



SHANGHAI 'LION'S HEAD' MEATBALLS

Recipe serves 4. Gluten-Free, Paleo or Whole30 with the indicated substitutions or omissions.

Lion's Head Meatballs is a very traditional Chinese dish featuring large pork meatballs and leafy greens. This is a family recipe passed down from my Shanghainese grandmother, which always uses bok choy. The big fluffy meatball represents a lion's head and the surrounding leafy greens, its mane. Don't you love the fanciful name? Just as much to love is the dish itself, a mainstay comfort meal to be certain. The secret to these meatball's fluffiness is a few tablespoons of water mixed with egg white...and using some vigor when mixing the ground pork with it before they're formed into balls. Who would've thought? Because of those tricks, the meatballs don't require bread or bread crumbs like most meatball recipes, making them gluten free too. I love eating this atop a bowl of steamed rice, so the flavorful brothy-ness soak all the way down into the rice. Yum!

INGREDIENTS

1 to 1 1/2 lbs (450g to 675g) baby bok choy

1lb (450g) ground pork

1 large egg white

5 tbsp cold water

2 tbsp light soy sauce (or tamari for gluten-free/Paleo or coconut aminos for Whole30)

1 tsp dark soy sauce (omit for gluten-free, Paleo or Whole30)

½ tsp (1 tsp if using Diamond Crystal brand) kosher salt, more or less to taste



1 tsp raw cane sugar (omit for Paleo / Whole30)

3-4 dashes of white pepper powder

Cornstarch, for dusting the meatballs (can substitute with flour or arrowroot flour for Paleo/Whole30)

3 cloves garlic, peeled and crushed

3 scallions, chopped into 1" pieces

1/2" knob of ginger, cut into 3-4 slices

1 3/4 C (450ml) chicken broth, preferably [homemade](#) or quality store-bought low sodium

High heat neutral oil i.e. avocado oil

METHOD

Prepare the baby bok choy by cleaning the leaves, taking care to rinse any debris in the area where the leaves join up. I like the leaves attached and whole for this dish, but you can trim a little bit off the stem if it's thick, especially if you are using full-sized bok choy.

In a large bowl, combine the raw ground pork, egg white and cold water. Using your hands preferably, mix everything together with vigor! This is important for fluffy light meatballs and you'll want to put some elbow grease into it. Mix and work the mixture, including throwing it against the side of the bowl to tenderize the meat for the most traditional Chinese way! I've also found it quite fun to do the tenderizing step after seasoning and forming the meatballs (in the next two steps), then throw them from one hand to the other to tenderize them.



Once the mixture is fluffy, add in the tamari or light soy sauce, dark soy sauce (if using), kosher salt, sugar and white pepper powder. Continue to mix another minute either by hand, or as my dad taught me to do, switch to chopsticks (two thick pairs of chopsticks held together in one hand). I'm not sure why? It's one of those "that's just how I do it" things. A narrow wooden spoon will do the same. I don't recommend using a food processor for this as it will toughen the meatballs.

Next, do yourself a solid. TASTE IT. Scoop 1 tsp of the meat mixture and put it in the microwave on high for ~20 seconds or cooked through. Taste and make sure the seasoning is to your liking. Add more salt or tamari / soy if required.

Preheat a large casserole (cast iron or enameled cast iron preferably) or heavy-bottomed pot on medium to medium-high heat.

While the pot preheats, divide the meat mixture and roll into 4-6 balls, depending how large you like them. I went for four large ones here. (This is when you can do the tenderizing via throwing the meatballs from one hand to the other). Dust lightly with cornstarch (or flour or arrowroot starch). Add 2 tablespoons of oil to the heated pot and immediately add the meatballs. Brown all sides about 1 minute each and keep rotating until it's nicely brown all over. Set aside.

In the same casserole with all the good bits from browning the meatballs, add the garlic, scallions and ginger slices and stir around for 30 seconds.

Add the bok choy leaves. At first it may seem like there is way too much to fit in the pot but have faith. Soon the leaves will begin to wilt and it will be easier to stir them around. Just try to keep things moving and be patient. Once the bok choy has begun to noticeably wilt and sink down a bit in the pot, add the chicken stock and bring to a boil.



Once the stock is boiling, add the meatballs back in, cover and turn heat down to get a very low simmer. Cover and braise for 30-45 minutes, or until meatballs are cooked through and greens are tender and wilt-y. I like it even better the next day when everything is reheated and the bok choy is almost 'dissolving' into the broth. Do a final taste and adjust seasoning (salt, soy sauce, dark soy sauce) to your liking. Serve on top of steamed rice with some of that broth ladled over it. Enjoy!