

Timbre Group / Yishun Park Hawker Heroes

Headline: Double-boiled with care

Standfirst: Jacky Zhang Binchao hopes you'll drink his soup and find it so comforting that you'll *dabao* another to bring home for your loved ones.

When it comes to soups in Cantonese cuisine, an old saying goes: *sanbao sidun* (三煲四炖). It means to boil for three hours and double-boil, or steam, for four.

Presumably, the long cooking time coaxes maximum flavour out of the ingredients. But this piece of wisdom should be taken with a grain of salt, says Jacky Zhang Binchao, proprietor of Zhiwei Double-Boiled Soups (#01-06) at the Yishun Park Hawker Centre.

"If some ingredients are cooked for too long, many of their nutrients will be lost," the 30-year-old explains. He adds that the longer meat is boiled, the higher the purine level in the soup. Purine increases uric acid in the body, too much of which may lead to gout. In other words: such a soup does more harm than good.

At his stall, Jacky boils pork bones, chicken feet and an assortment of dried mushrooms for one and a half hours or so, just enough to distil a full-bodied master stock. "To get full flavour, I don't skimp on the ingredients," he says.

Then, using the master stock as the base, Jacky concocts a range of double-boiled soups. In individual ceramic bowls, he combines the stock and various ingredients – pork, chicken, vegetables or herbs, depending on what he's making – and gently simmers the soups in a steaming chamber for two hours.

His soup-making is all about balancing time and flavour. This is a philosophy he has practised since he began working as a chef specialising in Cantonese cuisine. He honed his skills in the kitchens of five-star hotels such as St Regis in Tianjin and the Marriott in Singapore.

Jacky's food journey began when he was in his teens. He helped out at his uncle's eatery and catering business during his school holidays and discovered his interest in all things culinary. He then enrolled in a culinary institute in Shandong, where he was schooled in China's eight major regional cuisines.

At culinary school, Jacky picked up theoretical knowledge and practical skills, which often focused on the science of cooking. He rattles off the geeky questions he tackled there: "How does protein change at 70 degrees? What happens to the amino acids? When's the right time to salt?"

And because of this solid grounding in cooking science, Jacky makes his soups – even familiar, homestyle ones like ABC soup (pork ribs with carrots, onions and potatoes), pork ribs soup with watercress, and herbal chicken soup – with a whole lot of precision and care.

Jacky has seasonal specials in mind too. In cooler weather, he plans to serve "warming" options such as herbal mutton soup; in warmer weather, "cooling" soups like duck soup with

lotus seeds. Also on his menu: *zhongzai fan* (steamed rice in a pot) with six types of toppings, such as minced pork and preserved vegetables, and chicken and Chinese sausage.

Jacky believes that his goals in life will keep evolving. Right now, he hopes to make a good living from this entrepreneurial venture. “I don’t want to get ahead of myself,” he says. “I just wish that everyone who drinks my soup here at the hawker centre will find it so delicious and comforting that they’ll *dabao* another to bring home for their family.”

A wish that’s simple, down to earth but no less elegant, perhaps just like his double-boiled soups.