

# Taste of Macau

Portuguese Cuisine on the China Coast

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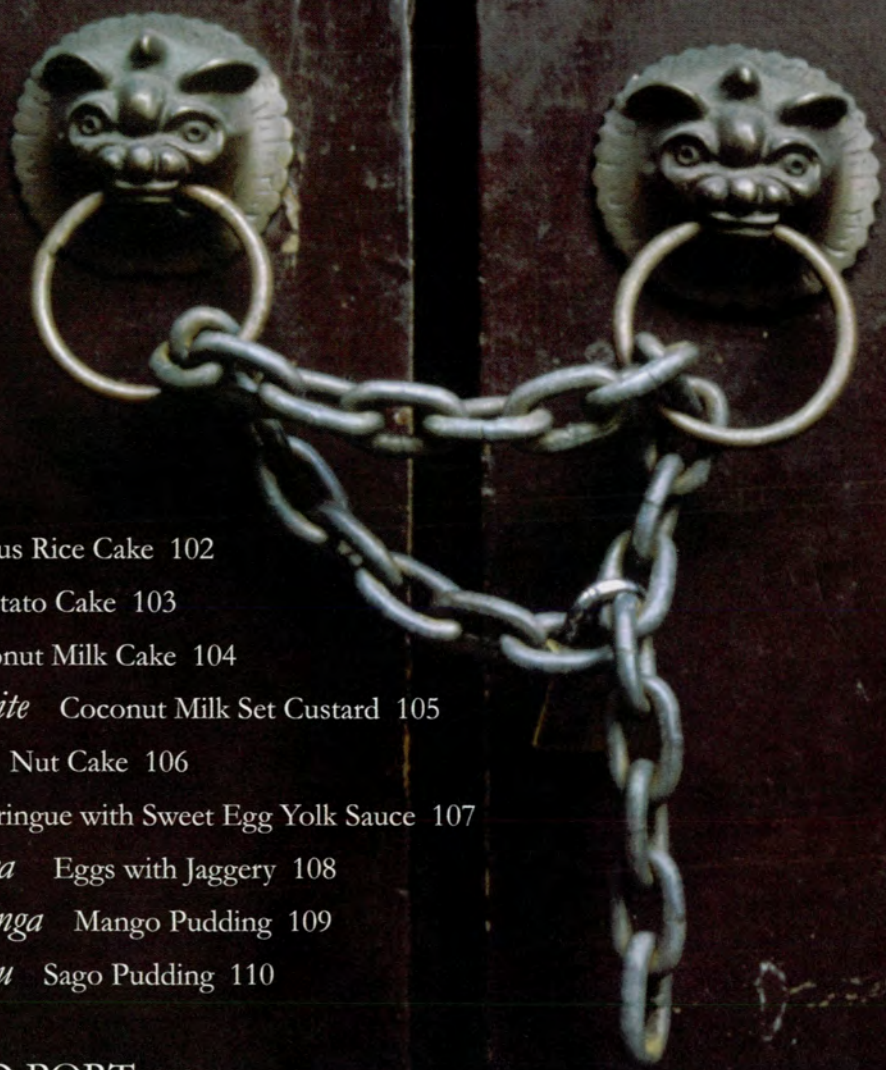
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## INTRODUCTION

About ten years ago I began work on a food-culture-travel guide entitled *Macau on a Plate*, during the research for which my interest in Macanese cooking was piqued. I also came to understand how the cuisine was already becoming marginalized even among sections of the Macanese community in Macau. In fact, it was dying out.

It was when I committed to try to gather a body of Macanese recipes and test them that I really began to truly understand the cuisine. My kitchen shelves began to fill with an almost confusing juxtaposition of ingredients; exotic aroma combinations wafted across the apartment.

Gathering such a body of recipes, particularly for a non-Macanese, is no easy task. Macanese recipes have traditionally been passed down orally, or in decades-old, handwritten albums. I have been privileged to see precious recipe albums brimming with historical fascinations, where, for example, the inclusion of papaya flowers recalls the days when everyone would have a kitchen garden, and each of those kitchen gardens would nurture at least one papaya tree; and where amounts of an ingredient are recorded not by weight but in currency — for example, 20 cents of ginger. Liquids are often measured by ‘tumbler’ or ‘wine glass’, or the measurement guide instruction is little more than ‘a little’.

Macanese recipes are closely guarded and rarely given away, and those which are shared are often incomplete. One friend has yet to be given her family’s recipes by her father: apparently he is convinced she would share them too generously.

Yet there is a growing sense within sections of the Macanese community that unless the already dying cuisine is recorded for a wider audience, it will be forever lost. Some of those Macanese, several of whom I have known for more than a decade, have willingly shared recipes with me. But there are just as many who have obviously felt unable to entrust to me and this cookbook with what I am compelled to assume are viewed as family heirlooms and, further, one of the last surviving tenets of Macanese cultural identity.

From time to time one comes across a Macau-produced recipe anthology that includes some Macanese recipes in English, and there are three or four Macanese cookbooks written in Portuguese. Yet not only are these difficult to find, they are also difficult to cook from (even for a Macanese), assuming too much prior knowledge on the part of the home cook or even excluding a key ingredient or technique. This, then, is essentially the first comprehensive, English-language cataloguing of the cuisine.

Even with recipes in hand, the process was still complicated. Cuisines that are not taught in the school but learned within the family operate inside their own fascinating sets of rules. There is no single way in the Macanese cooking lexicon to cook a dish like, say, *sarrabulho* — but the childhood memories of every Macanese are framed with the unique aromas of their own grandmother’s *sarrabulho*. So there is only one way to cook it, and that is her way!



I was keen, for this book, to get real recipes from real people, rather than writing them myself, and many recipes have a ‘story’ behind them which is included alongside. In cases where more than one family gave me the recipe for a dish, I have selected the one I find the most delicious. I have ‘fiddled’ as little as possible with the recipes, occasionally taking a feature from one recipe and incorporating it in another, but in general allowing an original recipe to speak for itself.

I have been struck during the recipe-testing phase how Macanese cooking truly is a hybrid, because it is accessible and enjoyable to many people and palates. I have tested out dishes on Asian and Caucasian friends and colleagues from a range of backgrounds and cultures, and there wasn’t one who did not enjoy the majority of the food sampled.



The intention has been to include recipes which can more or less work in kitchens around the world, and simultaneously document the fascinating cooking style of Portuguese descendants on the Pearl River Delta. It is not even necessary to have a wok to produce these dishes, though quick-cook dishes like *arroz bacalhau*, *minchi* and *chau chau parida* could work well in a wok. A normal pan suffices, however. Regular pans, casseroles and baking tins such as would be found in almost any kitchen are perfectly workable.

The foundations of Macanese cooking are indisputably Portuguese (aided by the availability in Macau for centuries of Portuguese non-perishables such as wine, olive oil and *chouriço*), while many of the ingredients are those readily available locally which are shared with the Cantonese kitchen, from root vegetables, ginger and garlic to soy sauce and *lap cheong*.

Yet here the influence of the Chinese kitchen on the traditional Macanese kitchen ends. Some more modern cooks might use Chinese five-spice, but the more traditional curry base would be Indian-style curry powder, and even a pile of spices freshly ground at home. The cuisine's exotic spicing (for example saffron and cinnamon) is a reflection not of the Portuguese landing in Macau but of Portugal's seafaring history in Asia, encompassing Goa, Malacca and Timor. Indeed, the cuisine has much in common with Goan cooking and the Nonya cuisine of the Malaccan Straits. The use of blood (see for example *pato cabidela*) is believed to have originated in Malaysia among the Hokkien people, as is the slow simmering in lard of offal (organ meat) in particular.

Thus a dish like *vaca estufada* slow-braises local beef and potatoes in a gravy which might combine, more obviously, European rosemary and bay leaf with Asian cinnamon bark and star anise. Desserts based on Portuguese originals substitute coconut milk for cow's milk. It could be argued, then, that Macanese cooking with its frequent mutations of Portuguese originals is the prototype of East-meets-West experimentation — long before the term became fashionable!

Today, modern health sensibilities have seen the amount of sugar and egg yolk heavily reduced in sweet dishes, and rarely does one see potatoes cooked in lard. Few families are now large enough — or have time enough — to present groaning spreads of twenty-plus dishes which comprise the *chá gordo* (literally 'fat tea', a combination of sweet and savoury dishes traditionally served in the afternoon at large Macanese celebrations) and mammoth pots like *feijoada* and *tacho*.

The recipes in this book range from very traditional Macanese dishes (*chilicotes*, *porco bafassa*, *bolo menino*) to dishes with a history of little more than fifty years, such as African chicken, right up to modern interpretations of Macanese cooking, such as *pato tamarinho*, or a dish featuring fresh cod rather than *bacalhau*.

There are those who argue that Macanese cooking, with its strong roots in the home kitchen, cannot be authenticated in the restaurant kitchen. Indeed, it could be further argued that it is even unsuitable for the restaurant given, for example, the less than aesthetic visual appeal of many of the finished dishes: the deep dark colour of the cooked blood in *pato cabidela*, the blackened bird which is African chicken, the pale anonymity of the *batatada* cake. There are comparatively few good restaurants in Macau serving Macanese food, but this collection of recipes, it is hoped, will succeed in bringing the centuries-old cuisine instantly to a wider audience who may never have the chance to see Macau for themselves.

## Note on spelling and translation

Since my mission is to try and preserve the cultural indicators of the Macanese community through their collected recipes and memories, for Portuguese words, I have generally followed the spelling used by the contributors and sources, which might be affected by patois and vary from standard Portuguese. Where there are variations, I have followed the one used in most Portuguese cookbooks.

For translations I have also depended on my sources. An interesting example is the use of '*Macaenses*', which means 'sons of Macau'. This has somehow become 'Macanese' in English. Some of the contributors, especially António M. Jorge da Silva, prefer to call themselves *Macaenses* instead because of the deep cultural meaning of the term, which I have kept whenever they are quoted. 'Macanese' is popularly used to refer to anyone born in Macau.


For Cantonese, I have used the transliteration in the original recipe or piece; otherwise, all Cantonese transliterations are my own.

## Note on weights and measures

The quantities used in these recipes are given in metric, Imperial and US systems. Any reference to a pint implies an Imperial pint (20 fl oz); reference to a cup indicates use of the American cup (8 fl oz); and reference to the quart, an American quart (4 cups). For convenience of measurement, the Imperial and US quantities given in parentheses are often approximations.



## TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF MACANESE COOKING

A photograph of a blue metal archway leading to a courtyard. The archway has vertical bars. Through the arch, a yellow wall with a white arched doorway is visible. A large potted palm tree stands in the courtyard. The ground is paved with stone tiles.

**F**or the purposes of compiling this cookbook, I sought to develop a broad definition of what Macanese cooking is.

Even within the community, there is no complete consensus. On a number of occasions I have been given the name of a classic Macanese dish by one family, only to have another family claim it is not Macanese. Underlying this difference of opinion are issues such as gender, ethnic background, class, upbringing, age, knowledge and a simple interest or lack of it in cooking.

It is perhaps simplest to define what Macanese food is not. There is certainly confusion over what I would prefer to call 'Macau' food: that is, dishes for which Macau may be famous but which are not truly Macanese. Favourites such as roast pigeon, pork-chop bun, and even egg curry, are eaten by locals and visitors alike, but have grown up in the broader, multi-cuisine restaurant scene, not from within the Macanese domestic kitchen.

Macanese cooking is not a simple cross between Portuguese (the colonizer) and the local Chinese (the colonized). Indeed, when the Portuguese arrived in Macau four hundred and fifty years ago, the landmass was virtually uninhabited save for a few fishing families. Many Chinese who then began to work in Macau in the golden era still slipped back across the border into China to sleep.

The Portuguese arrived with wives and servants from other colonies and outposts in Asia — Goa, Malacca, Indonesia, even Japan. The cooking which developed is, at its simplest, Portuguese dishes made with Portuguese techniques but using agricultural products of southern China, accented with Southeast Asian herbs and spices.

A cuisine never stands still. Subsequently, many of the grander families embraced true Portuguese recipes made with all the traditionally correct ingredients, and these should be regarded as Macanese dishes, particularly as several appear on traditional menus at weddings, baptisms and large parties. The more average family incorporated more Cantonese-style dishes and ingredients, though there are in fact few totally Cantonese-inspired dishes in the Macanese lexicon. *Tacho* is perhaps the most Cantonese of all the recipes in this book.

Today, mainly as a result of the Macanese diaspora, the cuisine is adapting itself to locally available ingredients across the world, often making substitutions, to produce dishes that have the spirit of Macanese cooking, but are far from traditional. The use of fresh codfish rather than salt cod (*bacalhau*), and the need to find an alternative for the almost extinct fish sauce *balichão*, are good examples of this evolution.

## MACANESE STORE CUPBOARD

The beauty of Macanese cuisine is that so many of the ingredients are the staples of the keen kitchen and easy to buy everywhere from neighbourhood wet market to international supermarket. Whether piles of tomatoes and onions, eggs by the dozen, minced pork and whole chickens, or simply flour, butter and sugar, they are readily found. Sometimes the type or quality of the individual products can make a material difference to the dish (read on for details) and those ingredients that may not readily appear in the average larder are described here.

## Bacalhau

Salted (and thus preserved) codfish was and remains a staple of the Portuguese kitchen, though it is no longer as inexpensive as it used to be. It readily found its way to the South China Sea aboard Portuguese ships and became incorporated in Macanese cooking. Generally, it suffices to first wash the fish under running water, then soak it in water for twenty-four hours, regularly changing the water. After draining, pour boiling milk over it, and leave it for a further two hours. This helps to tenderize the fish before removing skin and bones. The flesh is then flaked or broken into large pieces, depending on the recipe application. The drained-off milk can be used in soup. In a perfect situation, there is no need to add more salt to a dish prepared with bacalhau, nor should the codfish itself bring too much salt to the dish. If you cannot source bacalhau, it is often possible to substitute fresh codfish, or similar meaty white fish, with the altered method explained in each recipe.

## Balichão

A defining moment of Macanese cooking, *balichão* is a strong and fiercely aromatic fermented fish sauce, likely to have taken its name from Malaysian *balachan* (fermented fish paste sold in a block). It is also said to have given birth to the shrimp paste currently so popular in Cantonese cooking. It is now difficult to find, even in Macau, and made by just a few old ladies. If not available, make your own *balachan*-based *balichão*, or use a good quality Thai or Vietnamese fish sauce instead.

### Recipe for Balichão

I am presenting this recipe entirely as it was given to me, using the traditional weights and measures of Macau/southern China still in use today, but I am not suggesting that you try it at home! Very few Macanese make it themselves, not necessarily because it is difficult, but because today it is virtually impossible to find the correct shrimps. Originally, the shrimps for this paste were found the way up the Pearl River Delta, and were of a variety almost too tiny to be seen with the naked eye. To use ordinary shrimps is to create something with the wrong flavour entirely.

#### Ingredients

10 cate* shrimps	2 tael peppercorns
3 cate salt	1 tael bay leaves, crushed
8 tael** Shaoxing (Chinese wine)	3 lemons, juiced and cut into quarters
4 tael Portuguese brandy	1–2 tael chillies

\*1 cate = 500 g (1½ lb) approx

\*\*1 tael = 30 g (1½ oz) approx

#### Method

Mix together, seal jar, and leave for 3 months!

This recipe came from Isabel Eusebio, the owner of a former Macau restaurant called Balichão, and a place where many would enjoy Macanese food as cooked by Isabel's mother, Maria.

### Recipe for Balachan-based Balichão

One Macanese gourmet friend has suggested that, to get something close to the original flavour, we can start with a base of, say, 1 kg of Malaysian *balachan*, then mix it with all the *balichão* ingredients listed above, save for salt. Seal and leave for a few weeks to allow the ingredients to integrate. Then remove lemon peel, peppercorns and bay leaves. Before use, gently crush the sauce by hand or in a food processor. Fry for about two minutes, then store in a well-sealed jar for future use.

## Bay leaf

Also known as the laurel leaf, this herb comes from the tree *Laurus nobilis*. It is a classic herb in European cooking and the tree is also a native of India. The leaves can be left whole in soups or stews, but should be crumbled when used in marinades.



## Béchamel sauce

To make a béchamel, melt 40 g butter (1½ oz/3 tbsp) over a low heat in a heavy saucepan. Add 40 g flour (1½ oz/3 rounded tbsp) and stir briskly for about 5 minutes until the mixture is smoothly blended but before the colour darkens. Slowly stir in 500 ml milk (¾ pint/2 cups), bring to a boil, season. This recipe will yield 500 ml of sauce; adapt quantities of ingredients where smaller or larger quantities are required.



## Brown sugar

In Southeast Asia, dark palm sugar in blocks known as jaggery is often used instead of more refined dark sugars, but either is acceptable in Macanese cooking.



## Chillies

Macanese cooking normally uses the small and hot bird's-eye chillies, usually red but sometimes green.




## Chinese wine

Shaoxing wine is the so-called 'yellow' rice wine, good for braising. The so-called 'white' rice wine, *moutai*, is like a grappa, and is used to finish off the dish. The label on the bottle will usually give the generic name for the wine.



## Coconut milk

Popular across Southeast Asian cuisines, coconut milk features prominently in Macanese cooking, in sweet and savoury dishes. Tinned coconut milk is most commonly sold in a 165 ml (6 fl oz/  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup) can, which is the size used in this cookbook. Fresh coconut milk or freshly grated coconut flesh can of course be used if desired, though almost no Macanese continues to use fresh coconut.



## Chouriço

This dried chopped pork sausage is a staple of the Portuguese kitchen. The lower quality, cheaper sausages are designed for cooking in soups and stews, while the top quality ones can be eaten as they come, grilled (broiled) or barbecued, or incorporated into many different dishes.

They come in many different sizes:

100 g/15 cm in length (4 oz/6 in) is the standard size. The best substitute is not another kind of sausage but a salty, strong-flavoured ham.



### **Cinnamon bark**

The thick rough barks (cassia) found in Asia, crumbled, probably impart the best flavour in Macanese dishes, but the smaller pencil-thick sticks can be readily used. Though dried, the 'freshness' of the bark is the key; in other words store for weeks rather than months.

### **Garlic**

The garlic bulbs found in Southeast Asia and used in Macanese cooking are typically those with 10–15 medium-sized cloves.



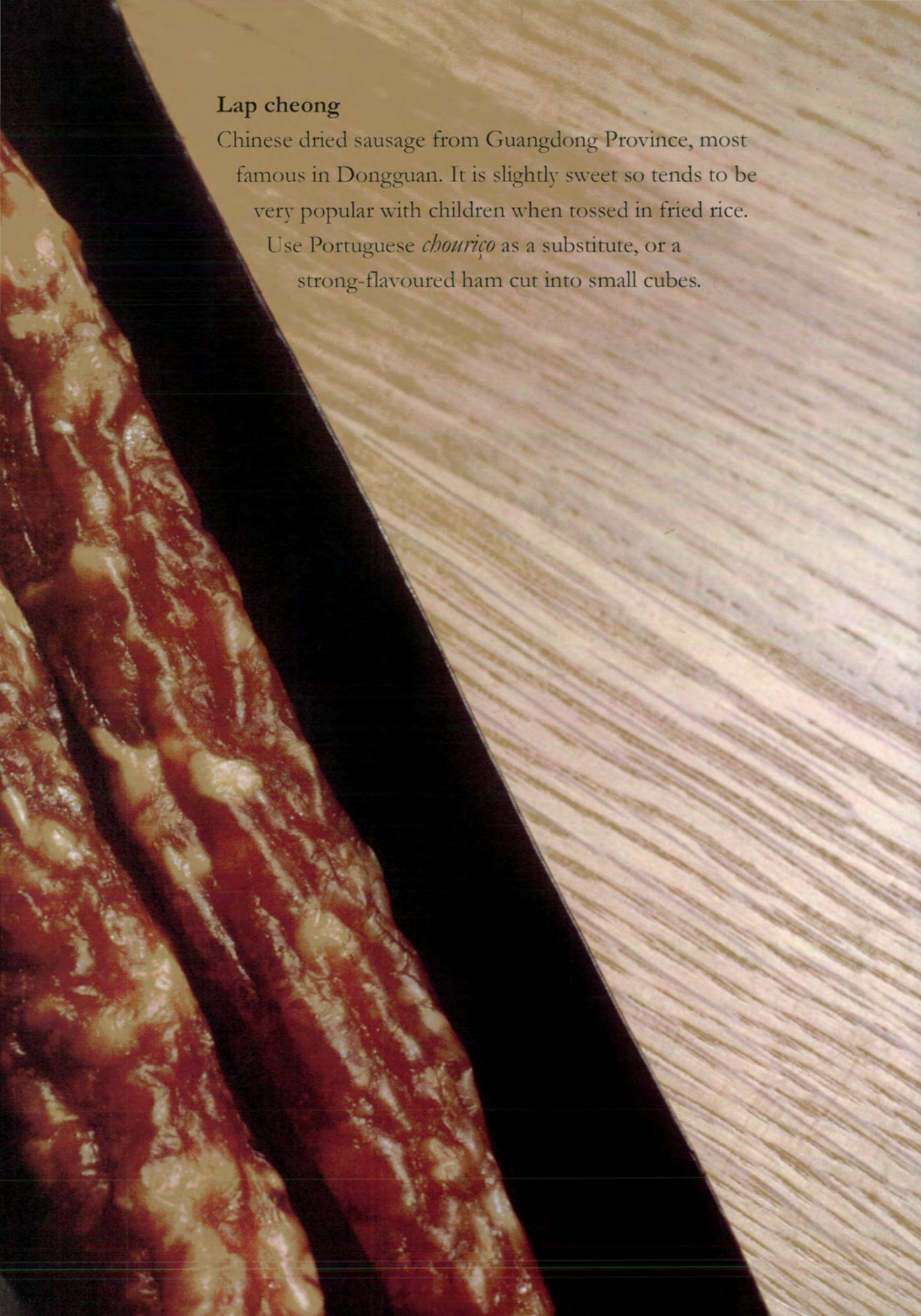
### **Glutinous rice**

Sticky rice is usually used in desserts, though there are some savoury dishes that incorporate it. Cook in the same way as regular rice but soak for up to three hours before use.

### **Indian curry powder**

Some modern Macanese and Macanese dishes substitute Chinese five-spice for curry powder, or combine the two, but Macanese cooking more normally uses an Indian curry powder likely to contain coriander, cumin, cloves, cinnamon, turmeric and fenugreek.



The image shows two pieces of Lap cheong, a Chinese dried sausage, resting on a dark surface. The sausage is long, thin, and has a wrinkled, reddish-brown exterior. The background is a light-colored wooden surface with a vertical grain pattern.

### Lap cheong

Chinese dried sausage from Guangdong Province, most famous in Dongguan. It is slightly sweet so tends to be very popular with children when tossed in fried rice.

Use Portuguese *chouriço* as a substitute, or a strong-flavoured ham cut into small cubes.

### Lotus root (rhizome)

This vegetable, popular in China, almost resembles strings of sausages. It is a little sweet, pleasantly crunchy, and beautiful in its cross section. It can be sliced in rings, which are very attractive, though the Cantonese are more likely to smash it with a cleaver, then chop it into 5 cm- (2 in) lengths.



### Morcela

Portuguese blood sausage flavoured with warm spices such as cinnamon. Any good black sausage works as a substitute.

### Olive oil

A combination of butter and olive oil makes an excellent base for many Macanese dishes, but it is important to use the thick green-tinged aromatic Portuguese olive oils usually purchased in tins. Heavy Spanish or even Greek olive oils can make acceptable substitutes, but the lighter Italian oils are not generally suitable.



### Olives

Most recipes in the book call for black Portuguese olives, but any olives can be substituted, the less processed the better. Look for olives with a textured bite to them, rather than the very smooth, manufactured brands. Where green Portuguese olives are called for, any green olive can similarly be substituted, the firmer the flesh the better.



## Rice

In spite of the heavy use of potatoes, and the popularity of bread, steamed white rice (Thai fragrant rice is the most popular type today) is almost always served with Macanese food. Rather than having it ‘dry’, the Macanese famously spoon gravy or sauce over the rice before eating it. Wash rice before use.

## Saffron

Notoriously expensive today, saffron brings a beautiful aroma to a dish, as well as a rich colour. It can — and should — be used sparingly so as not to dominate a dish. Even a quarter-teaspoonful of saffron powder is preferable to using turmeric, though the latter is more normally used today. If using good quality strands, as few as two to four strands is normally sufficient.



## Sago

Small, starchy pellets made from the stems of the sago palm which grows in Southeast Asia. This is sold in Southeast Asian stores, usually in sealed plastic packets of about 100 g (3½ oz) in weight.

## Shrimp paste

Cantonese shrimp paste, sold in solid blocks, is believed to be a direct descendent of *balichão*, though it is in fact far more salty, less sweet and less ‘fishy’. Malaysian *balachan*, on the other hand, is a more suitable substitute for *balichão*, and can be found in Southeast Asian grocery stores. Under the entry ‘Balichão’, a recipe is given which produces a kind of *balichão* but based on *balachan*. In some cases, good quality *nuoc mam* (Vietnamese fish sauce) or, because it is usually more readily available, Thai *nam pla*, can be used instead of *balichão*, particularly where aroma is as important as flavour.

### **Soy sauce (dark and light)**

Soy sauce is generally used as a marinade or to make sauces thicker, darker and of course salty. It is rarely if ever used in Macanese cooking as a dipping sauce or added at the last minute. Dark soy sauce is made from dark or black, rather than white, soy beans, and has a stronger flavour. Both types are used in Macanese cooking to varying degrees according to personal taste.

### **Star anise**

A beautifully aromatic spice, the traditional Chinese kitchen typically uses star anise for pork and poultry cooking, but it is included these days in everything from beef soup to fish stew.



## Stock

There is nothing to beat homemade stocks. At their most basic they simply require bringing to boil a pile of pork bones, a fresh chicken carcass with meat removed, or a fish head in about 1.5 litres (2  $\frac{1}{2}$  pints/1  $\frac{1}{2}$  quarts) water. Skim the surface. Then add a stick of celery, a potato, a carrot, an onion and a clove of garlic. Simmer over a low simmering heat for one or two hours. For stocks in Macanese cooking, bay leaves, peppercorns, star anise and cinnamon bark can readily be added.





## Tamarind

Fresh tamarind pods are difficult to find outside Asia, and in any event most cooks buy tamarind in dried, pulp form from Southeast Asian grocery stores. This pulp should be soaked and even simmered in boiling water, then strained to leave a marvellously sour, rich liquid. Discard the fibrous remains. Work on proportions of about 150g tamarind pulp to 225 ml (8 fl oz/1 cup) water.



## Turmeric

Turmeric brings little of flavour to a dish, but lends an attractive colour to all kinds of curries, sauces and even meats.

## White wine

While the Macanese in Macau would historically have used Portuguese white wine, the kind of white wine used in the marinades makes little difference to the final result. But avoid strong, oaky Chardonnays and use fresh-style wines where possible.



## Wrappers

Wrappers, whether made from rice flour, wheat flour, gluten-free flour or various combinations of these including the addition of egg, are used for dishes such as spring rolls and Chinese dim sum. They come in all shapes and sizes; and they come fresh, frozen, chilled and dried. So the subject of wrappers is a rather complex one. There is one Hong Kong-based Macanese woman who told me she buys frozen wonton wrappers from the US because those in Hong Kong are not suitable for *chilicotes*. Wrappers are used in this book for *chamuças*, and can also be used for *chilicotes* and *rissóis* in place of homemade pastries.