

Crispy Pork Belly Bahn Mi

While travelling through Vietnam last year, we took it upon ourselves to try the traditional, Vietnamese street food Bahn Mi, pretty much every chance we got. The difference between each region was quite astonishing and I realised that there really are no hard and fast rules, you just need the classic French style pate, sharp pickled carrot, cucumber and aromatic herbs along with a fresh, Vietnamese style, long roll to call it a Bahn Mi. In various regions the meat differed greatly but my favourite was the pork belly with crackling. After much deliberation I decided to try my version on some friends of ours who are somewhat Bahn Mi experts. Not only in Vietnam but also at home they are on a constant quest to find the best so I was a tad nervous about the result and the critiquing that would undoubtedly be voiced and I spent quite a long time researching how to get the crispiest pork etc.

I was in a bit of a flap with all of the pressure I had put myself under so after taking a deep breath and a big slug of wine, I set about doing what I do best. Cooking. They loved it.

Prep time: 30 Minutes
\$\$ Medium Budget

Cooking time: 2.5 Hours

Serves 4

1kg of boneless pork belly, scored at 0.5cm intervals (get your butcher to do this if you like)

1 tsp of Chinese 5 Spice

2 tsp of sea salt

2 tbs of olive oil

4 Vietnamese long rolls or baguettes

4 tbs of store bought chicken liver pate

1 Lebanese cucumber, thinly sliced

2 large carrots, finely julienned or shredded using a julienne peeler

1/4 cup of rice wine vinegar

1 tbs of caster sugar

2 red chillies, finely sliced

1 cup of coriander leaves

1/2 cup of mint leaves

1/4 cup of Vietnamese mint leaves (optional)

1/4 cup of Thai basil (optional)

2 spring onions, green part only, thinly sliced diagonally

Kewpie mayonnaise and Sriracha Chilli sauce to serve (optional but darn good)

I have a combined oven and grill which works really well for this recipe. If your grill and oven are separate, after grilling the pork skin, give the pork a little longer in the oven to ensure that the meat has cooked for long enough and keep a really good eye on the crackling to ensure it doesn't burn.

Preheat the oven & grill to 220°C.

For really good crackling, pat the pork skin with paper towel to dry it off and then pop it in the fridge for an hour or so, uncovered. This will really dry the skin out but it is not essential.

Once you have dried the pork, place it on a rack over an oven tray and drizzle over the oil. Combine the Chinese 5 Spice and sea salt and rub it between your fingers to break down any large clumps of salt. Use your hands to sprinkle it over the pork and then really massage it in to the skin. Bake the pork in the oven, on a lower shelf for 20-30 minutes or until golden and crispy. Keep an eye on it as you don't want it to burn. Once crispy, pour enough water in to cover the base of the pan and reduce the heat to 170°C and turn it to fan forced with the grill off, cooking for a further 2 hours.

Check periodically that there is still water in the tray and keep it topped up. This will ensure melt in your mouth pork belly. After 2 hours, remove from the oven and allow to rest, uncovered (so the skin stays crispy) for approximately 10 minutes.

While the pork is cooking, in a small bowl combine the rice wine vinegar and sugar. Stir until the sugar dissolves and then add the shredded carrot.

Give it a little toss and then place in the fridge until you assemble the Bahn Mi.

In another small bowl, combine the herbs and spring onion. Cover with ice

cold water and toss to combine. Drain just before serving.

Remove the crackling from the pork and use kitchen shears (or scissors) to cut the crackling. Slice the pork meat at about 1cm intervals.

To assemble, slice the rolls along the top and spread apart. Spread a good amount of pate on one side and line the other side with cucumber slices.

Divide the pork meat among the rolls and top with the carrot pickle and a nice pile of the fresh herbs. Garnish with chilli slices, slivers of pork crackling and a drizzle of Kewpie mayo and sriracha sauce.

If you have leftover Vietnamese mint, you may want to try this delicious recipe!:

Vietnamese 'Shaking' Beef