Main dishes / Vietnam

Bun Cha Meatballs

Hanoi's answer to the grill: fat-streaked pork patties charred over coal until they blister and caramelize at the edges, then plunged into a cool, sweet-sour nuoc cham that tempers the smoke and draws out the meat's depth. The char is not incidental — it is the recipe.

Time 60 min **Servings** 4

What you'll need.

- [ ] 1 lb Ground pork (80/20 fat-to-lean)
- [ ] 3 cloves Garlic cloves, minced
- [ ] 1.5 tsp Sugar
- [ ] 0.75 cup Warm water (for dipping broth)
- [ ] 3 tbsp Fish sauce (for dipping broth)
- [ ] 2 cloves Garlic, thinly sliced (for broth)
- [ ] 3 tbsp Shallots, minced
- [ ] 2 tbsp Fish sauce
- [ ] 0.5 tsp Black pepper, freshly ground
- [ ] 3 tbsp Fresh lime juice
- [ ] 2 tbsp Sugar (for dipping broth)
- [ ] 1 small Red chili, thinly sliced (for broth)

Let's make it.

01 Combine ground pork, minced shallots, garlic, fish sauce, sugar, and pepper in a large bowl. Mix with your hands for 2-3 minutes using a squeezing, folding motion — not stirring. The mixture should become slightly sticky and cohesive. The fat should begin to emulsify with the lean meat. Refrigerate for 30 minutes to firm.

02 Dissolve sugar in warm water. Add fish sauce, lime juice, sliced garlic, and chili. Stir and taste — the broth should land in four-part harmony: salty, sweet, sour, and funky, with no single note dominating. This is the dipping broth that the cooked patties will rest in, so it needs to be slightly more intense than you would drink — the meat will dilute it.

03 Form the chilled pork into flat, palm-sized patties about 3/4 inch thick (or small round meatballs for bun cha proper). Grill over high charcoal heat or a screaming hot cast-iron grill pan. Cook 3-4 minutes per side without moving — you want aggressive charring, not steaming. The fat will drip, flare, and add smoke flavor. Authentic bun cha has black char marks and a caramelized exterior.

04 Transfer the hot grilled patties directly into the bowls of nuoc cham broth. Serve with a plate of fresh herbs, vermicelli noodles on the side, and extra chili. The patties will continue steaming in the broth, picking up the sour-sweet nuoc cham and tempering the smoke. This is meant to be eaten immediately, scooping noodles into the broth bowl at the table.

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