

OO-PÉH-TSHIAT: TAIWANESE PORK DELICACY FOR THE COMMON FOLK

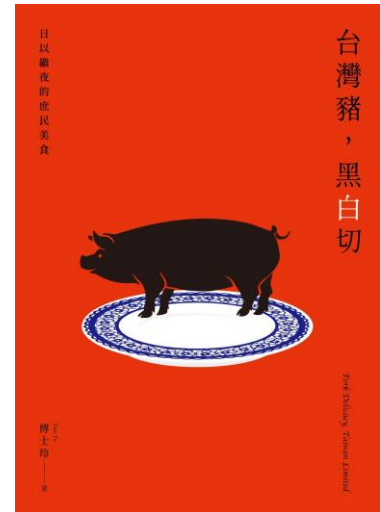
台灣豬，黑白切——日以繼 夜的庶民美食

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A thorough analysis of a thoroughly Taiwanese street food made from nearly every cut of pork imaginable, this is the ultimate foodie guidebook: an exquisitely detailed map of a distinctive culinary culture.

Oo-péh-tshiat is a dish found throughout Taiwan, beloved of the masses. Though this plate of assorted cuts of pork might at first appear a crude and slapdash affair, its humble appearance belies the expertise required in its preparation. It is a culinary delight enjoyed at all times of day, and which always bears the unique touch of the chef who prepares it. Beginning with the pigs, the animals that supply the basic elements of oo-péh-tshiat, this book expands into a foodie guidebook and cultural history of a nation's signature dish.

Organized into three parts, the book begins with the outer meats of the pig, detailing preparation methods for everything from head meat to tail tip, complete with a tantalizing list of recommended food stalls from across Taiwan. Even more mouth-watering are the descriptions of the resulting dishes, including "pork snowflake", a preparation of the meat of the gums that will have readers longing for a nibble of its delightfully chewy texture. The second part focuses on oo-péh-tshiat cuts prepared from internal organs, whose poetic names will have curious readers guessing at exactly what part of the pig has been employed in its creation. Emphasizing freshness and



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simple cooking that accents the natural flavor and appearance of the basic ingredients, oo-péh-tshiat prepared from organ meats are a direct representation of the chef's dedication and skill. The final section turns to the men and women whose knowledge is essential to the creation of oo-péh-tshiat. From the person who selects the pigs for slaughter, to the street-stall chef who cooks the meats, an entire food culture is revealed through unacknowledged but loyal inheritors of this culinary tradition.

Author Ema Fu, a media and publishing professional with decades of experience, gathered stories from numerous interviews to assemble this behind-the-scenes look at the complexities that go into the making of a humble dish. Spiced with personal anecdotes and a pinch of homesickness, Fu has created a foodie guidebook that doubles as a moving cultural documentary, using oo-péh-tshiat as a window on the honest, hard-working people of Taiwan. Food lovers and the culturally curious alike will find plenty to tempt their reading tastes in this unique book on one of Taiwan's most ubiquitous culinary delights.

Ema Fu 傅士玲

A graduate of University of Wisconsin and George Mason University, Ema Fu has over thirty years of experience in media and publishing. Her writing has appeared in *Business Weekly*, among other publications, and she has authored a previous food book on Taiwan's "lion's head" meatballs. Her publications also include numerous Chinese translations of English language books, including *The Book Thieves* and *Paper: Paging through History*.

OO-PÈH-TSHIAT: TAIWANESE PORK DELICACY FOR THE COMMON FOLK

By Ema Fu

Translated by Marianne Yeh

Prologue: Oo-pèh-tshiat Forever – The Common Folk’s Favorite, with Good Reason

In the life story of every Taiwanese, there is a page filled with memories of oo-pèh-tshiat.

Those few eateries we’ve eaten at since childhood are the most unforgettable. Each bite fills the heart with nostalgia.

These humble establishments, with their aging workers and timeworn recipes, struggle to find successors.

With each passing year, the beloved flavors teeter on the brink of extinction.

Oo-pèh-tshiat isn’t your ordinary street food. The exotic-sounding name doesn’t make it easy for people to fully grasp the uniqueness of this culinary wonder. For Taiwanese, when they go to a night market stall or a street-side eatery and order an oo-pèh-tshiat, they give their complete trust in the server to create a one-of-a-kind assortment platter consisting of the very best the establishment has to offer.

Don’t think of oo-pèh-tshiat as a side dish, because nothing about it is – or can be – made casually. Each slice carries the weight of countless workers’ dedication. From the production farm to the cooktop, they toil day and night, going to bed late, waking up early, and pouring themselves physically into every step, never once slowing.

The rise of oo-pèh-tshiat mirrors Taiwan’s economic development. In the early 1960s, it was a rare find. Today, it graces every corner and alley. The workers in these old eateries can be considered part of Taiwan’s intangible cultural heritage. They may not be professional chefs but are the unsung guardians of Taiwanese culinary tradition. The pork dishes they craft daily might appear simple and unassuming, but their taste tells a different story. Whether you’re wealthy or a regular Joe, all get to enjoy this delicacy equally. It’s a favorite for all.

The first time I tried oo-pèh-tshiat was back in fourth grade, in a small alley off Linsen North Road near Zhongshan North Road. This whole area was full of single-story Japanese-style houses then, each boasting expansive front and back yards about thirty-five hundred square feet in size. Two

of my classmates lived next door to each other there. Their yards were thick with trees and plants, and huge banyan trees spread their leafy, shady branches over the surrounding walls. Against one wall stood a hand-pushed mobile food cart selling rice vermicelli soup, fried tofu puffs, and pork large intestines – just these three items, and nothing else. The stall opened when schools let out in the afternoon, and the rice vermicelli and other ingredients were always fresh and flavorful. No need for dipping sauce; just drop the intestines straight into the rice vermicelli soup and slurp it all down in one go. The taste of oo-pèh-tshiat was more refined than any other street food around.

This was a time when oo-pèh-tshiat hadn't yet taken over Taiwanese street cuisine. Around our school and the nearby Chingguang Market, you'd often find fish ball soup, deep-fried sticky rice cake, thickened meat soup, pork blood soup, and large intestine vermicelli. Yet there was only one stall selling oo-pèh-tshiat rice vermicelli soup. In this neighborhood, street food was meant to be a snack, not a full meal. Each stall specialized in just one item, focusing on quality over quantity. It wasn't about stuffing yourself but instead enjoying small portions of expertly prepared food.

At that time, oo-pèh-tshiat only came with rice vermicelli soup. Other braised dishes were paired with cehhka-a noodles or braised pork on rice. Each stall stuck to just a few set items on its menu.

Several years later, our family relocated to Tomoncho. It was there, at the entrance of Yongkang Park, that we rediscovered the familiar sight of oo-pèh-tshiat rice vermicelli soup. The vendor's cart boasted a dizzying array of dishes, a testament to Taiwan's burgeoning economic prosperity. The geography, socioeconomic, and cultural characteristics of Taipei City were mirrored in the welcoming diversity of Yongkang Street. Here, you could find rice vermicelli soup, thickened squid soup, danzai noodles, Vietnamese pho, beef noodle soup, plain noodles, Fuzhou noodles, hot pot udon, xiaolongbao (steamed soup dumplings), crab shell pastry, three-treasure rice, and Cantonese congee... All the flavors gathered together like a vibrant world snack expo opening for business every single day.

Back then, oo-pèh-tshiat wasn't a household name yet, but the presentation of braised pork parts had already carved out its unique niche in Taiwan's culinary scene. Everyone knew the dish of assorted pork meats and intestines, prepared simply without elaborate cooking or seasoning. Despite its simplicity, it was culinary art in its purest form. From raising pigs to transforming them into a delectable dish, its natural, exquisite taste was the result of years of dedicated effort by countless professionals.

Consider the tireless labor of pig farmers. In the 1960s, almost every rural household raised pigs. As a child, I spent my winter and summer breaks visiting my grandfather in Taibao, Chiayi County. His home typically had two or three pigs, farming cattle for plowing fields, a whole henhouse of chickens, ducks, geese, and an array of free-roaming cats, dogs, and squirrels. The cow was considered part of the family, while the chickens, ducks, and geese laid eggs and were used for sacrificial offerings during religious worship. Pigs and humans jointly managed the delicate balance at both the top and bottom of the local food chain. When we ate oranges, the

adults would lead me to the pigsty, handing me the fruit while feeding the peels to the pigs. These pigs were raised for a long time and never intended for our consumption. A compost pit collected kitchen scraps, and leftover food was given to the pigs. Typically, the pigs were only sold when they were nearing the end of their lives.

Some families expanded pig farming into a side business. As a side venture, there was no need to fret over the intricacies of feed management. However, transforming it into a full-fledged family enterprise would be a different story. Table scraps alone wouldn't be enough to raise healthy pigs, so efforts would be made in the fields to grow crops like sweet potatoes, corn, and soybeans for their feed. If the scale expanded further, budgeting for purchasing feed would become necessary.

In rural life, survival depended on the whims of the weather, but that doesn't mean farmers and ranchers didn't need good math skills. My grandfather used to say that with each harvest, you had to calculate how much grain to store based on the household's headcount, and how much vegetable seed to collect in advance for the next season. Only the surplus was sold. The household wasn't just comprised of people – every pig, cow, chicken, duck, goose, cat, and dog had to be accounted for.

Once piglets are born, they are raised until weaning and then separated from their mothers, never to see them again in their lifetime. Piglets go through a critical growth phase before reaching puberty, so their nutritional needs are different from those of mature pigs. Professional farms, aiming to raise top-quality pigs, meticulously monitor pig weights and scrutinize the feed and timing. Pigs are intelligent animals capable of recognizing people and voices, much like household pets, though they are extremely timid and easily startled. They are highly sensitive to their environment, including noise, temperature, humidity, ventilation, and crowded conditions. Despite this, they are gentle and omnivorous, which is advantageous for humans who rely on them for meat. With clean and nutritious feed and a good environment, pigs grow and fatten up quickly.

On average, piglets are ready to leave the farm after about one hundred and eighty days. However, some piglets grow faster, while others eat a lot but don't gain as much weight. At that point, it's up to the farm to decide which pigs stay and which ones go. Before leaving the farm, to prevent the pigs from getting carsick and vomiting, they're not given food or water. This fasting period can last anywhere from twelve to twenty-four hours. Pigs recognize who feeds them and who transports them. When they see the feeder, they happily trot over. But when they see the transporter, everyone instantly goes on high alert, huddling together in the farthest corner and staying completely still, trying to hide their healthy bodies to avoid being caught.

Pigs aren't just intelligent; they also display social and even political behaviors. Some take on leadership roles, while others stir up trouble like rioters. Some enjoy playful antics, while some are prone to fights and confrontations. The animal kingdom shows remarkable similarities to human society. Visitors to animal farms witness naive, chubby piglets alongside fully-grown pigs asserting dominance or squabbling. Temperaments vary widely, from mild-mannered to

cantankerous, providing plenty of entertainment. From the moment we're born, what creature, regardless of species, isn't destined to evolve from innocence to cunning, and then march towards decay and mortality? The only difference lies in the timeline.

When the time comes, the selected pigs are rounded up and loaded onto freight trailers. These trailers are large iron cages; some are simply fenced, while others have sunshades, but most are basic affairs. Luxury is scarce because, after each unloading, they must be thoroughly cleaned inside and out to get rid of any trace of odor. As the freight trailers rush to the auction yard, the pigs already know their fate is sealed. They remain silent, resigned to their destiny. In the dawn hours, only the merest whiff of their individuality drifts in the air over the island's network of roads.

Most people are familiar with these trucks loaded with pigs. Even if you've never seen pigs walking around, you've probably caught a glimpse of a pig truck speeding by at some point in your life. The distinctive smell it leaves behind is quite memorable.

When they arrive at the auction, the pigs are usually so weak from hunger that the handlers have to use sticks to guide them along. Some pigs can't handle the stress of traveling on an empty stomach and the intense atmosphere of the auction, and collapse or even die as soon as they enter. To prevent financial loss for the farm, the auctioneers must immediately bleed and process the pigs on the spot. They can't wait until the pigs are completely dead, or they will be forcibly removed for disposal.

Each farm has its own code and number for identification, and so does every pig. The people who act as distributors between the meat sellers and pig farmers are known as pig catchers. They can instantly gauge the quality of a pig walking down the runway, so to speak. Regardless of the pig's size, weight, color, or breed, there will always be buyers with their own reasons for bidding on them. It's often said that there's no pig that can't be sold, and also no price that can't sell. Everyone wants a good pig. A good one has firm muscles and a stable belly when it walks. Weight is also a key indicator. A fully grown pig with the right weight has thick fat, which makes its lean meat and organs tender and flavorful.

The process of transporting and auctioning live pigs is difficult to manage perfectly and often criticized for various shortcomings that are difficult to overcome. And debates will continue to rage over whether fresh pork or frozen pork tastes better. However, when it comes to traditional dishes like oo-pèh-tshiat, the debate is settled. There is indeed a difference between fresh pork and frozen pork.

When the auction ends, the handlers once again load the pigs onto trucks and head to the designated slaughterhouse. Once there, a relentless race to deliver fresh meat begins. Typically, the auction finishes by midday, and by the time the pigs are transported to the slaughterhouse and then to the wholesaler for butchering, it's already midnight. The wholesalers must wield their cleavers non-stop and start delivering the meat to downstream buyers by one or two in the morning.

These downstream buyers include market meat vendors and breakfast vendors specializing in oo-pèh-tshiat. In fact, those preparing for the afternoon or late-night shifts also

need to have their meat and offal ready by noon. While regular office workers are enjoying their deep sleep, a large army of workers is sweating it out, preparing food under the cover of night.

Oo-péh-tshiat might seem like it's just boiled meat, but there is actually a lot of skill involved in its preparation. Should the various cuts be cooked separately or together in one big pot? How long should they be boiled? Until fully cooked, half-cooked, or about seventy to eighty percent done? Each vendor has their own unique method. Customers vote with their feet, and the best oo-péh-tshiat is usually sold out by noon, especially the most sought-after parts like head meat, cheek meat, kidneys, and pork heart.

The name "oo-péh-tshiat" is only used north of the Muddy River. In southern Taiwan, similar dishes are called "*lío-sit-bah*" or "*hiang-tshiâng-sit-bah*". Although the basic forms are similar, the latter two involve more complex preparation processes and are more akin to refined appetizers.

If you want to know the quality of Taiwanese pork, just give oo-péh-tshiat a try. You'll wonder how the various cuts of meat and organs can offer such a wonderfully complex array of flavors despite coming from the same pot. The simplest cooking method, with the most meticulous attention to detail, yields the richest flavor – that comforting and satisfying taste you keep returning to even after trying every elaborate dish out there.

Good food often isn't about what you add, but what you don't. The minimalist aesthetic of oo-péh-tshiat reflects the straightforward, amiable, and honest nature of the Taiwanese people.

Such a popular delight, so irresistibly enchanting. Its appeal may seem somewhat lowbrow, but it deservingly wins hearts and minds. Long live oo-péh-tshiat – may it endure for generations to come.

Part One: The Gifts of a Pig, from Head to Tail.

My First Love – Head Meat

No two plates of head meat are exactly alike.

What you get depends on your luck.

That's what makes eating head meat such a thrilling adventure.

Daylight slid across the frosted glass, forming a triangular edge. Soon, like a Band-Aid being ripped off, the floor-to-ceiling window flipped open from the bottom, flooding the room with light. The sun didn't reach the balcony but fell on the steaming pot at the food stand, bubbling like a hawker's cry.

The noodle stand owner was still absent today. His wife stood at the stove, patting a baby on her back with her left hand while stirring a large pot of broth with her right, her face taut and her lips pursed. Laugh lines hung from the corners of her mouth to her chin. At her feet, next to a

bucket, squatted their five-year-old son, his little red hands soaking in the water with the chives and bean sprouts. The boy spread his fingers wide, swirling his hands left and right in the water. The chives, cut to the same length as the bean sprouts, kept floating to the surface, and he slapped them with his palms. Water splashed onto his face, and he instinctively wiped his cheek and eyes with his arm, scattering the chives and bean sprouts all over the ground. The mother, focused on the broth, didn't notice a thing, oblivious to whether her son was washing the vegetables or playing with them.

Preparation for the broth started at five in the morning. This was the price one must pay for the first pot of rich bone soup each day. Food lovers also paid a price, not just for the first pot of soup, but also for the rare chance to snag the coveted first cuts of head meat.

I never saw a whole pig's head pulled from the pot. It must have been long since chopped up beyond recognition. I would see the owner's wife intently stirring and scooping out chunks of meat I couldn't identify. Later, I learned that the tasty meat she recommended to me was called liver loin. It was different from the more familiar pork belly, but just as delicious.

When I was about ten, we moved from near Qingguang Market to near Dongmen Market, where I first tasted Fuzhou plain noodles from this stall. The stall was right at the alley entrance, visible from our balcony. Sometimes, my sister and I would stand on the balcony and shout, "Vendor, we want sesame paste noodles, liver loin, tofu, wontons, and Fuzhou fish balls in poached egg soup!" The owner's wife would arrange the prepared dishes on a large wooden tray, complete with spoons and chopsticks, and deliver them to our door for cash on delivery. After eating, we'd leave the dishes by the door for the vendor to collect when closing the shop.

We didn't receive this kind of personalized delivery service because we were kids. Street chefs were common at the time, and our neighbors enjoyed them too. Balcony ordering was a scene that usually played out during summer and winter breaks. Our parents were busy, leaving us at home. Since the Yongkang Street vendors didn't set up for breakfast, and we didn't want to go to Dongmen Market, we relied on these Fuzhou noodles for nutrition. And nutritious they were. Meat soup with small wontons, Fuzhou fish balls, and poached egg, paired with fried sauce noodles or sesame paste noodles, plus a plate of small intestines and liver loin kept these two elementary school girls well-fed and healthy in both body and spirit.

In the 1970s, the area around Dongmen Market was surrounded by government buildings, and the food there was quite different from Qingguang Market. Besides Fuzhou plain noodles, you could find satay-flavored plain noodles and aromatic spicy beef noodles. To the right of Dongmen Market's main entrance, there was a dark and narrow alley. Near the entrance of the alley stood a billiards hall, known back then as a "pinball room". A bit further inside, there was an eatery selling rice vermicelli soup. The soup here was different from what you'd find at Qingguang Market. Besides the thickness of the noodles, the version at Dongmen Market was rich with pork lard, while the one at Qingguang Market was lighter and garnished with chopped celery.

The main dishes of the Fuzhou noodle stall at the entrance to the residential alley in Tomoncho were pork lard lo-mein, sesame paste noodles, and fried sauce noodles. This was my first encounter with sesame paste noodles and fried sauce noodles. Like a newly hatched duckling

imprinting on the first face it sees as its mother, I inexplicably developed this kind of “imprint” attachment to these two noodle dishes. From then on, I’ve believed that all fried sauce noodles and sesame paste noodles in the world must look like this and should taste this way. Even if they don’t, I remain convinced that this stall made them best.

The rice vermicelli soup stall at Qingguang Market only came out in the late afternoons, selling simple items like tofu, white radish, and large intestines as side dishes. After moving to Dongmen Market, I initially thought only rice vermicelli soup vendors sold large intestines. To my surprise, the Fuzhou noodle stall offered them too. Moreover, their soup pot yielded all sorts of pork cuts, the most unique being pig gum meat. I thought gum meat was weird enough; its unmistakable shape kept me from trying it for decades. But, lo and behold, there was something even more unusual than gum meat. The rarest of all, I couldn’t even get my hands on it. All I could do was stare longingly at that little plate tucked away in the corner of the glass case. When asked about it, the owner’s wife would only give vague answers, and if pressed, she’d enthusiastically recommend a plate of pork skin or bladder instead.

So, what was it, exactly? The owner’s wife only told me that it had to be pre-ordered.

But I could never successfully pre-order it because she always said someone else had already claimed it. Several times, I deliberately lingered at the stall, first ordering a bowl of sesame paste noodles, then a bowl of wonton soup. After fishing out all the wontons, I’d ask for a fried egg and some Fuzhou fish balls. Those fish balls were scorching hot, giving me another excuse to eat slowly. All this just to see who on earth was snagging that elusive dish I’d been missing.

Finally, one day, the person who pre-ordered that cut of meat showed up. Oddly, it was a disheveled woman. As soon as she sat down, without even saying a word, the owner’s wife, all smiles, immediately brought out that plate of meat and said, “I saved this especially for you.” The woman responded warmly, “Oh, you’re so kind! Thank you! You shouldn’t have...” They laughed, their voices growing louder, while my eyes grew wider.

From age eleven to thirty-seven, for twenty-seven years, I never managed to snag that plate of meat, no matter how long I lingered at the stall or how much liver loin, tofu, and seaweed I ate. People are funny that way – the more unattainable something is, the more irrationally obsessed we become, convinced that nothing else will satisfy our hearts.

The Fuzhou-born owner only showed up occasionally at first. He was the real chef, while his wife and kids were the assistants, responsible for washing dishes and vegetables, not even allowed to cut the side dishes. Besides washing dishes and vegetables, the wife also bore the owner seven or eight children, all of whom helped at the stand at some point. The baby on the wife’s back was just born when we heard the owner had gone back to Fuzhou to visit relatives. He made many such trips, each time staying longer and returning to Taiwan for shorter periods of time, until finally, his returns shortened to a full stop. The smile on his wife’s face grew less and less frequent until it too came to a full stop.