

Mrs. Song's Fish Soup



Mrs. Song was expert at cooking fish soup. She lived in Bianjing (today's Kaifeng in Henan Province), capital of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127). After the Northern Song collapsed following the invasion of the Nuchen people, and the ensuing Han regime, the Southern Song (1127-1279), moved its capital to Lin'an in Zhejiang Province, Mrs. Song and her family migrated with other patriotic citizens to the south, and settled down by the West Lake in Hangzhou to establish her own fish soup stall.

One day, Emperor Zhao Gou took a boat trip on the West Lake. The eunuch accompanying him heard the cries of someone selling fish soup in a northern dialect, and soon recognized the chef Mrs. Song. It was noon and the emperor was hungry, so the eunuch suggested they stop by the fish soup stall.

Mrs. Song saw the luxurious ship approaching and

guessed her customers must be royalty. She cooked a fresh batch of fish soup and served it to all aboard. She told the emperor that she was from Bianjing and had moved to follow the royal family. On hearing this, the emperor was moved and relieved – his reign had hope; even ordinary folk supported him. He was so happy to meet a person from his hometown and enjoyed the fish soup. After a hearty meal and chat he gave Mrs. Song a generous gratuity of 100 taels of silver.

News of the emperor's fondness for Mrs. Song's fish soup soon spread and people rushed to try it. From then on, the dish became famous and Mrs. Song opened a bigger restaurant. Her fish soup has since become a feature delicacy of Hangzhou.

Here's how to make it.

1. Skin 100 grams of fish and chop it into small cubes. Boil with water, ginger and ground pepper.
2. Add slices of ham, mushroom and some starch to the broth. Then add a beaten egg.
3. Add slices of red pepper, cucumber and a pinch of salt and pepper.

Note: Mandarin fish or weever fish are preferred as they don't have many bones. Steam the fish then remove the bones. When adding starch to the broth, remove the pot from the heat to ensure the starch dissolves completely without leaving lumps. Add the other ingredients one by one. Stir the soup while slowly pouring in the beaten egg. This will allow the egg to solidify into pieces in the soup, which adds to the flavor and look of the dish.