

Kho: Sweet, Salty and Ever Present

Continued from H1

A typical Vietnamese meal consists of rice, *kho*, a stir-fry and soup. "You can leave out the stir-fry and the soup, but you can't forget the *kho*," my dad says. "There's always plenty of rice, and you have to eat it with something salty."

To prepare a basic *kho* dish, you simply place all the ingredients in a saucepan and let them cook until the meat juices have exuded and combined well with the other elements, and the overall color is as reddish-brown as dark honey. Creative cooks can doll things up by grilling or briefly sautéing the meat or fish before simmering it with the caramel sauce and other ingredients. If it isn't naturally present, a little fat or oil is added for richness.

Though the color darkens slightly overnight, *kho* dishes re-heat beautifully, so Vietnamese cooks often prepare large quantities with leftovers in mind.

Kho dishes originated before refrigeration was available in Vietnam and cooks needed to preserve food to accompany the mainstay of their diet, rice. To that end, they infused food with the saltiness of fish sauce, their beloved condiment. But things cooked in pure fish sauce were overly salty, so sugar was added to balance the flavor.

Still, the color wasn't quite right, so they started experimenting and eventually adopted the practice of caramelizing the sugar into an inky, bittersweet sauce (think black coffee or molasses). Diluted during cooking, the dark red cast of this caramel sauce imparts a beautiful color. The use of *nuoc mau* negated the need to add sugar to the sauce, though some cooks still do. The caramel's bittersweet edge also helps counter the saltiness of the fish sauce and brings out the savory aspects of whatever is being cooked.

A *kho* made with a caramel-based sauce is rich in flavor and lush in texture. Because *kho* is such an important part of a Vietnamese cook's repertoire, *nuoc mau* is a staple in the Vietnamese kitchen, where it's made in large batches and stored in a jar, usually kept in the cupboard. Just spoon some into a saucepan with all the other ingredients and you're ready to go. Some cooks add ginger, hot chile peppers, galangal or whole peppercorns for extra pizzazz.

As with any dish that is so simple, the quality of the ingredients is important. Fish sauce, in particular, varies depending on the manufacturer and country of origin. Tiparos brand, which is widely available, is produced in the Thai style, which means that it's heavier and



LAWRENCE K. HO / Los Angeles Times

Suon Kho are pork riblets grilled, then simmered in caramel sauce.

saltier. Vietnamese-style fish sauce (Viet Huong/3 Crabs is my favorite brand—it's made in Thailand but to the Vietnamese taste) is lighter and a bit sweet because some fructose is usually added.

Traditional Vietnamese cooks such as my mother keep a Tiparos-type of fish sauce around for cooking (it's cheaper) and use the more delicate Vietnamese-style fish sauce ("more expensive" at about \$2.49 a bottle) to make their dipping sauces.

It's like the differences between grades of olive oil and how they may be used in different applications. If I had to choose only one brand of fish sauce to keep in my kitchen, I'd go for the 3 Crabs; it's widely available in Chinese, pan-Asian and Vietnamese markets. Vietnam is exporting some good stuff these days too, like Pigeon brand, which is primarily available at Vietnamese markets.

Most *kho* dishes can be made very quickly. The pork riblets are an exception—they're marinated and then broiled or grilled before simmering, which gives them a wonderfully complex roastiness at the price of more time. Still, I *kho* these riblets around Tet every year as a reminder of the traditional festivities (surrounding the annual slaughter of a pig), which can go on for weeks.

Since you're supposed to avoid

work and have fun during Tet, my mother's family would *kho* their pork ribs for eating throughout the celebration alongside other traditional foods. With the Year of the Horse starting Tuesday, I'm rounding up my riblets and reaching for my jar of caramel sauce.

Cover photo and above: tray and plates from Yuzu, Pasadena.

Chicken and Ginger in Caramel Sauce (Gà Kho)

Active Work Time: 10 minutes • Total Preparation Time: 30 minutes

This is a very straightforward northern Vietnamese preparation. I've read recipes from the central and southern Vietnamese regions that include garlic and chiles, and that sauté the chicken with aromatics before simmering. While there's bound to be more complex flavors in those versions, the beauty of this recipe lies in its simplicity. This preparation shows off the ease of making a kho dish and the delectability of the results.

The chicken exudes its juices during cooking, which adds extra savoriness to the sauce. The ginger softens and mellows, blending in with the other ingredients while still retaining its jolting quality. To crush the ginger, place the flat side of a knife blade on each slice and

Caramel Sauce (Nuóc Mầu)

Active Work Time: 5 minutes • Total Preparation Time: 35 minutes

The traditional method of making this sauce requires that you add boiling water to the caramelized sugar, which kicks off a dramatic reaction that's not for the faint of heart. The point of doing this is to arrest the cooking process so that the sugar doesn't burn to a bitter black stage. I find it easier to place the pan bottom in a sink filled with water. This cools the caramel down so that when you add the remaining water, there's little drama left. The result of both approaches is the same bittersweet inky sauce that's a staple in every Vietnamese kitchen.

1 cup sugar

3/4 cup water, divided

• Fill the sink with enough water to come halfway up the side of a 1-quart, heavy-bottomed saucepan. Place the sugar and 1/4 cup of the water into the saucepan and cook

over medium-low heat. Stir until the sugar dissolves, about 2 to 3 minutes. As the sugar melts, the mixture will go from opaque to clear. Small bubbles will form at the edge and gradually grow larger, moving toward the center of the pan. Eventually, bubbles will cover the entire surface.

• After about 15 minutes, the sugar will begin to caramelize and turn in color. You'll see a progression from champagne yellow to light tea to dark tea. When smoke starts rising, remove the saucepan from the heat and slowly swirl it around. Watch the sugar closely as it will turn darker by the second; a reddish cast will set in (think the color of a big and bold red wine) as the bubbles become a lovely burnt orange. Pay attention to the color of the caramel underneath the

bubbles. When the caramel color is that of black coffee or molasses, place the pan in the sink to stop the cooking process. The hot pan bottom will sizzle upon contact and the bubble action will subside.

• Add the remaining 1/2 cup of water (there may be a small dramatic reaction) and place the saucepan back on the stove over medium heat, stirring until the caramel has dissolved into the water. The result will be slightly viscous; flavor-wise, it will be bittersweet. Pour the caramel sauce into a small glass jar and let it cool; it will thicken further. Store indefinitely in your kitchen cupboard.

1 cup. Each tablespoon: 39 calories; 0 sodium; 0 cholesterol; 0 fat; 0 saturated fat; 10 grams carbohydrates; 0 protein; 0 fiber.

Shrimp in Caramel Sauce (Tôm Kho)

Active Work Time: 15 minutes • Total Preparation Time: 25 minutes

This simple dish exemplifies how the Vietnamese kho method of cooking sends an already tasty ingredient such as shrimp into a new dimension. Nowadays, it seems uncouth to overcook seafood. However, in this application, the longer cooking allows all the flavors to thoroughly penetrate the shrimp. Unlike other kho dishes, this recipe doesn't ask you to sweat the juices out by covering the pan with a lid; shrimp is delicate and requires faster "open" cooking to concentrate the flavors. The onions should practically disintegrate into the sauce. Adding the oil at the end lends a bit of extra richness; traditionally more lard or oil was added than prescribed here to also give an appetizing sheen to the shrimp.

This may seem like a lot of shrimp for four, but I've observed my friends snap these guys up like crazy, sometimes even eating them

without rice.

1 1/2 pounds medium shrimp (31-40 count), peeled and deveined

1/4 teaspoon salt

1 1/2 tablespoons fish sauce

2 tablespoons Caramel Sauce

1/2 yellow onion, thinly sliced

1/2 teaspoon freshly ground pepper

1 1/2 tablespoons oil

1 green onion, green tops only, chopped

Steamed rice, for serving

• Place the shrimp, salt, fish sauce and Caramel Sauce into a shallow saucepan. Bring to a vigorous simmer over high heat. Add the yellow onion and pepper, stirring to evenly distribute. Continue cooking over high heat, occasionally turning the shrimp so that they're

well coated with sauce. They'll curl up and release their juices to combine with the other ingredients and concentrate into a dark sauce. Add a little water if things get too dry.

• The shrimp are done when they've taken on an orange-brown color and have a pleasant sweet chewiness, about 8 to 10 minutes after you've added the onion and pepper. There will be a few tablespoons of sauce in the pan. Remove from the heat, add the oil and stir to coat the shrimp. Scatter the green onion on top and serve with lots of steamed rice.

4 servings. Each serving, without rice: 229 calories; 725 mg sodium; 276 mg cholesterol; 7 grams fat; 1 gram saturated fat; 10 grams carbohydrates; 31 grams protein; 0.58 gram fiber.

Pork Riblets Simmered in Caramel Sauce (Suon Kho)

Active Work Time: 15 minutes • Total Preparation Time: 1 1/2 hours plus 2 hours marinating

Traditionally, the riblets were grilled over charcoal to sear in the flavors before simmering. In our family, we take an easier route by broiling them. I've presented all the options below. Here are some additional things to note: Ask a butcher to cut the ribs, as this is not an easy home project. To remove the fat, the ribs may be prepared a day ahead and refrigerated. The congealed fat can be easily lifted off the surface. The onions may be prepped in a mini-chopper.

2 pounds meaty pork spareribs, cut crosswise through the bone into 2-inch-wide strips

1/3 cup minced, grated or puréed yellow onion, about 1/2 small onion

1 tablespoon sugar

3/4 teaspoon freshly ground pepper

1/4 cup fish sauce, divided

1/4 cup Caramel Sauce

1 green onion, green top only, chopped

Steamed rice, for serving

• Cut each rib strip between the bones or through the cartilage into

individual riblets. Combine the onion, sugar, pepper and 2 tablespoons of the fish sauce in a bowl. Add the riblets, cover with plastic wrap and marinate in the refrigerator for at least 2 hours or overnight.

• If necessary, adjust your broiler rack so that the ribs will cook as close to the flame as possible. Heat the broiler for 30 minutes to get it nice and hot.

• While the broiler heats up, take the ribs from the refrigerator and let them sit at room temperature to take the chill off. Place them on a

baking sheet and broil until they're tinged brown, about 4 to 6 minutes per side; a little charring is fine. (You'll hear a pleasant sizzle as this happens.) Alternatively, cook the ribs over high heat on a gas or charcoal grill, which imparts deeper flavor. The point here is to sear the riblets to obtain a roastiness and intensify the overall color.

• Place the riblets in a saucepan with the Caramel Sauce, the remaining 2 tablespoons of fish sauce and enough water (about 2 1/2 cups) to cover most of the riblets. Bring to a boil and reduce the

heat to simmer. Cover and let cook for 40 minutes; the ribs should simmer vigorously, sending steam out from under the lid.

• Remove the lid and continue to simmer until the ribs are tender (you can easily pierce the meat with a fork or knife tip), about 20 to 30 minutes. If there's cartilage, you should be able to bite through it, with a slight crunch remaining. This latter phase of cooking allows the sauce to reduce and concentrate in flavor, and deepens the color to dark reddish brown. In the end, there should be a fair amount of sauce left.

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• Turn off the heat, tilt the saucepan so the liquid goes to one side and use a spoon or small ladle to skim the fat from the top. Adjust the flavors with extra fish sauce, if necessary. Garnish with the chopped green onion and serve with lots of steamed rice.

4 servings. Each serving, without rice: 429 calories; 773 mg sodium; 104 mg cholesterol; 26 grams fat; 9 grams saturated fat; 20 grams carbohydrates; 27 grams protein; 0.36 gram fiber.

Truffles: The Ultimate Home Crop

Continued from H1

"Oranges are often grown in fairly arid climates that tend to have alkaline soil. Give the truffle trees as much space as possible from other trees, and gradually expand the limed area so that it takes a few years to get to the orange's roots."

Black truffles occur naturally between latitudes of 40 and 47 degrees north, between 300 and 3,000 feet above sea level, but given the right conditions, they will grow farther south. Though the Los Angeles Basin may be too far south for the elegant tuber, Lefevre says higher elevations in central California may be suitable. Northern California has already proven hospitable to truffles.

Californians have been interested in truffle cultivation for decades, but Lefevre is seeing new signs of truffle fever. Two months ago he was writing his dissertation when one prospector got his name, drove 800 miles to find him and appeared with a list of questions.

When Oregon wasabi grower Roy Carver was scouting land for a large truffle orchard, the Napa Valley was on his list. In the end, he chose a site in the Texas hill country, which one of his new neighbors described as "some of the sorriest country in the United States." Both locations are well south of the truffle's natural home.



MICHAEL BRENNAN

The prized "black diamond of Périgord" can be grown in this country.

Once you've selected a site, amended the soil and planted your tree seedlings, the next steps are to prune and weed as they grow. Then comes the hard part: waiting. In time, telltale truffle "marks," or burls, may appear around the tree in late summer, indicating you may have mature truffles in four to five months.

While you're waiting, you'll have to discourage other vegetation in the vicinity, with the exception of other hazelnuts. Acid-loving plants such as camellias and crape myrtles will suffer if they grow too close.

Eventually, if you've planted cor-

rectly, tended properly and been blessed with the right combination of sunshine, rain and moderate temperatures, you'll find yourself popular in December and January. You'll have the secret ingredient for a turkey stuffing your guests will swoon over, and your homemade truffle-infused oils and sauces will be on everyone's Christmas list.

If you've done your best but get no truffles, you can always eat the hazelnuts. Better yet, find a good recipe for hazelnut-filled chocolate truffles.

Jill Hunting writes about wine and food from her home in Sonoma.

Valentine's: It's a Matter of Commitment

Continued from H1

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even before the evening's menus were conceived. This became a hot topic on the Los Angeles message board of the Chowhound.com Web site. Some called Josie "arrogant" and "highhanded." Others defended the practice, alluding to Angelenos' infamous flakiness. "I agree with the guy who said, 'I'd like to see a menu before I commit to something,'" says Le Balch. "But I've had a following for quite a long time. People like my food. It's not like I'm trying to be snobby." Besides, she adds, like many chefs, she regularly changes details of her menu according to what's in the day's market (beautiful carrots, tired spinach).

There does seem to be at least a loose relationship between a restaurant's location and whether or not it is requiring credit cards. For instance, Gustav Anders, the acclaimed Scandinavian dining room in Costa Mesa, is taking just names and phone numbers.

"You gotta remember where we are," says waitress Dana Heuberger. "Orange County is very conservative compared to L.A. If people call to make a reservation, that means they're ac-

tually going to come and dine.

"People in bigger cities get kind of cocky or flighty and say, 'We'll go here and we'll make a reservation.' And maybe they'll show and maybe they won't. And I think they're a younger crowd. They're more go with the flow. Up in L.A. it's more hip. Our clientele is a little older and more conscientious." Tratter agrees. "I would definitely say it's a big-city thing. It has to do with the very busy lives of individuals that are making reservations. Often those people don't even make their own reservations. They have other people do it."

Not every upscale Los Angeles restaurant is going the advance credit card route this Valentine's Day.

John Rucci, food and beverage director at the Peninsula Hotel in Beverly Hills, home to the sophisticated California-French restaurant Belvedere, says it's too much paperwork. "It's the equivalent of a bureaucracy just to go out to dinner."

Besides, he said, making diners feel like you're "giving them the honor of spending money in your establishment seems a bit obtrusive, to put it politely."