
台灣製造
MADE IN TAIWAN

Recipes and Stories
from the Island Nation

台 灣 製 造

MADE IN TAIWAN

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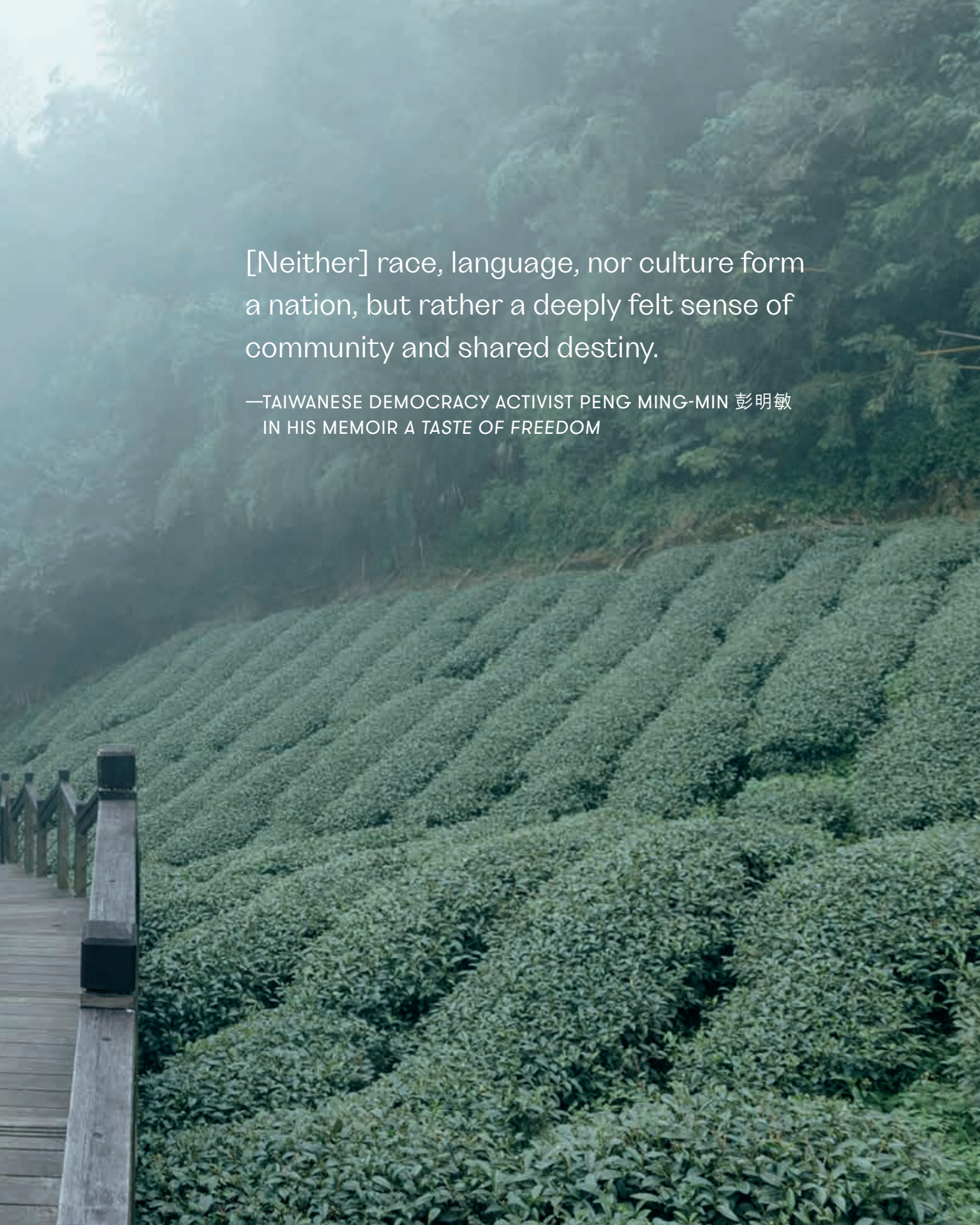

[Neither] race, language, nor culture form a nation, but rather a deeply felt sense of community and shared destiny.

—TAIWANESE DEMOCRACY ACTIVIST PENG MING-MIN 彭明敏
IN HIS MEMOIR *A TASTE OF FREEDOM*

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Introduction

Here in Taiwan, we mind our own business. We wake up each day to a cloak of humidity, a scattering of birdsong, hot steamers' bellies full of fresh soy milk or congee. Wet-market vendors set out their goods in the early morning, unloading cartloads of lime-green guavas and bundles of sharp bamboo shoots freshly picked from the mountains, as aunties with striped nylon bags do their grocery shopping for the week. During the lunch-hour rush, cafeteria-style canteens are packed with patrons wolfing down quick meals of pork chops over rice with pickled greens. Some of us might end the day with a home-cooked meal—pork ribs and chunks of daikon bobbing in soup, pan-fried fish rubbed with white pepper, a quick stir-fry of seasonal vegetables. Others pop into the closest neighborhood joint and slurp on a bowl of noodles while watching the in-house television spew out news about the rising prices of popcorn or about a monkey that broke into a local university and was photographed sitting in a cubicle. All things considered, our country does well for itself; we have low rates of crime, impeccable public transportation, a world-class health care system, peaceful elections, and, as this book will delineate, fantastic food and markets.

Yet when I turn on the international news, I always feel incredibly disoriented. Every other month, it seems, Taiwan appears on news tickers accompanied by the words *China*, *threat*, and *conflict*; our island is constantly framed as a flash point to potential world war. The Chinese government has made us a target—a so-called renegade province they say is theirs to take—despite the fact that we're a self-ruled democracy of 23.5 million people who have never in our history been ruled by the People's Republic of China. Over the years, I've come to realize that the very act of being Taiwanese is a constant fight against unrelenting Chinese state attempts to obliterate our identity. Unlike Taiwan, China does not mind its own business, and rarely do we get the opportunity to freely tell our own stories without having to deal with their very influential, very public displays of outrage.

And so, with food as the focus, this is my take on the Taiwanese story. This book, the recipes, and the stories herein revolve around the central premise that Taiwanese cuisine stands on its own. While one could argue that Taiwanese cuisine is just another provincial expression of Chinese food at large, our food isn't a subset of Chinese food because Taiwan isn't a part of China. While many of our dishes have Chinese roots or were brought over by immigrants from China, physical and diplomatic isolation, entirely separate governments, and, most important, a nascent yet powerful Taiwanese identity movement in the face of increasing cross-strait political tensions have given shape to a redefined food culture that's completely and unquestionably unique. And as the world sees an alarming rise in autocracy and affronts to democracy, it's more important than ever to remember what makes us different.

I'll be the first to admit that I didn't always feel this way. I was born in Los Angeles to apolitical Taiwanese immigrants and raised in a heavily East Asian suburb, where I went to school with kids from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. In the 1990s, we all just collectively referred to ourselves as Chinese—mostly because it was easier to explain ourselves to outsiders that way. But also, no one told me it was important to make the distinction. My parents were born in the '60s, before the democratic transition of Taiwan, when the island was a dictatorship put under martial law by the Nationalist Chinese government in exile. In my parents' youth, Taiwanese schoolchildren were told they were Chinese and taught more about the history of China than the history of their own people. Anyone who spoke up and said anything contrary risked being thrown in jail, exiled, or executed. The government at that time also portrayed Taiwan as a mecca of regional Chinese cuisine. While this was true to some extent because of the surge of Chinese refugees in Taiwan from the war, it was the food of the ruling elite and confined mostly to Taipei. Meanwhile, the cuisine of the majority who had been here for centuries—rooted in humble ingredients like shellfish, pork, sweet potatoes, and rice—was staunchly ignored and seen as second-class.

By now, more than 70 years have passed since the last wave of Chinese immigrants, and even our regional Chinese food in Taiwan today is irrefutably different from that of our neighbors across the strait. While Chinese culture and cuisine is no doubt a beautiful and important part of the Taiwanese identity at large, it doesn't define us, because we don't want it to. It's extremely important to point out our differences because cultural homogenization is a frequently used tool in the Chinese state's pursuit of conquest and unity. China molds hearts and minds with coercive storytelling, by forcing Uyghurs to memorize Chinese history in internment camps, and by plastering the Chinese leader's photograph in the classrooms of many Buddhist colleges in Tibet, where almost a quarter of the curriculum is dedicated to learning about the Chinese Communist Party. The Chinese government has a tendency to weaponize Chinese culture and cuisine to its advantage, oftentimes using them as excuses to claim even the diaspora as their own. But it's my strong opinion that the food of a place can tell a story far more vividly than any textbook—and the food of Taiwan tells a tale of a country that has been subjected to multiple colonial influences but remains vibrant in its self-expression.

The story of an entire cuisine cannot be told from one perspective alone, which is why this book includes recipes and stories from home cooks from all walks of life and lauded chefs from around the country. Though it's written in my voice, it's a collaborative effort with Ivy Chen, a Taiwanese cooking instructor here on the island whose guidance forms the backbone of this book. Ivy—who has been teaching the ins and outs of the cuisine for more than two decades—worked tirelessly to develop the recipes in this cookbook. Coincidentally, both our families are from Tainan in southern Taiwan and have been on the island for more than 200 years. But unlike me, who was raised in the States and whose early memories of Taiwan are centered around

the cities, Ivy spent her formative years in the countryside and watched her grandmother cater all sorts of now-antiquated religious festivities, weaving together thin strands of wheat noodles into the shapes of goats and chiseling blocks of white sugar into delicate miniature pagodas. Ivy's childhood playground was her grandfather's rice vermicelli factory, where long hairs of translucent rice noodles were churned out and sun-dried on large mesh bamboo trays.

Because of her unique background, Ivy has a deep relationship with Taiwanese flavors that most younger city folks like myself lack. When cooks around the country gave us their recipes for this book—many of them verbally thrown at us or haphazardly scribbled down—Ivy handled them with immense care, making sure we preserved the taste, texture, and intent of the original dishes. There were numerous times when, faced with a particularly difficult set of instructions, I impatiently wanted to delete an ingredient or a couple of steps, but Ivy resisted, believing that if we diluted the progression of a dish, we would lose out on its story. And the whole point of this book is to tell the story of Taiwan as best as we can before it's too late.

Unfortunately, the odds are not in our favor. Taiwan isn't formally recognized as a country by most of the world, China has been actively stripping us of our few remaining diplomatic allies, and we are in the midst of an existential threat. In his speeches, Chinese president Xi Jinping has repeatedly called for unification with Taiwan and hasn't ruled out using brute force to do so. Since 2020, a record number of Chinese warplanes have encroached on our island's air defense zone in a blatant act of intimidation, and in 2022, China conducted a series of unprecedented live-fire drills in the Taiwan Strait.

In light of these grim facts, all I can do is celebrate our humanity through the lens of food. I hope the world can see Taiwan as more than just a geopolitical chess piece or a controversial island near China with great night markets. Despite the occasional bouts of amnesia due to colonial influences, for generations and centuries we have considered ourselves our own people. Many of our dishes and rituals cannot be found anywhere else in the world, and even our core pantry items—like soy sauce, vinegar, rice wine, salt, and sugar—have always been and continue to be made in Taiwan. Our cuisine is a hodgepodge of cultures, colored by our indigenous tribes, influenced by Japanese colonists, inspired by American military aid, and shaped by all the various waves of Chinese immigrants and refugees who have arrived and made this island their home. We are not a tiny territory off the coast of China. We are not Chinese. We are Taiwanese, and we are a proud island nation—a self-sufficient collective of people who, despite unprecedented ambiguity, continue to forge on. This is our story.

A Note on Language and Romanization

Taiwan is a multilingual country, which makes translating the names of people, places, and dishes into English really difficult. Some dishes have only Taiwanese names, while others have only Mandarin names. Though Mandarin is technically the lingua franca in Taiwan, it arrived on our island in full force only during the mid-20th century with the Chinese refugees. The descendants of the initial waves of Chinese settlers from the 17th to the 19th centuries primarily spoke Taiwanese (which I sometimes refer to as Taiwanese Hokkien throughout the book), a dialect originally from the Fujian province of China that is still spoken by roughly 70 percent of the Taiwanese population. We also have significant pockets of Hakka speakers, but there are variations in their language depending on where they live. And, of course, Taiwan has a motley of Austronesian languages—the original indigenous languages of our island that have existed for millennia. There are currently more than a dozen unique Austronesian languages still in use today, and they aren't all mutually intelligible.

For posterity's sake, I've added Chinese characters after the names of people and shops that don't have English equivalents. Without these notations, it would be virtually impossible for many of the people I interviewed to find themselves in this book. It's important to me that not only people's stories but their identities remain intact. I've also included diacritics over most of the Mandarin, Taiwanese, and Hakka romanizations to help with pronunciation. Lastly, all the Chinese characters are written in traditional Chinese because, well, that's just how it's done in Taiwan.

FOR MANDARIN (IN BLUE): In Taiwan, proper nouns are anglicized using the Wades-Giles system. For everything else, I've resorted to Hanyu pinyin because I find that it's a much easier format to pick up and pronounce; it's also what most beginner Mandarin students around the world are taught. However, because Hanyu was a romanization system originally developed in China, it has long been a controversial flash point on the island. Many argue that Tongyong pinyin, which was created in Taiwan, more accurately reflects Taiwan-accented Mandarin and is therefore the more patriotic choice. There is no single correct method, and the choice of romanization in Taiwan remains frustratingly inconsistent. In Taipei, Hanyu pinyin is used for many of the highways, street names, and train stops. But if you drive south to Kaohsiung, Tongyong pinyin is the norm. It's confusing, but an apt metaphor for how Taiwanese identity isn't easily defined.

FOR TAIWANESE (IN GREEN): Also sometimes referred to as Taiwanese Hokkien or Tâi-Gí, Taiwanese is the language of my ancestors and arrived with the early Chinese settlers more than 200 years ago. While mutually intelligible with other Hokkien dialects around the world like in southeast China and parts of Southeast Asia, our language—like our food—has evolved to become distinct and includes vocabulary and sentence structures unique to our island. I'm using the Tâi-lô romanization system, which is used by Taiwan's Ministry of Education. The pronunciation of certain words also differs a bit depending on where in Taiwan people are from, so keeping true to my roots, we're using southern-style Taiwanese.

OTHERS (IN RED): Because of all the endless variations out there, the indigenous and Hakka romanizations were directly cross-referenced with the people I interviewed. The indigenous romanization comes from the Taromak tribe in southeastern Taiwan, a subset of the Rukai people. The Hakka dialect is from Meinong, a hilly, rural Hakka village on the outskirts of Kaohsiung.

Culinary History of Taiwan

A verdant green island at the far edge of the Pacific Ocean, Taiwan is shaped like a sweet potato—curvy and fat in the middle, gently tapered off at the ends. Sticky and hot with constant summer rains, our jungles are lush, like houseplants on steroids. Humidity clings to every living thing—that is, until you trek high up our alpine mountain range, which forms the magnificent spine of the island. Up there, a cascade of snowy mountain peaks reigns over all things, comfortably perched on thrones above the clouds.

For millennia, the stewards of our island have been a robust group of Austronesian nations whose cuisines perfectly mirror the diversity of our geography, flora, and fauna. Mountainous tribes, like the Bunun and Rukai, are agile hunters who can track down heavy boars and shoot leaping flying squirrels at night; the men can easily scale to soaring heights where the air is uncomfortably thin. It's in the alpine regions, after all, where many of their gods reside. Ocean-faring tribes like the Amis can read the tides and hold their breath underwater for incredible spans of time; some women are still fluent in all the different varieties of edible seaweed.

In the spring, gleaming schools of silvery flying fish leap across the east coast of Taiwan, and the Tao people of Orchid Island will row their canoes out and catch nets of them for sustenance. And deep in the central mountains is an important fig vine that snakes around the trunks of tall, ethereal trees. A couple of times a year, an indigenous wasp burrows itself into the belly of a fig and lays her eggs inside. The fig is pollinated by the dead maternal wasp and bulges until it's fat and juicy. When this happens, the men of the Tsou tribe know to scale the massive trees to harvest the fruit. They bring it back home, dig out the seeds, dry them, and mix them with water to form aiyu—a delicious, citrine-hued jelly native to Taiwan.

Our indigenous custodians cultivated brooms of yellow millet and pearly handfuls of javanica rice. They drew from the vast ocean around us and spread their culture across the world. The Austronesian languages, spoken from the Philippines to New Zealand to Hawaii, are widely said to have originated in Taiwan. The food of Taiwan's indigenous people—stunning and grounded—is a testament to the beauty and bounty of our island. But while all the aforementioned ingredients and traditions still exist in pockets of Taiwan today, we've strayed incredibly far from our original, indigenous food culture because we're a nation of people who have colonized and been colonized. And with every new regime change has come a tidal wave of completely new dishes.

Today, with a population of 23.5 million squeezed into a land mass roughly about the size of Maryland,

Taiwan is misunderstood by the world as a Mandarin-speaking collective of people who may or may not be Chinese. We are, by cliché, the land of glitzy night markets and hearty beef noodle bowls. And while these descriptors may be true on some level, they only skim the surface.

And so, what is Taiwanese food?

It's impossible to write a book about Taiwanese cuisine without oversimplifying it in some way, because what's traditional to one family differs vastly from the traditions of the next. Ninety-five percent of the people in Taiwan are ethnically Han Chinese, though that's an extremely broad generalization and doesn't indicate much, because Han Chinese is but a vague umbrella term for people who have ancestry in China. The first wave of Chinese immigrants who arrived in the 17th century were primarily Hokkien-speaking folks from the southern Chinese province of Fujian who brought over their love of seafood, rice, and pork. Then came the Chinese refugees who landed with the Nationalist government in the mid-20th century, whose influence further broadened our culinary palate. Throw in intermarriage, colonial influences from the Japanese, and a lot of time, and out tumbles a rather eclectic menu particular to Taiwan. Given the shared ancestry, our cooking techniques and flavors are undeniably similar to those of our Chinese cousins across the strait. Food is fried or braised in large woks, or softened in hot and steamy bamboo baskets stacked up on top of one another. Because the first Chinese settlers in Taiwan came primarily from Fujian, we possess a common love for lightly seasoned food, occasionally heightened with a minimalistic trinity of ginger, garlic, and scallions. While its roots in China have shaped our taste preferences, Taiwanese cuisine ultimately revolves around the ingredients that thrive here. For carbs, sweet potatoes and rice dominate. A cheap and easy-to-grow root vegetable, sweet potatoes spring up like weeds, and rice does particularly well with the ample subtropical rains. Because two-thirds of our small island is covered by mountains, we lack large tracts of grazing land, and so the pig—which doesn't need a lot of space—is our de facto protein. Of course, by virtue of our being an island nation, seafood has remained a constant. I must point out that Taiwanese coastal waters have been considered overfished since the 1950s; however, there is a robust aquaculture industry, and fish and shellfish are consistently churned out by the boatload. Although not endemic, tropical fruits like mangoes, papayas, guavas, and pineapples have thrived here for centuries and usually punctuate the end of a great meal. And as for the Taiwanese pantry, it's stuffed with simple but effective condiments like soy sauce, sesame oil, rice vinegar, and rice wine. All things considered, this is a rather plain collection of staples—but our food has never needed much bling to shine.

For the last three centuries, and at the expense of the indigenous people here, Taiwan has been a land of immigrants with influences from around the world. The Chinese and Japanese have had the most significant impact on our cuisine; the European influence is imperceptible mostly because their colonial outposts didn't last very long (though it's said that the Dutch inspired our culture of deep-frying). Western food started to make an appearance only during the Cold War in the 1950s, when the United States flooded Taiwan with billions of dollars in economic aid and filled our coffers with large shipments of wheat and soybeans. There are a lot of threads to unpack. So, in order to properly synthesize our incredible cuisine, I've broken it down into six major historical time periods.

The Dutch and a Chinese Pirate (16th Century–1683)

Taiwan has had visitors from China for more than 600 years, and by the 16th century there were already a handful of Chinese settlements on the southwestern half of the island, albeit seasonal and sparsely populated. But then the Dutch arrived and established a

small colony in the south of Taiwan in 1624. In order to milk the island for taxes, the Dutch recruited droves of farmers and fishermen from China to work the land and sea, which jump-started one of the first waves of Chinese immigration to the island. They started sugarcane and rice farms and, with the help of Chinese fishermen, set up some of the first primitive aquaculture systems on the island. They also purchased venison and deer hide in bulk from the indigenous Taiwanese and sold them to China and Japan, respectively.

In 1661, the Dutch were ousted by a Japanese-born Chinese pirate named Koxinga (sometimes known as Zheng Chenggong), who brought more people over from China during his military expeditions. Koxinga is often credited with the invention of the Taiwanese oyster omelet. Legend has it that when the Dutch opposition hid his supply of rice, he made due by feeding his soldiers oysters dipped in sweet potato starch. While likely just a tall tale, the story gives insight into the humble ingredients that were accessible at that time. Oysters could easily be farmed in brackish waters near the shore, an industry that's still very much alive today. And sweet potatoes were the carb of choice because most of the rice that was grown was reserved for export. Pickles and preserves were also incredibly important at this time. Leafy greens, bamboo shoots, and fruits like mangoes were salted and preserved, as were catches from the sea like fish and shrimp. All of these added much-needed pops of flavor to otherwise rather bland plates of food.

DISHES:

Fried Mackerel Thick Soup (page 97)
Pan-Fried Milkfish Belly (page 164)
Sweet Potato Leaves Stir-Fry (page 169)
Oyster Omelet (page 99)
Preserved Radish (page 351)

Qing Dynasty (1683–1895)

Koxinga's kingdom, known as the Kingdom of Tungning, was annexed by the Qing Dynasty in China in 1683 and some of Taiwan became a part of Fujian province. At first immigration was limited mostly to men, but by the late 18th and early 19th centuries, more than two million immigrants, primarily from Fujian and Guangdong, settled in Taiwan. Impoverished yet hopeful for new opportunities, my ancestors came over here for a chance at a new life. For the first time in Taiwan's history, the Chinese population outnumbered the indigenous, though there was significant intermarriage between the two groups at the cost of the indigenous women and their offspring, whose cultures and surnames were quickly erased.

The Chinese arrivals brought over with them their culinary traditions from across the strait, like making soy sauce with black soybeans and braising leftover bits of pork. They also set up large, permanent agrarian communities throughout the island. The

Hokkien-speaking folks from Fujian, who were used to living by the sea, settled on the western coastal plains; many were already expert fishermen and sea salt producers and continued their trades in Taiwan. The Hakka, who were used to living in the mountains, occupied the hills and made the most of their uneven terrain by carving out intricate terraces of tea and rice fields. They were also some of the first people to raise domesticated pigs, and the pig slowly became a central part of the Taiwanese household and a source of pride, food, and offering.

As the Chinese immigrants shifted from a pioneer society to a settler society, temples and ancestral altars were set up across the island, which created the need for tribute foods. Rice, which was time-consuming to grow, became a pivotal ingredient for offerings and was shaped into intricate dumplings and puddings called kueh. In 1858, the Qing Dynasty opened Taiwan's ports to the world, and Taiwanese tea, then marketed as Formosa Oolong, became an international export and brand. And as Taiwan became an increasingly profitable colony, it transformed from a prefecture of Fujian to a province in 1887, and stayed that way for seven years.

It's important to note, though, that while parts of Taiwan were under Qing control for these 200 years, only isolated pockets of the island were actually claimed by the Chinese. The rest of Taiwan was still run by indigenous stewards, who were not subjugated until the Japanese came.

DISHES:

Oyster and Pork Intestine Vermicelli Stew (page 136)
Red Tortoise Kueh (page 269)
Daikon Kueh (page 274)
Braised Minced Pork Belly (page 90)
Savory Rice Pudding (page 101)
Shiitake and Pork Congee (page 46)
Rice Noodle Soup (page 43)

The Japanese (1895–1945)

In 1895, in the aftermath of the first Sino-Japanese War and without any input from the people of Taiwan, the Qing government in China handed Taiwan over to Japan. They were met with hefty opposition, and even a declaration of independence that lasted for about five months. It was a brutal handover, and violent battles among the Japanese arrivals, the Chinese settlers, and the indigenous people raged on for years. Japan used the legal concept of *terra nullius*—meaning nobody's land—to claim ownership over what was previously considered indigenous territory. Many tribes were kicked out of their ancestral lands and forced to assimilate.

Japan set off on a mission to modernize Taiwan, and one way of doing that was through sugar, which was considered an ingredient of luxury and refinement. The empire of Japan was reliant on imported sugar, and Taiwan's subtropical climate meant that it was the perfect place to establish a proper sugarcane industry to supply domestic demand. Though Taiwan already had a history of sugarcane cultivation dating back to the Dutch days, the Japanese raised it to another level. Dozens of modern plantations and factories were set up, and by the early 20th century, sugarcane growers made up one-third of all rural households in Taiwan.

Within elite circles, the Japanese invented a brand-new cuisine known as Taiwanese ryori (táiwān liàolǐ 台灣料理), inspired by their limited understanding of Chinese cuisine. These were elaborate 13-dish banquets with bird's nests, pigeon eggs, shark fins, crab, white fungus, soft-shelled turtles, sea cucumbers, and other rare ingredients. But just as Indian curry is a figment of the British colonial imagination, so was this new genre of haute cuisine a figment of the Japanese imagination. Chefs from southern China were brought over to execute these meals, which were described to diners as exotic Taiwanese flavors with a tropical flair. Served in elaborate buildings with free-flowing alcohol and pretty girls, Taiwanese ryori was exclusively

geared toward the wealthy, including the Japanese royal family.

The Japanese rule of Taiwan lasted only 50 years, but it had a long-lasting impact on our cuisine because it industrialized and monopolized so many of our core ingredients. Most of our core pantry items, including soy sauce, rice vinegar, and rice wine, are still made in the Japanese fashion today.

DISHES:

Taiwanese Tempura (page 255)
Haishan Sauce (page 370)
Railway Bento Box (page 144)

Nationalist China (1945–1980)

At the end of World War II, Taiwan was taken over by the Republic of China, which, at that point, was in control of most of China. But in 1949, it was defeated by Communist forces and the government was forced to flee the Chinese mainland for Taiwan. With them came about one million soldiers and refugees, and the food of Taiwan radically changed once again. Whereas the first waves of Chinese immigrants mostly came from southeastern China, this new batch of people hailed from all over. They brought with them a diverse spread of regional Chinese cuisine never seen before in the history of Taiwan. Northerners introduced fried crullers, scallion pancakes, and flatbread. Folks from Shanghai brought over soup dumplings and rice rolls. Sichuan immigrants were partial to spicy broad-bean paste, which formed the foundation of beef noodle soup.

While these immigrants made up only 10 to 15 percent of the population, they were very much the ruling elite, both literally and culturally. The people of Taiwan were told that they were being returned to the fatherland and that Taiwan was the last bastion of traditional Chinese food and culture. Celebrated celebrity chef Fu Pei-Mei 傅培梅, Taiwan's first TV chef and considered by many to be the Julia Child of Chinese cookery,

was sent by the government to countries around the world as an ambassador for Chinese cuisine. Her programs were broadcast internationally and promised the Chinese diaspora a taste of home. It's here where the perception of Taiwanese food is often stuck in time. While this era was indeed rich in regional Chinese feasts, it eventually faded, and many of the dishes have evolved to become virtually unrecognizable from their mainland progenitors in both flavor and ingredients. I currently live in a neighborhood in Taipei with a lot of restaurants and veterans from this era, and the food tastes very different from what I've experienced during my extensive travels in China. Generally speaking, Chinese food in Taiwan is significantly sweeter than its modern Chinese counterparts.

Meanwhile, as the world was being told that Taiwan was a hub for Chinese cuisine, the majority of people—like my parents and Ivy—only knew of these Chinese dishes from television or during rare visits to Taipei. Most folks were eating the plebeian meals of Taiwan's

middle class, which were still very much rooted in sweet potatoes, rice, cheap seafood, and lots of pickles.

DISHES:

Fried Crullers (page 54)
Sesame Flatbread (page 58)
Beef Noodle Soup (page 128)
Soup Dumplings (page 125)
Sticky Rice Roll (page 52)
Pickled Mustard and Pork Noodle Soup (page 146)

The Americans (1945–1990s)

While the United States never colonized Taiwan, its policies made a durable impact on our food culture. After World War II, it was the Americans who forced the Japanese to surrender Taiwan to the Republic of China; and as an enemy of the Communist Chinese forces in mainland China, Taiwan naturally became an American ally. From the late 1940s to the 1960s, the States pumped billions of dollars in military aid and agricultural exports into Taiwan. Products like soybeans and wheat were shipped in en masse. The soybeans were used for animal feed, soy sauce, oil, and tofu products. Taiwanese chefs were sent to America to learn how to make bread with the wheat, and the recently arrived refugees from northern China happily molded the mountains of wheat into dumplings, flatbreads, and noodles. Even American turkey eggs were shipped in, which created a niche industry of turkey-over-rice restaurants. All these raw ingredients are still very much in vogue today and continue to be shipped in, mostly from the United States.

In part because of American aid, Taiwan's economy soared, and it became an East Asian superpower. American hegemony and soft power eventually inspired a new genre of dishes. In the 1970s and '80s, the Taiwanese became particularly enamored of American culture. Hamburger breakfast chains were set up as aspirational interpretations of concession-stand food. Cheap steak houses were erected at night markets across the country, where stringy cuts of meat were smothered with sweet black-pepper sauces. The first coffee shops in Taiwan arrived during this time, and sipping slow cups of coffee in air-conditioned spaces became a symbol of status. It was also during this era when many Taiwanese interpretations of American classics were born. Fried chicken was turned into popcorn chicken. Chicken pot-pie morphed into a chicken liver chowder in deep-fried bread, a dish called coffin bread. Despite the prosperity, this also marked an era of significant Taiwanese emigration. Highly educated but faced with very limited job opportunities, many college graduates left Taiwan during this period to obtain advanced degrees. My parents were part of this wave, and in the late 1980s they left Taiwan for California—where I was born.

DISHES:

Turkey Rice (page 134)
Pork Floss Milk Bread (page 65)
Coffin Bread (page 112)
Fried Chicken Cutlet (page 236)
Black Pepper Steak and Spaghetti (page 242)

A New Taiwanese Identity (1980–Today)

Taiwan transitioned into a democracy in the 1980s, and by then, enough generations had passed that the rampant discrimination and disparate identities of the past had begun to fade. Most people of today's Taiwan no longer see themselves as Chinese, and a completely new identity distinct from those of our former colonial occupants has formed. In the 1980s, a new class of outdoor beer restaurants known as rè chǎo 熱炒 popped up, serving cheap lagers with quick plates of food that combined regional Chinese influences, Japanese condiments, and local seafood into one large fusion genre unique to the island.

When the Democratic Progressive Party assumed power for the first time after the elections of 2000, then president Chen Shui-Bian hosted a banquet featuring street food from southern Taiwan, like savory rice pudding and milkfish soup—a momentous gesture that celebrated what most people on the island actually ate. In contrast, previous presidents had insisted on ethereal Chinese banquet dishes like shark fin soup, abalone, and lobster—purposefully eschewing local cuisine because it was considered inappropriate and low-class.

Today, there is a small yet influential cohort of fine-dining chefs channeling native ingredients and products that have been cultivated here for centuries. In a way, we're coming back full circle to an awareness of our indigenous roots, while also acknowledging our messy colonial past. In the grand context of all this history, the notion that Taiwanese cuisine is its own distinct genre is extremely new. But it's an increasingly common perspective that's being adopted by many who live on the island today, especially in light of cross-strait tensions and as we look for ways to set ourselves apart from our aggressors. And it's through this perspective that this book was born.

DISHES:

Poached Squid with Five-Flavor Sauce (page 214)
Pineapple Prawns (page 225)
Stir-Fried Fiddleheads (page 207)

Status Quo

The idea that Taiwanese cuisine is its own unique genre isn't controversial here in Taiwan at all. The majority of people in Taiwan identify as solely Taiwanese, not Chinese. Yet outside Taiwan, our food often gets conflated with Chinese food because of a general lack of understanding of modern Taiwanese identity politics (in 2022, only 2.4 percent of people in Taiwan identified as exclusively Chinese, compared to 25.5 percent in 1992, according to an ongoing survey by National Chengchi University). But also, despite being a self-ruled island with peaceful elections, Taiwan isn't recognized as a country by most of the world—which has a significant impact on how our cuisine is perceived internationally.

A nation's identity is shaped by its history. So in order to properly understand why the idea of a distinct Taiwanese identity is contentious to outsiders, it's imperative to understand the progression of events that led us to where we are. In just three generations—from my grandparents to my parents to myself—Taiwan has shifted from a Japanese colony to a Chinese dictatorship and finally to a functioning democracy. These transitions have been incredibly violent but instrumental to defining who we are.

The formal name of Taiwan is the Republic of China, and it's in this nomenclature where a lot of the confusion lies. A government that, indeed, originated in China, the Republic of China ruled the Chinese mainland when it overthrew the centuries-long reign of the Qing Dynasty in 1912. But it wasn't able to hold on to control for long, and in 1927 China was thrown into a chaotic state of civil war as the Republic of China (also commonly referred to as the Nationalists) wrestled for power and control with what would later be known as the People's Republic of China (the Communists). To add fuel to all the pandemonium, the Japanese decided to invade Northeast China in 1937, and World War II broke out.

My paternal grandmother, who was born when Taiwan was under Japanese rule, told me stories from this era. Born in Madou, a district in the southern Taiwanese city of Tainan, her earliest memories of life were punctuated by the sound of exploding steel against concrete and loud, menacing American planes zipping across gray skies. For 50 years, Taiwan was a Japanese colony, and my grandmother spoke more Japanese than she did Mandarin. She was a small schoolgirl; she had classmates who were killed. She didn't have any shoes, and food was prohibitively expensive. I kept trying to get her to tell me about the bombings by American warplanes, but she kept circling back to the shoes. "We were so poor we couldn't afford shoes. We had to borrow shoes," she said. "Most schoolchildren didn't have shoes."

On August 6, 1945, the United States of America dropped a nuclear bomb on Hiroshima and then another three days later on Nagasaki, effectively ending the war. Nine days after that, Japan surrendered, and two months later, at the behest of the Americans, they

handed Taiwan over to the Nationalist army of the Republic of China as part of reparations for the war.

When the Japanese surrendered to the Allied forces, they were told by the Americans to give Taiwan to the Chinese Nationalist government and not to the Communists—even though the Chinese Civil War was far from settled. And so the Republic of China became the new custodian of our verdant island, set up an office in Taipei, and declared Taiwan a province of their China. At that time, with the exception of the indigenous population, most of the people in Taiwan were descendants of ethnically Chinese immigrants and felt cautiously optimistic about the new colonial power because of their shared cultural heritage. They were told that they were being returned to "the fatherland." All of a sudden, my grandmother, whose native tongue was Taiwanese Hokkien and who was born a Japanese subject, was told that she was Chinese.

Unfortunately, the honeymoon phase was over before it could start. Corruption and bribery were rampant. The newly arrived soldiers from China terrorized the people and took away private property as they pleased. The economy tanked. Rice in Taiwan sold for twice the price it did in Shanghai. The Nationalist government ruled Taiwan with an iron fist, forcing people to learn, speak, and write Mandarin. And if they didn't, they were belittled and discriminated against. The Taiwanese, who were used to a strict but fair rule of law as enforced by the Japanese, began to resent their new colonizers and pine for the past.

The Taiwanese people, fed up with their oppressors, took over the radio stations and called for an uprising. They were quickly rebuffed, and more than 18,000 people were killed by military forces. Protest organizers were thrown in jail and executed by the thousands. The incident, now known as the 228 Massacre, was so brutal and violent that the leadership of the Nationalist party—still in China fighting the civil war—dismissed and replaced their governor in Taipei.

Two years later, in 1949, the Communists gained full control of the Chinese mainland and Mao Zedong formally established the People's Republic of China, still the ruling government of China today. Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek, the head of the Nationalist government, was forced to flee to Taiwan. Taipei was officially declared the temporary capital of the Republic of China, and more than 1.2 million Chinese refugees began to trickle into the island.

A motley group made up of veterans, military families, exiled students, Chinese prisoners of war, and government bureaucrats, these newcomers made up only 10 to 15 percent of the population, but their politics, food, and culture dictated the lives of the majority. Taiwan was put under martial law for 38 years. It's a period that's now referred to as the White Terror, the second-longest continuous period of martial law in recorded history, after Syria's. Under these conditions, resentment between the Taiwanese and the new Chinese arrivals continued to flare up. The former proudly called themselves sweet potatoes—the tuber's shape resembles that of the island of Taiwan—and new arrivals were called taros. The children of sweet potatoes and taros were also discriminated against and disparagingly known as mutts.

My parents—both sweet potatoes—were born in the 1960s, during the period of martial law, and from birth they were indoctrinated with anti-Communist but pro-Chinese-culture propaganda. They read about how the Communists destroyed Chinese culture in the Cultural Revolution, burned books, pulverized ancient temples and gods, and stripped the Chinese language of its soul by creating simplified Chinese. They were told that Taiwan—in language, religion, and spirit—was the last vestige of traditional Chinese culture, and that one day the Nationalists would reclaim their old territories and fulfill their manifest destiny as the sole rulers of all of China.

Of course, that never happened.

In 1979, the United States established official relations with the People's Republic of China, cutting diplomatic ties with Chiang Kai-Shek's Republic of China and sending Taiwan into international purgatory. Now, Taiwan isn't a victim by any means, and much of this was actually self-inflicted. Taiwan likely could have achieved international recognition and gotten away with it, but the stubbornness of the ruling class took priority over the desires of the people. During the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal, the Taiwanese leadership was given an opportunity by the International Olympic Committee to compete under the formal banner of Taiwan. But the Nationalist government—hell-bent on being recognized as the Republic of China and offended that the title of China was given to the Communists—decided to boycott the Games in retaliation. Four years later, when Taiwan rejoined the Olympics, China insisted Taiwan compete under the banner of Chinese Taipei, which is the title we're forced to use in the Games today. A similar script had played out in the United Nations a couple of years prior, where the Republic of China was kicked out in favor of the People's Republic of China. Today, Taiwan remains excluded from most international organizations. Our status as a nation stuck in international purgatory is in part a result of the greed of our political forefathers, whose ambitions to blindly conquer were not unlike those of Chinese leader Xi Jinping today.

But while Taiwan is still the Republic of China on paper, attempts to reclaim the Chinese mainland were eventually abandoned as Taiwan slowly transitioned from an autocratic dictatorship to a democracy. In 1986, an opposition party known as the Democratic Progressive Party was born, offering an alternative to the one-party system. Martial law was lifted a year later, and in the 2000s, the Democratic Progressive Party won their first presidential election by supporting the idea of a distinct Taiwanese identity.

Democracy, though, did not come easy. There were multiple presidential assassination attempts, physically charged brawls in parliament, and rampant streaks of corruption. As a kid, I watched television broadcasts of Taiwanese legislators hurling punches, food, and water bottles at one another, a tradition that continues to this day (albeit sparingly). Back then, I was convinced that this was just how politics was conducted around the world. While messy and rough around the edges, this democracy somehow produced a new Taiwanese identity, separate from China and notable in its sense of self-determination.

While the Chinese Civil War was never formally settled, over the decades, the people of Taiwan have made it increasingly clear that they do not want any Communist Chinese involvement on their shores. In 2014, the Nationalist party hastily passed a trade treaty that would make Chinese investment in Taiwan legally easier. They did so without the required public discussion and transparency, and many citizens took that as an assault on democracy. Hundreds of students and protesters angrily burst into the legislative and executive chambers and occupied the buildings for weeks in a protest known as the Sunflower Movement. They argued that the trade pact would make Taiwan vulnerable to political pressure from Beijing.

The movement gave birth to a new cohort of politicians who were more vocal than ever against China, and in time, many prominent Sunflower activists were eventually elected to office. In 2016, Tsai Ing-Wen, a former law professor and Democratic Progressive Party politician who ran on a platform of not bowing to pressure from Beijing, was voted in as president. Four years later, in 2020, as cross-strait tensions continued to ramp up and Beijing began to escalate its crackdown on Hong Kong, Tsai was reelected with more than eight million votes—the highest number of votes any presidential candidate has ever received in Taiwan's short democratic history.

Today, tensions between China and Taiwan continue to climb to unprecedented heights as the Chinese side becomes increasingly hostile and the Taiwanese side becomes increasingly outspoken. Over the years, Xi Jinping has continuously reiterated his desire to fold Taiwan into the People's Republic of China. In 2021, he vowed to "smash" any attempts at Taiwanese independence, and since then, record numbers of Chinese military planes have been sent into Taiwan's air defense identification zone in a blatant act of intimidation. Chinese ships have illegally dredged sand on Taiwanese territorial seas, and tidal waves of targeted disinformation campaigns are continuously lobbed at us.

Domestically, flare-ups between the two major political parties in Taiwan are almost always sparked by fundamentally different views on China. The Nationalist party (also known as the Kuomintang), which decades ago dropped its ambitions to retake China, wants friendly relations and free trade with China. Their official line is that Taiwan's issue of sovereignty is something for future generations to take care of. The Democratic Progressive Party's current stance is that Taiwan does not need to declare independence because it's already an independent, self-ruled country. Despite all their differences, neither group wants unification or a direct declaration of independence. Both want to keep the status quo, which means "no unification, no independence, and no use of force"—a delicate stance that the Chinese state is actively trying to topple to their advantage.

The status quo can be uncomfortable and might one day prove to be untenable, but it's what the majority of Taiwanese people—roughly 87.1 percent, according to polls—want to uphold. Unification with China would mean the destruction of our way of life. But an outright formal declaration of independence would also mean imminent war. This gray space, awkward as it may be, is perhaps the safest place to be. Many people of the older generations—like my grandmother, standing in a swirl of dust left behind by bombs, or the war refugees from China, forever estranged from their families in the Chinese mainland—still viscerally remember the heartbreak of war.

It may not seem like it, but the people of Taiwan are well aware of the realities and risk of armed conflict. Yet life goes on as normal because it must, and as China becomes more aggressive, we find ourselves becoming increasingly more Taiwanese.

Taiwan	China
Republic of China	People's Republic of China
Used to be referred to as Nationalist China	Used to be referred to as Communist China
Major political parties: Kuomintang (sometimes called the Nationalists) and the Democratic Progressive Party	Major political party: Chinese Communist Party
Democracy	Autocracy

The Taiwanese Pantry

Even at the pantry level, Taiwanese cuisine stands on its own. All our condiments and seasonings are produced on the island, and have been for centuries. We are very much a self-sufficient country.

LARD (zhū yóu 豬油): Pork is integral in our cuisine, and lard—a hearty by-product of it—is the core ingredient many swear on for flavor's sake. Every single home cook over the age of 50 has stressed to me that it is absolutely mandatory. Traditional families will have a decorative ceramic lard jar in their refrigerator that they replenish constantly; I just use a simple glass Mason jar. For instructions on how to make lard at home, see page 358.

VEGETABLE OIL (zhí wù yóu 植物油): The vegetable oil of choice in Taiwan has shifted with the times. From the 17th to 19th century, the early Chinese immigrants had manually powered wood mills that churned out peanut and sesame oil. But because it was done on an extremely small scale back then, lard was still very much the de facto fat of choice. It wasn't until the early 20th century, when the Japanese invested in hydraulic oil presses, that peanut oil became a regular fixture of the Taiwanese pantry. In the late 20th century, Taiwan entered a string of trade deals with the United States and soybeans were imported into Taiwan en masse, which gave way to the rise of soybean oil. Of course, these days, we also have grape seed oil, canola oil, and all sorts of other exotic variants, but these are largely imported from abroad.

SESAME OIL (zhī má yóu 芝麻油): There are two major types: toasted sesame oil (zhī má xiāng yóu 芝麻香油), which is made from white sesame seeds, and black sesame oil (hēi má yóu 黑麻油), made from black sesame seeds. They are derived from two completely different varieties of sesame. White and black sesame oil cannot be used interchangeably. Toasted white sesame oil is lighter and more versatile, and is mostly used as a marinade or to add a subtle pop of flavor in sauces and at the end of stir-fries. It's also great as a final drizzling touch on a dish. Black sesame oil has a darker and smokier taste. It's regarded as more medicinal, and because it has a lower smoking point, it must be cooked carefully at low heat or added at the end of the cooking process.

SUGAR (táng 糖): Coarse raw sugar is the preferred and traditional sugar of choice in Taiwan. It's an unrefined light golden brown sugar known domestically as Cane Sugar #2 (èr shā táng 二砂糖); the closest equivalent is demerara. Unlike white sugar, coarse raw sugar has subtle notes of toffee and molasses, flavors that are especially accentuated in long braises. Considered to be much more aromatic, coarse raw sugar keeps better in the Taiwanese tropics because it has larger, coarser grains that don't clump with the humidity. For

most dishes, it can be used interchangeably with white sugar, but I've listed it specifically as an ingredient in the recipes where I find it absolutely essential. As a former cash crop, sugar is incredibly important to Taiwanese cuisine and was considered a status symbol, especially during the Japanese colonial era. We also have dark brown sugar (hēi táng 黑糖) and rock sugar (bīng táng 冰糖) on the island, but these are typically reserved for desserts.

SALT (yán 鹽): As in many ocean-faring countries around the world, sea salt is king. In the 17th century, residents started to divert seawater into shallow ponds to harness the power of evaporation to make piles of salt. But because of water pollution and how time-consuming this process was, these salt pans have largely been retired, though some of the more historical ones are now functional tourist attractions that can still produce salt on a small scale. Today, most of Taiwan's salt is produced by Taiyen Biotech, which sells both fine sea salt (produced by electrodialysis) and iodized table salt. Coarse salt is quite rare in Taiwanese cooking.

SOY SAUCE (jiàng yóu 醬油): This foundational condiment was brought over in the 17th century by Chinese immigrants, and in the early days was exclusively made with black soybeans, which have a deeper, almost earthier flavor than the more common yellow soybean that dominates the soy sauce market internationally. Originally, black soybean soy sauce production in Taiwan was concentrated in Lukang township in the west of the island. But it declined dramatically when the Japanese took over Taiwan and brought their soy sauce processing techniques, which used yellow soybeans and toasted wheat. Yellow soybean soy sauce became the standard in northern Taiwan and in all the big cities. All the recipes in this book were developed using yellow soybean soy sauce from Kimlan, which is the largest soy sauce brand in the country. Stylistically,

Kimlan soy sauce is most similar to Japanese all-purpose soy sauce (koikuchi shoyu), so if you can't find Kimlan, Kikkoman is the best brand alternative.

While black bean soy sauce (which is gluten-free) still exists in pockets of Taiwan, it's a smaller, more artisanal market based mostly in Xiluo, an urban township in Yunlin County. I'm partial to Yu Ding Xing, a family-owned business that wood-fires all their soy sauces and ages them in terra-cotta vats. They also scribble little love notes on the sides of the vats for good luck, which is a lovely and adorable bonus.

Unlike China, Taiwan doesn't have light or dark soy sauce. There's a dark soy sauce–like variant here in Taiwan called bottom-vat soy sauce (which is a much more concentrated formula designed specifically for braises and stews), but unlike Chinese dark soy sauce, it doesn't contain molasses and will not color your food as prominently. If you're using bottom-vat soy sauce for any of the recipes in this book, start with half the amount listed and taste your way up from there.

TAIWANESE SOY PASTE (jiàng yóu gāo 醬油膏): This is a condiment unique to Taiwan, made with soy sauce and sugar thickened with glutinous rice flour. With a viscosity and color similar to those of oyster sauce, soy paste is used to add complexity to braises or is mixed with water and sugar to make a dipping sauce. There are many variants of this item, depending on the region and brand. Northern versions will add a hint of licorice powder, and in the south, the paste is extremely saccharine and has a light caramel color instead of a dark, coffee-like hue. The recipes in this book were developed using Kimlan soy paste. For instructions on how to make this condiment yourself, see page 366.

WHITE PEPPER (bái hú jiāo 白胡椒): Ground white pepper—which is derived from the seeds of a whole black peppercorn—is the default pepper of choice in Taiwan. It's used in most dishes as an accent, as a marinade for meats, or as a finishing touch to anything soupy. Unlike black pepper, which can be quite sharp around the edges, white pepper has a gentleness to it that most Taiwanese people prefer.

FIVE-SPICE POWDER (wǔ xiāng fěn 五香粉): I get my five-spice powder from my local Chinese medicine store, which is where most people in Taiwan procure their spices. Different stores will have their own proprietary blends, but fundamentally, the powder is made with ground Sichuan red peppercorns, cinnamon, star anise, cloves, and fennel seed. Five-spice is what gives a lot of Taiwanese deep-fried snacks their signature pop. It can be quite overpowering, so be gentle with it.

MONOSODIUM GLUTAMATE (MSG) (wèi jīng 味精): Most chefs and street vendors are pretty heavy-handed with MSG; it's what gives food in this part of the world an extra layer of depth and umami. But, like lard, it's something that appears in every grandma's house but is frowned upon by the younger generation for health reasons. Of course, a flavor agent is sometimes needed, and many Taiwanese households today will instead stock boxes of hondashi—a "healthier" instant granular form of Japanese dashi which, ironically, also contains MSG (but don't tell my mom—she has no idea). I didn't include MSG or hondashi in any of the recipes in this book, but feel free to add a pinch to any of the savory recipes if you'd like.

DRIED FLOUNDER (biǎn yú 扁魚): The Japanese have bonito, and Koreans use anchovies. Here in Taiwan, we're partial to a palm-size dehydrated whole flatfish known as the olive flounder. The fish, which is about as big as a business card, is usually cut into squares, fried, and then scattered in soups. Or it can be crushed into a powder and folded into braises for flavor. Unfortunately, because many home chefs now prefer granulated instant flavoring like hondashi or bouillon cubes, dried flounder is getting increasingly harder to find, even in Taiwan.

In the West, it's also sometimes labeled as dried stockfish, brill fish, dà dì yú 大地魚, or ròu yú 肉魚. Korean dried pollack is an acceptable alternative as well. To store, cut the whole dried fish into small, one-inch

chunks and keep it in the freezer. Don't be intimated by the head and the eyes of the fish; use and cook them like you would the rest of the fish. Chinese medicine stores might also have this in stock, sometimes in powdered form. If you can only get your hands on the powder, substitute it 1:1 by weight.

BLACK VINEGAR (hēi cù 黑醋): In China, Japan, and Korea, black vinegar is made by steaming rice and then aging it in clay pots for at least six months. But here in Taiwan, our black vinegar—inspired by Japanese-style Worcestershire sauce—is more of an infusion than it is an aged vinegar. First, a basic rice vinegar is made with sticky rice. Then it's steeped with fruits and vegetables for months, and then sometimes flavored with a sprinkle of licorice and caramel. The result: a fruity, full-bodied hit of acid that's usually drizzled to taste over a thick soup. The most common Taiwanese black vinegar brand is Kong Yen. If you can't find that, Chinkiang vinegar from China, although not made the same way, is a decent-enough substitute.

RICE VINEGAR (mǐ cù 米醋): A transparent vinegar with yellowish undertones, this is a really simple condiment that's mostly used for quick pickling vegetables like cucumbers, daikons, or carrots. The most common brand is Kong Yen, which makes a Japanese-style vinegar out of glutinous rice, salt, and a little bit of fructose. Slightly less acidic than Western styles of vinegar, rice vinegar is made using a process similar to that for making sake. If you can't find a Taiwanese brand, the best substitute is a seasoned Japanese rice vinegar.

TAIWANESE RICE WINE (michiu or mǐ jiǔ 米酒): In the old days, rice wine was created by incorporating long-grain rice with white koji and fermenting it. However, because koji can be unpredictable, this method gave funky and inconsistent results. When the Japanese took over Taiwan, they learned about a new rice wine–brewing technology from Vietnam, which isolated the bacteria from the koji. This created a more even and consistent brew and is how most of our rice wine is produced today. In Taiwan, rice wine comes in all sorts of different alcohol percentages. The most common one is the Red Label, which is 19.5 proof. If you can't find Taiwanese rice wine, cooking sake is the best alternative.

SHACHA SAUCE (shā chá jiàng 沙茶醬): Made with a special blend of dried flounder, garlic, shallots, and dried shrimp and brought over by Teochew immigrants from China, this sauce used to be a heavily guarded secret just a few generations ago. Families would make it behind closed doors and serve it with hot pot or in lamb or beef stir-fries. Shacha is easy to find in Asian grocery stores; the most common brand is Bullhead Barbecue Sauce, but for instructions on how to make it from scratch, see page 371.

SWEET POTATO STARCH (dì guā fěn 地瓜粉 or fān shǔ fěn 蕃薯粉): Taiwanese starches are one of the most mislabeled items in both the English- and Chinese-speaking world, which is extremely frustrating because for select dishes like crystal meatballs, the type of starch that's used makes a really big difference. Sweet potato starch is the original starch of the island and, when molded into dough, is quite firm and hardens when it cools. Sometimes you can buy sweet potato starch in thick granular form, which is ideal for dishes that are deep-fried.

TAPIOCA STARCH (mù shǔ fěn 木薯粉 or shù shǔ fěn 樹薯粉): Made from dehydrated cassava, tapioca starch yields a much softer dough than sweet potato starch, which is why the two starches are often used in conjunction with each other to achieve the right texture. Because sweet potato and tapioca starches are often mislabeled for each other in English, double-check the ingredient list on the back of the packaging and cross-check the Chinese characters if you can. For some dishes, it's important to distinguish between the two because of the textural differences. Tapioca starch is also a popular thickener because it produces a glassy and translucent finish, which is a typical feature of many southern Taiwanese soups.

POTATO STARCH (tài bái fěn 太白粉): This is a common, generic starch in Taiwan used for thickening and marinades. It's described in English as potato starch, but in fact it's just a hodgepodge of cheap, miscellaneous starches that's mostly potato starch. I don't usually buy this; I'll use tapioca starch as my default thickener because it has the same effect.

CHILI SAUCE (là jiāo jiàng 辣椒醬): Taiwanese cuisine tends to be mild and sweet, and therefore we don't really have a robust hot-sauce scene. And in keeping with this theme, our chili sauce tends to be—well—mild and sweet. Even then, it's rarely used by itself and is usually mixed with sugar and ketchup to make a sweet chili sauce. The best replacement for Taiwanese-style chili sauce is Lee Kum Kee chili garlic sauce or Huy Fong sambal oelek.

FERMENTED BROAD BEAN PASTE (dòu bàn jiàng 豆瓣醬): Fermented broad bean paste originated in Sichuan, but when it made its way to Taiwan via Chinese immigrants in the 1950s, it was tweaked so much over the generations that it's now virtually unrecognizable from its original form. Taiwanese broad bean paste is more bean-heavy than it is spicy. It's used only in select dishes, like beef noodle soup and braised beef shank.

DRIED FERMENTED BLACK BEANS (dòu chǐ 豆豉): These are soybeans that have been inoculated with a mold, salted, and then left to wrinkle and cure. They're like salty capers, but with the funkiness of a deeply aged cheese. Time breaks down the protein in the bean, which combines with the sodium in the salt to form a natural MSG. These pair especially well with stir-fried fiddleheads or steamed fish.

DRIED SHIITAKE MUSHROOMS (xiāng gū 香菇): Taiwan has a robust shiitake mushroom cultivation industry, and the mushrooms come in all different sizes. The rule of thumb is to soak them in room-temperature water to coax out most of the flavor. You could technically reconstitute the mushrooms in boiling water, but they lose a lot of their fragrance that way. The soaking water can also be reserved and used in lieu of water in any of the recipes. If you can, look for organically grown shiitakes; fungi are quite sensitive to their surroundings and can pick up heavy metals if they're grown in subpar conditions. Rehydrate these in a French press if you have one; the plunger will keep the mushrooms submerged in the water.

DRIED SHRIMP (xiā mi 蝦米): An absolutely essential pantry item, these sun-dried shrimp are about the size of a fingernail and infuse salty complexity in any stir-fry or braise. Look for shrimp that are a vibrant orange. They should be even in color and shouldn't be too ragged around the edges. A tip I learned from the auntie I buy my dried shrimp from: store them in your freezer. They'll last a lot longer that way.

FRIED SHALLOTS (yóu cōng sū 油蔥酥): Fried shallots are used as a garnish or thrown directly into braises or soups for an infusion of flavor. You can make these at home (see page 368), but most people in Taiwan don't bother. Pre-fried shallots are available in nearly every corner store in Taiwan. Asian grocery stores in the West also stock them. I keep a big bag of these in my pantry at all times.

WHEAT FLOUR (miàn fěn 麵粉): Most flour in Taiwan is milled domestically and made with wheat berries imported from the United States. The protein levels are the same, but the way the berries are milled and the additives that are incorporated are slightly different. For more on the nuances and history of wheat flour, see page 56.

RICE VERMICELLI (mǐ fěn 米粉): These are dried strands of thin rice noodles that are reconstituted with water, and can be thrown into a stir-fry or soup. Ivy's tip is to blanch the noodles in boiling water instead of just soaking them in water for a couple of hours like most people do. Blanching softens the noodles so that they're perfectly al dente; soaking them overnight will make them far too mushy. When buying rice vermicelli, look for the package with a red and yellow tiger on it. These noodles are made in northern Taiwan and can be procured at most major Asian supermarkets.

BAMBOO LEAVES (má zhú yè 麻竹葉): These long green leaves are derived from the sweet bamboo (*Dendrocalamus latiflorus*) plant and are sold in dehydrated packets at Asian specialty stores. They're the default wrappers for southern Taiwanese–style zongzi. They must be boiled and washed thoroughly before use.

MALTOSE (mài yá táng 麥芽糖): Also known as malt sugar, maltose can be a bit of an intimidating ingredient because it straddles the medium between a solid and a liquid. It's thicker than honey but softer than caramel. With a brilliant amber-like shine, maltose is best pried out of the jar with a wet stainless steel spoon or with wet hands. It will dissolve easily in water, and if you're folding it into flour, just pull it apart with your hands in the flour until it's thin and stringy like a spiderweb. Eventually—like magic—it will disappear. Maltose is a really common ingredient in Taiwanese desserts and is the secret for keeping dishes like mochi soft and supple for hours. There's no substitute for it; the most common brand outside of Taiwan is Elephant King.

GINGER (jiāng 薑): There are two types of ginger: old ginger (lǎo jiāng 老薑) and young ginger (nèn jiāng 嫩薑). The former can be found in most grocery stores around the world, and in Taiwanese cuisine, it's usually sliced up—unpeeled—and put into soups or stir-fries. Young ginger is quite rare outside Taiwan, and even on the island, it shows up only around the spring. It's a delicate, tender, almost ivory-like root that's finely julienned and used in dipping sauces or soups. If you can't get your hands on young ginger, peel old ginger, slice it up thinly, and soak it in water for 30 minutes to tone down its piquancy.

GARLIC (suàn tóu 蒜頭): This is a pretty straightforward, universal aromatic. How we usually process it: smash it with the back of a cleaver, peel off the skin, and chop or mince accordingly.

SCALLIONS (cōng 蔥): My rule of thumb for scallions is to reserve the white parts for stir-frying and the green parts for folding into the end of the dish. If they're needed in soup, you can tie them into a knot and plop them right in; this makes them easier to pluck out afterward. My local vegetable vendor taught me a nifty little trick for preserving scallions: trim off the bottom, separate the whites and greens, and then freeze.

PORK FLOSS (ròu sōng 肉鬆): An old way to preserve excess pork, pork floss is made by boiling chunks of meat, shredding them, and then pan-frying until the meat is dry, fluffy, and stringy. Pork floss can be sprinkled over morning congee or bread. For instructions on how to make this from scratch, see page 364.

PLUM POWDER (méi zi fěn 梅子粉): Made from dehydrated brined plums, plum powder was, in the old days, given out for free at fruit stalls across the country. It has a distinct sweet and sour taste and is usually sprinkled over fresh slices of guava.

Cordia dichotoma (phuà pòo tsí 破布子): These are the pickled seeds of the bird lime tree, a tropical plant distributed across Asia. They taste like sweet capers and are usually steamed with fish or sautéed with tender fern shoots. They add a delicious layer of brininess to a dish.

MAQAW (mǎ gào 馬告): A seed derived from the *Litsea cubeba* tree, maqaw is an indigenous Taiwanese peppercorn with spicy and floral lemon notes. Used primarily by the Atayal tribe, it's one of the few indigenous ingredients that has crossed over into mainstream Taiwanese cooking. It's a popular spice in wild boar sausages; I've also had maqaw in both coffee and pineapple cake, which works surprisingly well.

Rice

I live next to a small family-owned bulk food shop in Taipei, where heaps of rice, grains, and miscellaneous legumes are piled up neatly in individual white bins, and then measured out using an antique scale with miniature brass weights. It's here where the residents of my neighborhood have been congregating for generations to buy dried pulses and grains, and for the uninitiated, it can be really intimidating.

"I'm looking to buy, uh, rice to make daikon cake with," the teenager ahead of me in line says nervously, clutching his phone.

"Long-grain or glutinous?" the auntie who manages the store asks.

"I don't know. The one that makes daikon cake?" he says, looking down at his phone screen, referencing a shopping list someone sent him out to fulfill.

As he does that, Auntie scoops up some rice and puts it in a bag. "Long-grain," she says as she hands it to him.

Then it's my turn.

"I'd like four kilograms of short-grain regular rice and one kilogram of short-grain glutinous rice," I say, pleased with myself for knowing the difference.

Auntie doesn't look impressed. "Okay, what district do you want the rice to be from? Chishang or Guanshan?" she asks dryly.

I make an educated guess, get my order, and leave incredibly humbled.

Rice in Taiwan is an incredibly nuanced topic that can take many lifetimes to grasp. And because of our colonial history, the type of rice that we eat on a daily basis changed depending on who controlled the island. The original variety of rice was javanica, which was cultivated on a small scale by indigenous residents and by the early Dutch settlers. Difficult to grow, it was eventually replaced by indica and japonica rice, brought over by colonists from China and Japan, respectively.

Today, there are four basic types that dominate the island: short-grain rice (japonica), long-grain rice (indica), short-grain glutinous rice (japonica glutinous), and long-grain glutinous rice (indica glutinous). Different varieties have varying levels of amylose and amylopectin, and like gluten in wheat flour, these variables greatly affect texture. Amylose is what gives slender, long-grain rice like basmati and jasmine their light, fluffy texture. When these varieties are cooked, they don't stick together at all. Amylopectin is the carbohydrate responsible for the stickiness of short-grain and glutinous rice. It's the reason sushi rice—a short-grain rice—can be packed into a sushi roll with ease. And it's why mochi, which is made with glutinous rice, is gooey when you bite into it.

Short-grain rice has high amounts of amylopectin but low amounts of amylose. Long-grain rice is the exact opposite. Glutinous rice has high levels of amylopectin and almost no amylose. And if all that wasn't confusing enough, the age of the rice matters, too. Dishes like savory rice puddings are made out of long-grain rice that has been aged for at least


A
B
C
D

a year; newly harvested rice would make the pudding far too sticky.

All these nuances might seem disorienting, but it's actually not that complicated. The vast majority of the rice Taiwanese people eat on a daily basis today is a short-grain japonica rice. Long-grain indica rice, introduced by Chinese settlers in the 17th century, used to be the dominant strain in Taiwan because of its ability to thrive in the hot and humid climate. Similarly, a lot of other tropical countries have a similar predilection for long-grain rice. India, for example, has basmati, and Thailand has jasmine.

But the Japanese colonists in the early 20th century grew up eating short-grain rice and weren't fans of the long-grain variety. So, they got to work, and after many failed attempts over many years, finally had a

Rice Kernels

A. Short-grain glutinous rice (japonica glutinous), also known as sweet rice Yuán Nuò Mǐ 圓糯米	Amylose content: 0–5%	Extremely sticky kernels usually used to make desserts with.	Taiwanese Mochi (page 327) Tang Yuan (page 302) Red Tortoise Kueh (page 269)
B. Long-grain glutinous rice (indica glutinous), also known as sticky rice Cháng Nuò Mǐ 長糯米	Amylose content: 0–5%	A long-grain sticky rice usually reserved for savory festive dishes.	Oil Rice (page 287) Zongzi (page 279)
C. Short-grain rice (japonica), like sushi rice Péng Lái Mǐ 蓬萊米	Amylose content: 15–20%	The rice that is most commonly served at home and at restaurants. Plump, sticky, great for absorbing sauces.	Shiitake and Pork Congee (page 46) Fried Rice (page 210) Quick Seafood Congee (page 158) Braised Minced Pork Belly (page 90)
D. Long-grain rice (indica), like extra long-grain rice, basmati, or jasmine Zài Lái Mǐ 在來米	Amylose content: Over 25%	Used a lot in steamed pastries, the rice is often aged for a couple of years which helps improve the texture.	Savory Rice Pudding (page 101) Crystal Meatball (page 108) Daikon Cake (page 285)

breakthrough with a short-grain cultivar bred in the mountains of Yangmingshan, a national park just north of Taipei. In 1926, they named that new cultivar péng lái 蓬萊 after Mount Penglai, a mythical mountain in Chinese and Japanese folklore that houses the elixir for eternal life. And the old long-grain rice of Taiwan—an indica variety—was named zài lái 在來, which means "has-been." This new nomenclature signaled that indica's reign as the dominant rice strain on the island was officially over, eternally replaced by the superior japonica.

Today, Taiwan is one of the few subtropical countries in the world where japonica is the de facto rice of choice—a grain more typical of temperate and mountainous climates. Indica still exists in Taiwan, though its role has largely shifted from a daily rice to an ingredient used in steamed pastries. Most of the long-grain rice in the market these days is sold in flour form, or meant to be taken home, soaked overnight, and blended with water to form rice milk, which is then steamed to make pastries.

There's also glutinous rice, which also comes in long-grain and short-grain varieties. Both variants are quite dense and distinguished by their pearly, opaque kernels. A special-occasion grain reserved for weddings, funerals, and religious holidays, glutinous rice tends to be pricier because there's less farmland dedicated to it. Short-grain glutinous rice, sometimes called sweet rice, is reserved for sweet rice desserts like mochi and tang yuan. And long-grain glutinous rice is used for festive savory dishes, like oil rice, which marks the birth of a baby boy, or for zongzi, which celebrates the Dragon Boat Festival.

And as the auntie at the bulk grain store so bluntly pointed out to me, terroir also plays a huge role in how a bowl of rice turns out. It's a lot to unpack, but the changing nature of rice in Taiwan reflects the shifting tides of Taiwanese identity. From javanica to indica to japonica, even our staple, core foundational grain hasn't stayed constant through the generations—a testament to how we're constantly redefining what it means to be Taiwanese.

Rice Flour

Rice flour, also known as Thai rice flour or common rice flour Zài Lái Mǐ Fěn 在來米粉 or Zhān Mǐ Fěn 粘米粉	Made with long-grain rice flour. Usually mixed with water to form rice milk and then steamed into a cake or savory pastry.	Savory Rice Pudding (page 101) Daikon Cake (page 285)
Glutinous rice flour, also known as sweet rice flour Nuò Mǐ Fěn 糯米粉	Most commonly made with a mix of long-grain and short.	Taiwanese Mochi (page 327) Tang Yuan (page 302) Red Tortoise Kueh (page 269)

NOTE:
When buying rice flour outside Taiwan, always go for water-milled rice flour. I highly recommend the Erawan brand. If you use dry-milled or stone-ground rice flour, the flour-to-water ratio might need to be adjusted.

Equipment

Depending on your perspective, the average Taiwanese kitchen is either really janky or quite charming. When I first moved into my 40-year-old sixth-floor walk-up in Taipei, I was convinced of the former. We don't have hot water in the kitchen or a dishwasher, and when I run out of gas—oftentimes when I'm in the middle of cooking—I have to call a number and patiently wait for a courier to carry a new tank of gas up six flights of stairs. There's simply no way around it. If anything, living in an old apartment in Taipei has given me a deeper appreciation for Taiwanese cuisine and its inherent simplicity. You don't need a large, grandiose setup to create a wonderful, home-cooked meal.

These are the bare essentials:

GAS STOVE (wǎ sī lú 瓦斯爐): Gas stoves in Taiwan are like infernos, and even the lowest heat can bring a small pot of water to a rolling boil if you're not careful. Our stoves here are quite difficult to control, but the benefit is that the high heat is great for wok-frying and imparts a lovely smoky finish to the food. An electric or induction stove, of course, is fine; just make sure your wok is sufficiently heated before you add your oil and aromatics.

WOK (chǎo cài guō 炒菜鍋): For Western kitchens, I recommend a 14-inch (35-cm) flat-bottomed carbon steel wok. Carbon steel is lightweight, distributes heat evenly, and develops a gorgeous patina over time if it's properly seasoned. Carbon steel is traditional in Taiwan and is the de facto wok material in restaurants across the country, though more home cooks are now becoming partial to nonstick because it makes for easier cleanup. It's a real shame, because unlike nonstick woks, a properly cared-for carbon steel wok can truly last forever, and might eventually become a family heirloom.

How to season a wok: Using a dish brush, scrub the inside and outside of the wok with mild dish soap. Rinse off the soap. Heat the wok over high heat until the water evaporates. Tilt and rotate the wok so all the sides and edges are heated. It will start to change color and become dark brown with a blue tinge. Turn off the heat and let it cool down again. Rinse under running water and scrub with a dish brush. Heat the wok over high heat until all the water has evaporated again. Turn off the heat. Swirl in 2 tablespoons of oil and, with a folded paper towel held in a pair of tongs, spread the oil all over the inside of the wok. It can be used immediately.

How to clean a wok: Rinse your wok in the sink with hot water and scrub it with a plain sponge. If things are especially sticky, use a dish brush (you can splurge on a fancy wok brush, but a nylon dish brush with a scraper edge will do the trick). To finish, heat the wok on the stove over high heat until all the water beads have evaporated. Washing your wok with a tiny bit of baking soda or mild dish soap is okay when it's absolutely needed, but don't overdo it.

WOK LID (guō gài 鍋蓋): Wok lids in Taiwan are traditionally made out of cheap aluminum or stainless steel. I have a gorgeous Japanese cedar lid that

nestles perfectly on top of my wok, and I love it because it makes my kitchen smell like a sauna. The wood prevents condensation from building up and dripping onto the food.

METAL WOK SPATULA (chǎo cài chǎn 炒菜鏟): Don't worry about scratching up your wok with this; carbon steel woks are quite resistant, and the scratches will even out with time. A hefty metal spatula is necessary for stir-fries and for scraping up any junk that accumulates on the bottom of the wok.

CLEAVER (cài dāo 菜刀): Everyday tools for slicing, dicing, and smashing, most cleavers in Taiwan are made with either stainless or carbon steel and have rectangular blades. Look for a lightweight cleaver that's comfortable on the wrists. While I've met people who use heavier meat cleavers that can cut through bone to do all of the above as well, it takes quite a bit of skill and experience to maneuver that on a daily basis. A lightweight cleaver is easier to manage for beginners and great for everyday use—especially if you aren't butchering on a regular basis.

CUTTING BOARD (zhēn bǎn 砧板): Old-school households in the countryside use a smooth cross-section of a tree trunk as their cutting board. That setup isn't as practical for many home cooks today, though a heavy, round piece of wood at least 1.5 inches (4 cm) thick and about a foot (30 cm) in diameter is ideal. Traditional wooden cutting boards are made from an indigenous magnolia known as black heart stone (wū xīn shí 烏心石) or a native elm called Zelkova (jǔ mù 櫸木). I use my wooden cutting board exclusively for meats and a regular plastic board for vegetables. The oil from the meat will keep the board naturally lubricated, but if you have a wooden board dedicated to vegetables, make sure to rub it with vegetable oil often or else it might crack over time. To clean, rinse the board with hot water and vinegar after use and dry completely.

ROLLING PIN (gǎn miàn gùn 擀麵棍): Taiwanese rolling pins are usually made out of wood and are much thinner and shorter than their Western counterparts, which makes them easier to maneuver with one hand. Be sure to oil your rolling pin regularly so that it doesn't crack.

METAL LADLE (tāng sháo 湯杓): A necessary tool for ladling soup. These ladles aren't as steeply angled as Western ladles, and some restaurant wok chefs will sometimes even use the back side for stir-frying.

SPIDER STRAINER (lòu sháo 漏杓): Also sometimes known as a skimmer spoon, this is one of my favorite tools. It's especially great for lifting deep-fried food from a bubbling vat of hot oil or noodles from a pot of boiling water. Think of it as a lightweight colander on a stick. Old-school Taiwanese spider strainers are large metal spoons dotted with perfectly round holes; newer models are made with woven metal.

BAMBOO STEAMER (zhú zhēng lóng 竹蒸籠): There are many different types of steamers out there, but I highly recommend one made out of bamboo. If you're using a 14-inch (35-cm) wok, buy a 12-inch (30-cm) steamer with at least two or three tiers. Bamboo is preferred because, unlike stainless steel, it won't allow condensation to build up on top of the lid and drip back down onto the food. This doesn't make a difference if you're steaming meat or vegetables, but if you're cooking a delicate rice pastry like a kueh, condensation could mean the difference between a gloopy, wet pastry and a firm, intact one. If you only have a stainless steel steamer, wrap a large cloth around the lid to prevent condensation from falling onto the food.

How to use a steamer: Pour 1 to 1½ inches (2.5 to 4 cm) of water into a wok. Bring it to a rolling boil, then nestle the covered bamboo steamer with the food inside over the water. The bottom rim of the steamer should be submerged in water at all times, or else it might char. Make sure the floor of the steamer doesn't touch the water, though, or the food will get drenched. Depending on how long your steam time is, you might have to replenish the water occasionally. I always keep a kettle of boiling water on the side for a quick top-off.