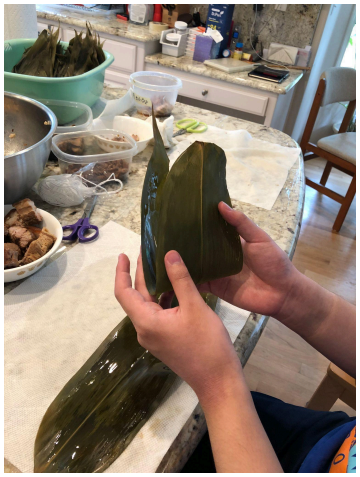
5. Prepare the ingredients from the previous day as follows: Take bamboo leaves and dry them with a paper towel. Cut shiitake mushrooms into fourths and save the water for later. Drain the sticky rice into a large bowl. Warm up the *lóo-bah* and cut the meat into 1-inch chunks.

[1] They always end up getting made in huge batches, because everyone in the extended Ho-Lee family seems to want a few *bah-tsàng*. Definitely feel free to scale this down.

6. Heat dried shrimp in a pan with soy sauce to soften and flavor them.
7. In batches, cook the rice in a pan with a mixture of *lóo-bah* broth, soy sauce, and chicken broth. Stir continuously.
   The exact proportion is a matter of guesswork; basically just add more until it looks right. Two things give away that the rice is done: when 1) none of the grains are white anymore, indicating that the sauce has spread through them evenly, and 2) when the rice grains have stopped behaving as individual grains and started forming a continuous, sticky mass[2]. Add fried shallots to rice about halfway through the process. Transfer rice to a large bowl when finished.
   a. *This takes roughly 20-25 minutes when divided into three batches, or for every 1⅔ pounds of rice.*
8. Wrap *bah-tsàng* as shown:




a) Start with two clean bamboo leaves and spread oil on them





[2] The reason this recipe is so difficult is that there's no way to quantify this step. I don't know how much liquid you put in; I've never been able to measure it. I've tried my best to write this down in a way that makes sense. Apparently it feels a bit like risotto, but I've never made risotto and so for me, that's not a great reference point. It might be helpful to you.

b) Take one bamboo leaf, bend it in half, and fold the edge over a little bit to turn it into a pocket, as shown





c) Fill *bah-tsàng* with sticky rice, then fillings[3], then more sticky rice to cover everything




d) Wrap the second bamboo leaf around the first one, covering the fold made in step 1

[3] The Lee standard is one piece of pork, two shiitake mushrooms, and three dried shrimp.



e) Fold the left edge over the top…



f) … and then the right edge…





g) … and then press all the top layers together and fold them down.





h) Finally, tie the *bah-tsàng* with a piece of kitchen twine to keep it from coming apart during cooking.

Repeat steps a-h until the rice is gone[4].

9. Steam for 25 minutes.
10. When done, serve with *Ai zhī wèi* and/or soy sauce. These can be frozen and will keep for a month or two; defrost in the refrigerator overnight and then re-steam for 10-15 minutes to eat them again.

Other Notes

Below I've transcribed a conversation I had with my mother when first writing down this recipe:

NICOLE LEE
That step-cooking the rice-it takes a while, but it makes the steaming step faster. Because it only took 25 minutes, right?

MARCUS HO
Yeah…

NICOLE
Do you know how long it would take if you put in the rice raw? Six hours.

MARCUS
Seriously?

NICOLE
Yep. People at church would do that, and they would have all these weird superstitions about it, like you couldn't enter the house through the front door while it was cooking.

[4] Prepare all the other ingredients in excess so the rice becomes the limiting reagent; you can refrigerate all the other things, but the rice is the one thing that doesn't last super long.

MARCUS
Oh boy.

NICOLE
And they'd say, "If you open the front door, all the heat will leave the house and the *bah-tsàng* will never be done!" And [your *A-má* and I] would be like, "Yeah…that's not how it works at all."