



## momofuku pork buns SERVES 1

It's weird to be “famous” for something. Can you imagine being Neil Diamond and having to sing “Cracklin’ Rosie” every time you get onstage for the rest of your life? Neither can I. But if Momofuku is “famous” for something, it’s these steamed pork buns. Are they good? They are. Are they something that sprang from our collective imagination like Athena out of Zeus’s forehead? Hell no. They’re just our take on a pretty common Asian food formula: steamed bread + tasty meat = good eating.

And they were an eleventh-hour addition to the menu. Almost a mistake. No one thought they were a good idea or that anyone would want to eat pork belly sandwiches.

I got into the whole steamed bread thing when I stayed in Beijing. I ate *char siu bao*—steamed buns stuffed with dark, sweet roast pork—morning, noon, and night from vendors on the street who did nothing but satisfy that city’s voracious appetite for steamed buns. When I lived in Tokyo, I’d pick up a *niku-man*—the Japanese version, with a milder-flavored filling—every time I passed the local convenience store. They’re like the 7-Eleven hot dogs of Tokyo, with an appeal not unlike that of the soft meatiness of White Castle hamburgers.

And in the early days of my relationship with Oriental Garden—the restaurant in Manhattan’s Chinatown where I’ve eaten more meals than anywhere else on the planet—I’d always order the Peking duck, which the restaurant serves with folded-over steamed buns with fluted edges, an inauthentic improvement on the more common accompaniment of scallion pancakes. *Char siu bao* and *niku-man* were influential, but the Peking duck service at Oriental Garden was the most important, if only because it was here in the city and I could go back and study what made their buns so good—and also because the owner of the restaurant was willing to help me out, at least after a point.

After I’d eaten his Peking duck about a million times, I asked Mr. Choi, the owner (whom I now call Uncle Choi, because he’s the Chinese uncle I never had), to show me how to make the steamed buns. For as many times as I had eaten steamed buns, I had never thought about making them, but with Noodle Bar about to open, I had the menu on my mind. He laughed and put me off for weeks before finally relenting. (He likes to remind me that I am the *kung-fu*—the student, the seeker, the workman—and he is the *si-fu*—the master.) But instead of taking me back into the kitchen, he handed me a scrap of paper with an address, the name John on it, and a note scribbled in Chinese that I couldn’t read.

Have you ever seen the blaxploitation martial arts movie *The Last Dragon* from the eighties, where the dude is in constant search for some type of master who can provide some wisdom, and in the end it turns out to be a hoax—the master’s place is a fortune cookie factory? Probably not. But that’s how I felt when the place I was sent to learn the secret of steamed bread turned out to be May May Foods, a local company that supplied dozens of New York restaurants with premade dim sum items, including buns, for decades before it closed in 2007. The guy there, John, showed me the dead-simple process: a little mixing, a little steaming, and presto! buns. It turns out they are made from a simple white bread dough, *mantou* (not so different from, say, Wonder Bread), that is steamed instead of baked.



But when I saw the flour everywhere and tried to imagine that mess in our tiny, already overcrowded kitchen, I immediately placed an order. We didn't have the space to attempt them then, and we continued to buy them from Chinatown bakeries even after May May closed.

If you have that option—a Chinese bakery or restaurant where you can easily buy them, or even a well-stocked freezer section at a local Chinese grocery store—I encourage you to exercise it without any pangs of guilt. How many sandwich shops bake their own bread? Right. Don't kill yourself. But don't be put off by the idea of making them either. They're easy and they freeze perfectly.

Here's the recipe for our pork buns, which you can increase ad infinitum to make more to share.

**1 Steamed Bun (opposite)**

About 1 tablespoon hoisin sauce

3 or 4 slices Quick-Pickled Cucumbers (page 65)

3 thick slices Pork Belly (page 50)

1 scant tablespoon thinly sliced scallion (green and white)

Sriracha, for serving

**1.** Heat the bun in a steamer on the stovetop. It should be hot to the touch, which will take almost no time with just-made buns and 2 to 3 minutes with frozen buns.

**2.** Grab the bun from the steamer and flop it open on a plate. Slather the inside with the hoisin sauce, using a pastry brush or the back of a spoon. Arrange the pickles on one side of the fold in the bun and the slices of pork belly on the other. Scatter the belly and pickles with sliced scallion, fold closed, and voilà: pork bun. Serve with sriracha.



**steamed buns**

**MAKES 50 BUNS**

Okay, fifty buns is a lot of buns. But the buns keep in the freezer for months and months without losing any quality, and if you cut the recipe down any more than this, there's barely enough stuff in the bowl of the mixer for the dough hook to pick up. So clear out a couple of hours and some space in the freezer and get to work.

1. Combine the yeast and water in the bowl of a stand mixer outfitted with the dough hook. Add the flour, sugar, milk powder, salt, baking powder, baking soda, and fat and mix on the lowest speed possible, just above a stir, for 8 to 10 minutes. The dough should gather together into a neat, not-too-tacky ball on the hook. When it does, lightly oil a medium mixing bowl, put the dough in it, and cover the bowl with a dry kitchen towel. Put it in a turned-off oven with a pilot light or other warmish place and let rise until the dough doubles in bulk, about 1 hour 15 minutes.
2. Punch the dough down and turn it out onto a clean work surface. Using a bench scraper or a knife, divide the dough in half, then divide each half into 5 equal pieces. Gently roll the pieces into logs, then cut each log into 5 pieces, making 50 pieces total. They should be about the size of a Ping-Pong ball and weigh about 25 grams, or a smidge under an ounce. Roll each piece into a ball. Cover the armada of little dough balls with a draping of plastic wrap and allow them to rest and rise for 30 minutes.
3. Meanwhile, cut out fifty 4-inch squares of parchment paper. Coat a chopstick with whatever fat you're working with.
4. Flatten one ball with the palm of your hand, then use a rolling pin to roll it out into a 4-inch-long oval. Lay the greased chopstick across the middle of the oval and fold the oval over onto itself to form the bun shape. Withdraw the chopstick, leaving the bun folded, and put the bun on a square of parchment paper. Stick it back under the plastic wrap (or a dry kitchen towel) and form the rest of the buns. Let the buns rest for 30 to 45 minutes: they will rise a little.
5. Set up a steamer on the stove. Working in batches so you don't crowd the steamer, steam the buns on the parchment squares for 10 minutes. Remove the parchment. You can use the buns immediately (reheat them for a minute or so in the steamer if necessary) or allow to cool completely, then seal in plastic freezer bags and freeze for up to a few months. Reheat frozen buns in a stovetop steamer for 2 to 3 minutes, until puffy, soft, and warmed all the way through.

**1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon active dry yeast**

**1½ cups water, at room temperature**

**4¼ cups bread flour**

**6 tablespoons sugar**

**3 tablespoons nonfat dry milk powder**

**1 tablespoon kosher salt**

**Rounded ½ teaspoon baking powder**

**½ teaspoon baking soda**

**¼ cup rendered pork fat or vegetable shortening, at room temperature, plus more for shaping the buns, as needed**