



Sweet & sophisticated

Our reinterpretations transform traditional sweet and sour pork from safe to sassy

By Daniel Bendas and Dean Small

the original

Over the years, Chinese sweet and sour pork has evolved from an ethnic staple dish (symbolizing “sweet life,” it’s a mainstay at any Chinese New Year celebration) into an all-American classic that is among the first steps of any foray into Chinese cuisine. For our makeover original (pictured, recipe, p. 81), we solicited Alfred Hsu, owner of Chicago’s Szechwan East, the 1995 offshoot of the former Magnificent Mile icon, Szechwan House. The key to good, authentic sweet and sour pork, he says, is the coating. “Every chef does it differently,” he says. “But the batter makes all the difference.”

* the analysis

Although safe, familiar and satisfying, the underlying principles of sweet and sour pork can rather easily be adapted to some broader, more contemporary menu applications that credibly enhance a wide variety of restaurant concepts. This dish presents some classic flavor balances that can be exploited: sweetness, acidity, and the interplay between the pork, the fruit and the vegetables.

In addition, the basic sweet and sour concept lends itself to many Asian interpretations beyond traditional Chinese, capitalizing on the growing influence of Asian cuisines.

* the results

Both of our reinterpretations are Asian-inspired, with one closer to the original’s Chinese roots and the other infused with flavor notes from India and Singapore. Both offer creative, contemporary spins on the dish’s traditional ingredients, such as pineapple, peppers, onions and rice—substituting, for example, Indian basmati rice in one dish and a flavorful fried rice cake in the other. Another departure: both dishes are grilled, not fried. This is partly to help negate the veto vote of more health-conscious diners, but also to capitalize on the current popularity of grilling.

Marinated pork chops crusted with garam masala, char-broiled and served with fragrant basmati rice, mango chutney and a caramelized sweet citrus glaze

Dean Small and Danny Bendas,
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Yield: 8 servings

FOR THE MARINATED CHOPS

Ginger	2 TBS
Garlic, granulated	2 TBS
Chile garlic sauce	2 TBS
Cayenne	1/2 tsp
Brown sugar	3/4 C
Low sodium soy sauce	2 C
Pineapple juice, from concentrate	5 C
Pork chops, bone-in, 6-Oz	16 each

1. Place the ginger, garlic, chile garlic sauce, cayenne and brown sugar in a food processor and pulse to chop the ginger. Slowly add the soy sauce and pineapple juice to the running processor.

2. Pour the mixture over the chops. Reserve, refrigerated, for at least 12 hours.

FOR THE MANGO CHUTNEY

Yield: 1 qt

Mangos, peeled, 1/2-inch dice	2 Lb
Apple cider vinegar	1/2 C
Sugar	1/2 C
Salt	1 tsp
Golden raisins	1/2 C
Raisins	1/2 C
Ginger, chopped	2 TBS
Serrano chile, seeded	1 each
Garlic, chopped	2 TBS
Ground cumin	1 tsp
Ground coriander	1 tsp
Ground turmeric	1/2 tsp
Cinnamon	1 tsp
Star anise, whole	1 each

1. In a small bowl, toss mangoes with vinegar, sugar, salt and raisins.

2. In a food processor, purée remaining ingredients, except star anise, to a paste.

3. Heat a large sauté pan over moderately low heat. Cook paste, stirring frequently, until very fragrant, about 5 to 7 minutes.

4. Stir in mango mixture and star anise and simmer, covered, over low heat, stirring occasionally, until mangoes are tender, about

15 to 20 minutes. Discard star anise and cool chutney completely. Reserve.

FOR THE CITRUS GINGER GLAZE

Yield: 2 1/2 C

Canola oil	2 TBS
Yellow onion, 3/8-inch dice	4 Oz
Garlic, chopped	2 TBS
Ginger, dime-sized, thin slices	3 each
Star anise, whole	3 each
Black pepper, cracked or café grind	1 tsp
Cold water	4 TBS
Sugar	1/2 C
Lime juice, freshly squeezed	1/4 C
Lemon juice, freshly squeezed	1/4 C
Orange juice, freshly squeezed	1/4 C
Chardonnay	1/4 C
Low sodium soy sauce	1/2 C
Chile garlic sauce	1 TBS
Chicken stock or broth	1/2 C
Cornstarch	1 TBS

1. Heat the oil in a small skillet. Add the onion, garlic, ginger, anise and black pepper. Cook over medium heat, stirring, until onion is tender and transparent.

2. In a medium sauce pan, place 2 tablespoons of water and the sugar and cook, stirring frequently, over medium-high heat until the mixture is caramelized, about 5 minutes. Add the juices and wine and cook until the sugar is dissolved, about 4 minutes.

3. Stir in the onion mixture, soy sauce, chile garlic sauce and remaining chicken stock, and cook over high heat for 5 minutes, until the flavors are well blended.

4. Combine the cornstarch and remaining 2 tablespoons water in a small bowl. Mix thoroughly and add to the sauce. Bring mixture to a boil, reduce heat and simmer for 15 to 20 minutes to reduce by half. Strain the sauce and discard solids. Reserve.

TO SERVE

Pork chops	16 each
Garam masala rub (see note)	8 tsp
Canola oil	as needed
Sweet and sour citrus ginger glaze	2 1/2 C

Asparagus, cooked	1 Lb
Sugar snap peas, cooked	1 Lb
Red bell pepper, julienned	8 Oz
Yellow bell peppers, julienned	8 Oz
Yellow onions, julienned	8 Oz
Fragrant basmati rice, prepared (see note)	6 C
Mango chutney	1 qt
Green onion flower	8 each
Green onions, sliced	8 tsp

1. Remove pork chops from marinade and drain well. Evenly sprinkle a 1/4 teaspoon of the spice rub over each side of the pork chops. Oil the grill and cook the chops, browning both sides and marking with the broiler grids. Lightly baste the chops with the sweet and sour citrus ginger glaze.

2. Heat oil in a sauté pan. Sauté about 2 ounces of the asparagus, 2 ounces of the sugar snap peas, and 1 ounce each of the peppers and onion until fully cooked. Lightly toss with citrus ginger glaze to coat.

3. Place about 3/4 cup of the warm rice in the middle of the plate. Place about 4 ounces of the mango chutney in front of the rice. Place 2 pork chops on top of the mango chutney, leaning on top of the rice. Place the sautéed vegetables around the back of the plate.

4. Ladle 2 ounces of sweet and sour glaze over the chops and vegetables. Place a green onion flower between the 2 pork chops. Sprinkle 1 teaspoon of green onion over the pork chops.

Note: Serve with jasmine rice cooked in prepared jasmine or passion fruit tea with diced onion, zucchini, yellow squash and red bell pepper and garnished with chopped mint.

Note: 8 thick pork chops may be substituted for 16 thin chops.

Note: The garam masala spice rub is a mix of 2 teaspoons each of ground cumin and ground coriander and 1 teaspoon each of cinnamon, ground cloves, cayenne, ground ginger, ground turmeric, granulated garlic and salt.

Menu price: \$13.95 - \$14.95;
food cost/serving: 30% - 31%

Bendas and Small are managing partners with Synergy, a California-based foodservice consulting firm, specializing in menu development, operations and staff training.



* Use of pork chops allows operators to put a contemporary ethnic spin on a readily available cut that's likely already in their inventory. Keeping the chops on the bone keeps the meat moist and tender.

* Tropical juices, sugar and chile garlic sauce in the marinade create a counterbalance of sweet, sour and spicy.

* The garam masala spice rub and crusting adds depth of flavor and Indian tones to the dish.

* The caramelized sweet and sour citrus ginger glaze adds a clean citrus flavor to the traditional sweet and sour sauce.

* All of the products for this dish, except for the chops themselves, can be prepared in advance and held cold, allowing for timely, fresh preparation at the time of service.

* Fresh mango chutney adds another element of freshness.

* Substituting prepared jasmine or passion fruit tea for traditional chicken broth to cook the basmati rice adds a unique spin to the overall flavor profile.

Sweet and sour grilled pork tenderloin with fried vegetable jasmine rice cakes

Dean Small and Danny Bendas,
Synergy Consulting

Yield: 4 servings

FOR THE SWEET AND SOUR SAUCE

Yield: 3 C

Cold water	1 C
Red wine vinegar with garlic	3/4 C
Soy sauce	1/2 C, plus 2 TBS
Ketchup	2 TBS
Chile garlic sauce	2 tsp
Garlic, chopped	1 TBS
Ginger, minced	4 tsp
Sugar	1 1/4 C
All-purpose flour	3 TBS
Salt	1/2 tsp

1. Place water, vinegar, soy sauce, ketchup, chile garlic sauce, garlic and ginger in a saucepan. Blend with a wire whip.

2. In a small bowl, blend together the sugar, flour and salt. Using the whip, blend the dry mixture into the liquid, completely dissolving the sugar.

3. Place the pan on the range and bring to a boil over high heat, stirring frequently. When boiling, reduce the heat and simmer the sauce for 2 minutes. Reserve, refrigerated.

FOR THE VEGETABLE FRIED JASMINE RICE CAKES

Yield: 2 Lb

Jasmine rice	1 C
Warm water	1 3/4 C
Chicken base	1 TBS
Peanut oil	3 TBS
Eggs	6 each
Garlic, chopped	2 tsp
Red bell pepper, 1/4-inch dice	1/4 C
Carrot, 1/8-inch x 1-inch julienne	1/2 C
Frozen green peas, thawed, drained	1/2 C
Green onion, 1/4-inch slices	1/2 C
Soy sauce	1/4 C
Toasted sesame seed oil	1 TBS

1. Place the rice into a suitable sized saucepan. Dissolve the chicken base in the

water, then pour over the rice. Blend the ingredients together with a kitchen spoon.

2. Bring to a full boil over high heat. When boiling, reduce the heat, cover the pan with a tight fitting lid, and gently simmer until the rice is cooked tender and all the liquid is absorbed, about 15 to 17 minutes. Turn off the heat and allow the rice to stand for 5 minutes. Spread the cooked rice on a sheet pan and chill completely.

3. Heat 1 tablespoon of peanut oil in a sauce pan or wok over high heat. Lightly beat 4 of the eggs and add to the pan; allow to set, without browning. Mix as necessary until completely cooked, but still soft. Remove from the pan and, using the tines of a fork, break up the egg into small (1/4-inch) pieces.

4. Clean the pan, then heat the remaining 2 tablespoons of peanut oil over high heat. Add the garlic, red pepper and carrots, cooking for 30 to 45 seconds, tossing frequently. Add the peas and green onion and continue cooking until hot.

5. Add the cooked rice and egg and toss with the vegetable mixture. Continue cooking, tossing frequently, until all ingredients are hot and the rice is well blended with the vegetable mix.

6. Make a "well" in the center of the pan and add the soy sauce and sesame oil. Toss all ingredients to blend and evaporate all liquid, obtaining a finished rice of uniform color.

7. Remove from the heat and spread the rice on a sheet pan. Chill completely. When chilled, place into a mixing bowl. Add the 2 remaining eggs, lightly beaten, and gently blend the egg into the rice with a fork. Shape the rice into 3-ounce cakes. Reserve, chilled.

FOR THE CHOPS

Pork tenderloin, fat and silver skin removed, trimmed, cut into 7- to 8-Oz portions	4 portions
Sweet & sour sauce, cold	1/2 C, plus as needed

1. Place the pork tenderloin into a pan or plastic bag. Add the sauce and completely coat all meat surfaces. Cover (or seal bag) and allow to marinate for 12 hours, or overnight.

2. Char-grill the pork, browning all sides and marking with the broiler grids. Cook to a medium doneness. While cooking, baste with sweet and sour sauce. After cooking, slice into 6- to 7 1/4-inch thick bias slices.

TO SERVE

Vegetable or peanut oil	as needed
Fried vegetable jasmine rice cakes	8 each
Peanut oil	1 TBS
Yellow onion, char-grilled, 1-inch dice	3 Oz
Poblano pepper, char-grilled, 1-inch dice	2 Oz
Red bell pepper, char-grilled, 1-inch dice	2 Oz
Yellow bell pepper, char-grilled, 1-inch dice	2 Oz
Fresh pineapple, char-grilled, cored, 1/2-inch x 3/4-inch chunks	6 Oz
Cherry tomatoes, halved	2 each
Sweet and sour sauce, cold	2 C
Fresh pineapple top (greens), cut into 4 pieces	1 each
Grilled pork tenderloin	4 portions
Green onion, 1/4-inch slices on the bias	8 tsp

1. Heat oil in a sauté pan over medium heat and sauté/pan-fry the rice cakes until golden brown on both sides and thoroughly heated. Drain all excess oil and reserve cakes, warm.

2. Heat 1 tablespoon of peanut oil in a sauté pan over high heat. Add all char-grilled vegetables and pineapple and toss to heat. Add the cherry tomatoes and sauce, tossing all ingredients to blend together. Bring the sweet and sour sauce to a boil.

3. Arrange 2 rice cakes on each service plate. Stand the pineapple greens on the plate in front of the rice cakes. Spoon about 3 3/4 ounces of the vegetables onto each plate, in front of the rice cakes, reserving a small quantity of sauce to drizzle over the pork. Arrange the sliced pork, shingled, over the vegetables and sauce. Drizzle a small portion of sauce, in a neat line, over the pork slices. Sprinkle about 2 teaspoons of green onion over each plate and serve.

Menu price: \$13.95 - \$14.95;
food cost/serving: 31% - 32%

* The pork tenderloin portions can be purchased pre-trimmed, eliminating labor and the need to determine ways to use fabrication byproducts.

* This dish incorporates many ingredients of traditional sweet and sour pork, but presents them in a more casual, mainstream context.

* Use of fried rice cakes, rather than typical steamed rice, adds flavor, crunch and visual appeal.



* The use of cherry tomatoes, rather than a diced product, adds visual interest.

* Substituting poblano chiles in lieu of traditional green bell peppers, plus the addition of chile garlic sauce to the sweet and sour, incorporates an element of heat, creating a "sweet-heat" flavor profile that is very popular.

* Grilling as the cooking technique capitalizes on the current popularity of grilled meats and vegetables and negates any potential veto vote from diners concerned about fried foods.