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Ravenous | Thit Heo Kho

by MONIQUE TRUONG • SEPT. 2, 2011



Damijan SaccioThe author simmers pig cheek and red peppers in coconut water to make thit heo kho, a Vietnamese slow roast pork dish.

In this new column, Monique Truong, author of “The Book of Salt,” and “Bitter in the Mouth,” shares food stories and recipes from her kitchen table.

My mother called on Friday, Aug. 26, 2011, forever to be known here in New York City as “Pre-Irene Panic Shopping Day,” and asked whether I had any bottled water in the house. My mother is not a member of the Facebook nation, otherwise she would have already known the answer. I had posted this on my page: “We have no bottled water in the house, but we do have a ridiculous amount of extra virgin olive oil.” It was a true statement, but then again it is also true on most days of the year. I’m known for having a well-stocked larder.

My mother lives in Houston and is very familiar with the destructive force and consequences of hurricanes. My mother is also a war refugee, as am I. This may or may not explain why our survival instincts are a little off.

In 2008, while many Houstonians had hit the highways out of town, my mother waited for Hurricane Ike in a suite in a fancy hotel. She swears that she chose it for the location, one less prone to flooding than her own neighborhood, rather than the luxe accommodations. She had brought with her my younger sister and a collection of our extended family members. Her rationale: “I’ve already left everything behind once, and I’m not doing it again.” Rationale is, of course, very different from rational.

I should mention that my mother also brought with her some butane-powered, portable burners and what sounded to me like a month’s worth of food: a 10-pound bag of jasmine rice, fresh pork and vegetables, bottles of fish sauce and most certainly cooking oil. Hurricane Ike may have had its way with the Lone Star State, but all I heard about was how well my family had eaten.

Just as the proverbial Irish wake is not heartless or disrespectful and is instead a celebration of life, all that cooking that went on as Hurricane Ike raged through Houston was my mother’s way of saying that if this was, in fact, life’s last hurrah, then she and everyone around her was going to go out with a full and satisfied stomach. Her rationale: the last meal should be a good one.

Also, the last meal should feature pork, preferably thit heo kho, slow cooked until it turns the color of amber. We are Vietnamese Americans, after all. Pork is as necessary to us as water.

So on Sunday as the tail of Hurricane Irene was whipping through the trees and threatening to bring them and the power lines down, I started to think about my last meal, not my last one ever but possibly the last hot one for sometime. The extra virgin olive oil wasn’t what I reached for. I went for the pork.

My husband and I belong to a pork CSA. Every other week, we receive fresh pork and “hand-crafted” charcuterie from the Piggery, a farm in Trumansburg in the Finger Lakes region of New York. That week’s share included pig cheek medallions and pork confit.

Thit heo kho, especially the version from the south of Vietnam that uses coconut water as its braising liquid and features the addition of hard-boiled eggs at the end of cooking, is usually made with thick chunks of fat-layered pork from the shoulder, butt or leg. The fat is as integral to this dish as the meat. The slow cooking transforms them in different ways, and it’s the interplay of textures — the molten fat, the toothsome, caramelized meat — that makes this dish a Vietnamese classic.

In my thit heo kho Irene-style, the pig cheek medallions — my first time cooking with this lean cut — became fork tender and yet retained a pleasing chewiness. The pork confit (smoky hunks of fat, laced with a thin layer of meat) made me think of how cooking was and is still done in the

countryside of Vietnam, over a wood or coal fire.

To go with the pork, I sautéed some cauliflower and snap peas and cooked a pot of jasmine rice. My husband and I ate, putting Irene in her place with every bite.



The finished thit heo kho served over jasmine rice.

Thit Heo Kho Irene-Style

Serves 4

2 pig cheek medallions (about $\frac{1}{4}$ pound); 4 medallions would be even better

4 pieces of the Piggery pork confit (about $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ pound)

4 large eggs, hard-boiled and peeled

1 bunch of scallions, cleaned and cut into 4 inch long segments

12-ounce can of coconut water (some brands contain pieces of coconut flesh, which should be strained out)

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup of water

1/8 cup of Vietnamese fish sauce, more to taste
3 tablespoons of Demerara sugar, more to taste
2 dried red pepper pods
1 teaspoon of canola oil
1/4 teaspoon kosher salt
1 teaspoon of freshly ground black pepper.

1. Place the pig cheeks in a small bowl. Add salt, 1/4 teaspoon of black pepper, 1/2 teaspoon of sugar, 1/2 of the scallions and mix until the medallions are evenly coated. If you have the time, let the pork marinate for at least 1/2 hour. If marinating for longer, cover and place in the fridge.
2. In a medium pot, add the oil and turn the heat to medium-high. Add the pig cheeks, along with the scallions that were part of the marinade. Sear the pig cheeks on both sides.
3. To the pot, add the coconut water, water, fish sauce, the rest of the sugar, the rest of the black pepper and the dried red pepper pods. Bring to a boil and lower the heat to achieve a lively simmer. Cover and simmer for about 1 hour.
4. When the pig cheeks can be pierced with a tip of the knife with just a bit of resistance, add the pork confit pieces and the rest of the scallions. Give the contents of the pot a gentle stir. It's important to treat the confit gently as it's already cooked and will become very tender almost immediately. Cover the pot and continue simmering.
5. After 1/2 hour, add the peeled, hard-boiled eggs to the pot. Cover the pot and continue simmering.
6. After another 1/2 hour, check to see whether the pig cheeks have become very tender (they should still retain their shape, though. . If yes, taste the sauce. It should be both savory and sweet. You'll want to achieve a balance of the two and can adjust by adding a little more fish sauce or sugar at this point. If the sauce is too intense for your taste, add a bit of water.
7. Continue to simmer for a bit longer, about 10 to 15 minutes, with the lid off. The dish is done when the color of the broth and the meat is a pleasing shade of amber (not as light and golden as clover honey but not as dark as black strap molasses. .
8. Serve with jasmine rice. Don't be afraid of the fat. Eat it. Hurricanes don't happen that often (at least not here in New York.)!

For an excellent, more traditional take on this dish that doesn't call for pig cheeks or pork confit, I recommend the one in Andrea Nguyen's "Into the Vietnamese Kitchen: Treasured Foodways, Modern Flavors" (Ten Speed Press).

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