

MA-PO DOU-FU

Ma-po Dou-fu is more correctly but less frequently called Chen Ma-po Dou-fu, or "Old Pockmarked Mrs. Chen's Bean Curd." It takes its name from the wife of a certain Ch'en Fu-chih who ran a restaurant in the large provincial town of Chengtu in Szechwan in the 1860s. A very well-known Szechwanese dish, Ma-po Dou-fu should be very hot. Variations of this popular dish are numerous—some restaurants prepare it using garlic and ginger, some cooks replace the pork with beef, some recipes call for fermented black beans. This recipe has been called "the authentic and original Ma-po Dou-fu," but you can take that statement as seriously as you like. Ma-po Dou-fu should be eaten not just with, but on top of, rice. Provide a serving spoon and let each person take a helping from the serving bowl and transfer it to his rice bowl before eating.

INGREDIENTS

3 to 4 cups cubed bean curd
2 medium pork chops, about 1/2 pound total
3 to 5 tablespoons finely chopped fresh ginger
1/4 cup coarsely chopped green onion
1 to 2 tablespoons hot bean sauce
1 cup chicken stock or water

Seasonings

2 to 3 tablespoons cornstarch mixed with 4 to 6 tablespoons water
1 to 2 teaspoons salt, depending on the saltiness of the hot bean sauce
1 tablespoon rice wine or dry sherry
1 tablespoon soy sauce
1/2 teaspoon ground Szechwan pepper
4 to 5 tablespoons oil

Optional

2 tablespoons finely chopped garlic
1 teaspoon fermented black beans
2 to 3 dried or fresh mushrooms
6 to 8 pieces wood ear
1 tablespoon sesame oil

PREPARATION

1. Cut the bean curd into small cubes. If desired, place the bean curd in boiling water in a wok or pot and let boil until the bean curd starts to float. This procedure firms the bean curd slightly and is especially advisable if you are using soft, Japanese-style bean curd.
2. Chop the pork into small pieces, about 1/4-inch by 1/4-inch, or slightly smaller. Chop the green onion coarsely. Chop the ginger as finely as possible.

3. Mix the seasonings in a cup, first dissolving the cornstarch in the water and then adding the other ingredients.
4. Heat 4 to 5 tablespoons oil in a wok or large frying pan until very hot. Add the pork pieces and cook briefly. Then add the hot bean sauce, stir, and add chopped ginger. Stir until the meat and ginger have absorbed the red color from the hot bean sauce. Add 1 cup stock or water. Then carefully add the bean curd cubes and stir gently.
5. Allow the liquid in the wok to cook down somewhat, keeping it over a medium flame. Stir occasionally being careful not to break the bean curd cubes. Just before the liquid has cooked away, stir the seasonings and add with the green onion. Stir, check for salt. The consistency should now be very thick, almost like custard. If necessary add a tablespoon or so more cornstarch, first mixing it with a few tablespoons of water to make a thin paste. Sprinkle ground Szechwan pepper over the bean curd. Serve hot over rice.

OPTIONAL INGREDIENTS

- a) If using garlic, chop a few tablespoons very finely and add together with the ginger.
- b) If using fermented black beans, use a very small amount and add together with the ginger.
- c) Soak dried mushrooms or wood ear in warm water until softened, rinse well, cut away stems or tough portions before using. Add together with seasonings.
- d) If using sesame oil, add 1 tablespoon after mixing in the seasonings.