

— AMERICA'S —
TEST KITCHEN

Lion's Head Meatballs (Shīzi Tóu)

SERVES Serves 4 to 6

TIME 2 hours

Why This Recipe Works

These giant, savory, tender-yet-springy pork meatballs from eastern China are pure comfort food. For a streamlined approach, we started with commercial ground pork. We treated the meat with a baking soda solution before cooking, which helped it retain juices over the relatively long cooking time. We lightly seasoned the meat with soy sauce, sugar, Shaoxing wine, ginger, scallions, and white pepper for well-rounded savory flavor that still tasted distinctly porky. Beating the pork mixture in a stand mixer caused its sticky proteins to link up into a strong network that trapped fat and moisture, resulting in a texture that was resilient and unctuous. Braising the meatballs for 1½ hours in the oven broke down the pork's collagen so that the meatballs were tender. Adding the cabbage for the last 30 minutes of cooking allowed it to soften and absorb the flavor of the chicken broth without turning mushy. Soaking rice vermicelli in just-boiled water softened the noodles but didn't overcook them.



Gather Your Ingredients

- ¾ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 2 pounds ground pork
- 1 large egg, lightly beaten
- 2 scallions, white parts minced, green parts sliced thin
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 2 tablespoons Shaoxing wine or dry sherry
- 4 teaspoons sugar
- 2 teaspoons grated fresh ginger
- ½ teaspoon white pepper
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 1 small head napa cabbage (1½ pounds), quartered lengthwise, cored, and cut crosswise into 2-inch pieces
- 4 ounces rice vermicelli

Before You Begin

- * Fully cooked ground pork can retain a slightly pink hue. Don't be concerned if the meatballs develop cracks while cooking. Shaoxing is a Chinese rice wine that can be found at Asian markets. If you can't find it, use dry sherry.

Instructions

1. Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Whisk baking soda, salt, and 2 tablespoons water together in bowl of stand mixer. Add pork to baking soda mixture and toss to combine. Add egg, scallion whites, soy sauce, wine, sugar, ginger, and white pepper. Fit stand mixer with paddle and beat on medium speed until mixture is well combined and has stiffened and started to pull away from sides of bowl and pork has slightly lightened in color, 45 to 60 seconds. Using your wet hands, form about ½ cup (4½ ounces) pork mixture into 3-inch round meatball; repeat with remaining mixture to form 8 meatballs.
2. Bring broth to boil in large Dutch oven over high heat. Off heat, carefully arrange meatballs in pot (7 around perimeter and 1 center; meatballs will not be totally submerged). Cover pot, transfer to oven, and cook for 1 hour.
3. Transfer meatballs to large plate. Add cabbage to pot in even layer and arrange meatballs over cabbage, paler side up. Cover, return pot to oven, and continue to cook until meatballs are lightly browned and cabbage is softened, about 30 minutes longer.

- 4.** While meatballs and cabbage cook, bring 4 quarts water to boil in large pot. Off heat, add vermicelli and let sit, stirring occasionally, until vermicelli is fully tender, 10 to 15 minutes. Drain, rinse with cold water, drain again, and distribute evenly among 4 to 6 large soup bowls.

- 5.** Ladle meatballs, cabbage, and broth into bowls of noodles. Sprinkle with scallion greens and serve.