Main dishes / Vietnam

Bò Lúc Lắc (Shaking Beef)

Saigon's beloved stir-fry of tender beef cubes marinated in oyster sauce and garlic, seared on a screaming-hot wok until caramelized and served over watercress and sliced tomato with a lime-salt-pepper dipping sauce.

Time 140 min **Servings** 4

What you'll need.

- ☐ 500 g Beef sirloin or tenderloin, cut into 3 cm cubes
- ☐ 30 g Oyster sauce
- ☐ 15 g Soy sauce (light)
- ☐ 10 g White sugar
- ☐ 15 g Garlic cloves, minced fine
- ☐ 30 g Neutral oil (peanut or canola)
- ☐ 15 g Fresh lime juice, for dipping sauce
- ☐ 3 g Coarse salt, for dipping sauce
- ☐ 3 g Freshly cracked black pepper, for dipping sauce
- ☐ 80 g Watercress, washed and dried
- ☐ 150 g Ripe tomatoes, sliced into wedges
- ☐ 100 g Yellow onion, cut into 2 cm wedges

Let's make it.

01 In a bowl, combine the oyster sauce, soy sauce, sugar, and minced garlic. Stir until the sugar has dissolved. Add the beef cubes and toss thoroughly, making sure every surface is coated. Cover and refrigerate for a minimum of 2 hours; overnight is ideal but not essential. The oyster sauce does double duty here: its glutamates begin to season the meat deeply, and its sugar content will be what caramelizes on the wok surface to give the beef its signature mahogany crust. Pat the beef cubes dry with paper towels before cooking — excess marinade on the surface will steam the beef rather than sear it.

02 Heat a wok or large cast iron skillet over the highest possible heat for at least 3 minutes until it smokes visibly. Add the oil and swirl — it should immediately begin to smoke. Add the beef cubes in a single layer without crowding — cook in two batches if the wok is not large enough. Do not touch the beef for 60–90 seconds. Let it sear undisturbed until a deep mahogany crust forms on the bottom. Then — this is the lúc lắc (shaking) — grab the pan handle and shake the wok in quick, sharp lateral movements to tumble the cubes over onto an unseared face. Sear for 45–60 more seconds. Add the onion wedges in the final 30 seconds and toss everything together briefly. The total cooking time should be no more than 3 minutes per batch for medium-rare to medium beef.

03 In a small dish, combine the fresh lime juice, coarse salt, and cracked black pepper. Stir briefly. This is muối tiêu chanh — one of the oldest and simplest Vietnamese condiments. Taste it: the lime should be bright and sour, the salt forward, and the black pepper should prickle the back of the throat with a dry warmth. Adjust with more lime or salt as needed. Each diner dips the hot beef cube into the sauce immediately after eating, so the contrast between the hot caramelized exterior of the beef and the cool, bright, peppery sauce is immediate.

04 Arrange the watercress and sliced tomato wedges on a large serving plate or individual plates. Immediately transfer the seared beef and wilted onion pieces directly on top of the watercress — the heat from the beef will lightly wilt the watercress, releasing its peppery fragrance. Place the lime-salt-pepper dipping sauce on the side. Serve immediately. The classic Saigon-restaurant presentation also includes a fried egg on top, or a side of plain jasmine rice. The watercress is not just a garnish — it is eaten alongside the beef, its cool bitterness cutting through the richness of the caramelized meat.

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Servings are an estimate; check quantities in the source recipe.
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