Main dishes / China

Lion's Head Meatballs (Shi Zi Tou)

Enormous pork meatballs — each one nearly the size of a fist — braise slowly in their own rendered fat and a dark, amber Shaoxing wine broth until the outer crust gives way to an interior so tender and yielding it trembles when the chopstick touches it, the napa cabbage around them having dissolved into silky ribbons that carry the concentrated braising juice. The name honors the meatball's resemblance to a lion's head surrounded by its cabbage mane.

Time 150 min **Servings** 4

What you'll need.

- ☐ 600 g Ground pork (30% fat — do not use lean)
- ☐ 1 whole Egg, beaten
- ☐ 15 g Fresh ginger, grated to a pulp
- ☐ 25 ml Light soy sauce
- ☐ 30 ml Shaoxing rice wine
- ☐ 30 ml Neutral oil (for searing)
- ☐ 500 ml Light chicken or pork stock
- ☐ 80 g Water chestnuts, fresh or canned, finely diced
- ☐ 20 g Cornstarch
- ☐ 25 g Scallions, white parts only, minced
- ☐ 15 ml Dark soy sauce
- ☐ 20 g Rock sugar
- ☐ 400 g Napa cabbage, outer leaves separated whole

Let's make it.

01 In a large mixing bowl, combine the ground pork, finely diced water chestnuts, beaten egg, cornstarch, grated ginger pulp (squeeze it through your fingers to include the juice, discard the fibrous residue), minced scallion white, light soy sauce, and Shaoxing wine. Like the wonton filling, mix vigorously in one consistent direction — always clockwise or always counter-clockwise — for 3–4 minutes until the mixture is completely homogeneous and has developed a slight stickiness. The directional mixing is not superstition: it aligns the myosin proteins in the pork into a coherent network that gives the cooked meatball its characteristic bouncy, springy bite rather than a crumbly texture. The water chestnuts provide crunch that contrasts beautifully with the soft surrounding meat — do not skip them. The mixture should be very soft and sticky — far softer than most Western meatball mixtures. Do not add breadcrumbs. The starch and egg are the only binders needed. Refrigerate for 30 minutes to firm up before shaping.

02 With wet hands, divide the mixture into 4–5 equal portions (each about 150 g). Roll each into a smooth, tight sphere — wet palms are essential because the mixture is very sticky. Work quickly and with light pressure: over-packing the sphere makes the interior dense rather than tender. Place on a wet plate as you go. Heat the oil in a wide, deep pot or Dutch oven over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add the meatballs gently, leaving space between each. Sear for 2–3 minutes on each major surface — they will not roll easily, so use a spoon to tilt and hold them against the hot surface. You are not trying to cook them through; you want a golden-brown crust on all surfaces that will hold the sphere together during the long braise and add depth of flavor to the finished dish. Do not attempt to flip them until the seared side releases naturally from the pot — a stuck meatball is an unseared meatball.

03 In the same pot, pour off most of the oil, leaving a thin film. Add the dark soy sauce and rock sugar to the residual fat and stir over medium heat until the sugar melts — about 1 minute. Add the Shaoxing wine and let it sizzle for 30 seconds. Add the stock and bring to a simmer. Taste and adjust seasoning — the braising liquid should be distinctly savory and subtly sweet. Lay the whole napa cabbage leaves across the bottom of the pot in a thick layer, then nestle the seared meatballs on top of the cabbage, which will act as a natural rack elevating them from the direct heat. Ladle the braising liquid over the meatballs. Cover the meatballs with more cabbage leaves. Cover the pot tightly. Braise over the lowest possible heat for 90 minutes. Turn the meatballs once at the 45-minute mark. The low, slow heat allows the collagen in the fatty pork to dissolve into gelatin, creating the interior texture that defines this dish. The cabbage simultaneously absorbs the braising liquid and releases its own sweetness into the pot.

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