

Buta no Kakuni (Japanese-Style Slow Cooked Pork Belly)

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While the average life expectancy United States has fallen for the first time in decades, the average life expectancy in Japan continues to dominate. Such preeminence remains despite the continuing encroachment upon the traditional Japanese diet from the offerings reflective of standard American fare.

Whenever I had the great fortune to visit Japan, it tended to be in the late fall/early winter or springtime. Thus for me, many of my taste memories of the indigenous cuisine have a fall and wintry association.

This is my spin on *Buta no Kakuni*, or Japanese-style pork belly. By utilizing high quality, seasonal, authentic, and local ingredients with such a traditionally Japanese flavor profile it is at the same time both familiar and homey, and exotic and refreshing. This hard apple cider-braised pork belly was served atop lightly sautéed cabbage and apples and accompanied by kabocha (Japanese winter squash) gnocchi.



Ingredients:

- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ pound pork belly, trimmed into a square or rectangular shape and cut into six equal segments
- 1 teaspoon each (ground): cumin, coriander, fennel, ginger, fresh ground black pepper
- 2 teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup brown or white rice
- 1 cup teriyaki sauce
- 16-ounce hard apple cider
- 3 tablespoon avocado or other neutral oil
- 2 teaspoon sesame oil
- $\frac{1}{2}$ head shredded green cabbage
- one apple, peeled, cored and cut into matchsticks
- juice of one lemon
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon pumpkin pie spice
- 1 tablespoon stone-ground mustard
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ pound kabocha squash (if kabocha is not available you may use another winter squash like butternut)
- 1 teaspoon each (ground): cardamom, cinnamon
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup rice flour
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup sprouted whole-wheat flour



Directions:

For the pork bellies: In a bowl combine the cumin, coriander, fennel, ginger, fresh ground black pepper, and salt; mix thoroughly. Apply the rub generously to the pork and allow to rest in the refrigerator overnight and up to twenty-four hours. Heat a skillet with 1 tablespoon of avocado or other neutral oil over medium-high heat. Brown the pork belly and remove from heat. In a pot, large enough to accommodate the pork bellies add the rice and pork belly. Bring enough water to cover the belly by several inches to a boil. Reduce and simmer until fork-tender, about 2 hours. Remove from the heat and wrap in cling wrap tightly. Place a weight on top as this allows the pork belly to retain its shape. This can keep for up to two days in the refrigerator.

Heat a medium pan over medium heat. Add 1 tablespoon of avocado or other neutral oil over medium-high heat. Add the pork belly fat side down and brown, about 5 minutes.

Add the hard apple cider and teriyaki sauce. Crimp some aluminum foil into a rough disc by gathering it in at the edges. Make the diameter about 2 inches less than the pan you are using. Place a small hole or slit in the center. This is a makeshift version of an *otoshibuta*; a wooden disc that covers

the food being braised to keep it moist while allowing the cooking liquid to concentrate by evaporating at the edges.

Bring the liquid to a simmer. Cook for ninety minutes, flipping once halfway through. The pork should be fork-tender and the liquid reduced to about $\frac{1}{2}$ cup. When you are serving, you may simply spoon the sauce over the top of the pork belly, or alternatively spoon it over the top and glaze it using a handheld torch or by placing it under the broiler for about a minute.

For the gnocchi: Preheat the oven to 350°F. Cut the squash into three or four roughly equal chunks. Drizzle with 1 teaspoon of sesame oil. Season with the cardamom and cinnamon; and also lightly season with salt and pepper. Roast in the oven until fork-tender; approximately thirty minutes. Remove, allow to cool and separate the flesh from the seeds and skin. Utilizing a potato masher or a food process purée the squash until it is smooth. You may store this in the refrigerator for up to two days until you are ready to make the gnocchi. Bring a large pot of water up to the boil. In a large bowl combine the squash, eggs, rice flour, and wheat flour. Roll out the dough into several cylinders approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in thickness. Cut into approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ inch segments and lightly press with the tines of a fork. Add the gnocchi to the boiling water. When they float to the surface they are ready. Remove and set aside. When you are ready to cook them, heat the sesame oil in a small sauté pan. When the oil is hot, add the gnocchi and cook until lightly browned on all sides; approximately two minutes.

For the cabbage: Heat the remaining 1 tablespoon of avocado or other neutral oil in a medium saucepan. When the oil is hot, add the cabbage and cook for 1 to 2 minutes; until lightly wilted. Add the apple, mustard, lemon juice, and pumpkin pie spice. Cook for another 1 to 2 minutes until all the elements are warmed throughout.

