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The Wisdom of the Chinese Kitchen by Grace Young

Ginkgo Nut Porridge

Bock Guo Foo Jook Jook

Of the three porridge, or *jook*, recipes offered in this book, this is the most therapeutic. It is a congee like the others you've read about, but prepared with ginkgo nuts (*bock guo*), dried bean curd sticks (*foo jook*), and Chinese dried scallops (*gawn yu chee*). The combination is plain by Western standards, but the Chinese appreciate the purity and delicacy of flavor. Whenever I fly home, my parents have a big pot on the stove (about four times the amount of this recipe) so that, the moment I arrive, we can have this as a late-night snack (*siu ye*). They feel it helps to restore the body after the damaging effects of flying. Baba likes to place a few thin slices of raw beef or fish with finely shredded ginger on the bottom of the bowl before ladling on the piping-hot porridge, but it is also eaten plain.

My parents can make this year-round because ginkgo nuts are almost always available in San Francisco. In New York, I am only able to make this when they are in season, from December until April. The nuts are said to be beneficial for relieving coughs and reducing phlegm. Ginkgo biloba, which is reputed to be good for memory functions, is from the ginkgo leaves and not the nuts.

½ cup long grain rice
¼ teaspoon vegetable oil
½ teaspoon salt
1 stick dried bean curd (*foo jook*)
¼ cup unshelled ginkgo nuts (*bock guo*), about 1 ½ ounces
¼ cup Chinese dried scallops (*gawn yu chee*)
4 ounces flank steak, well trimmed, optional
2 tablespoons finely shredded ginger, optional

Wash the rice in several changes of cold water. Drain the rice and soak overnight in 1 quart cold water with oil and salt.

In a 1½-quart saucepan, bring 3 cups cold water to a boil over high heat. Break up the bean curd sticks into 2-inch pieces, and add them to the boiling water. Cook, turning the pieces, 1 to 2 minutes, or until almost ivory colored and softened. Drain and rinse under cold water.

Meanwhile, crack the ginkgo nuts lightly with a hammer, tapping on the opening and removing the shells. In a small saucepan, bring about 1 cup water to a boil over high heat. Blanch the shelled ginkgo nuts for about 1 minute. Drain, rinse under cold water, and remove the skins.

Place the rice and soaking water in a large pot. Add the ginkgo nuts and blanched bean curd sticks, and bring to a boil over high heat. Cover, reduce heat to low, and simmer 2 hours, stirring occasionally, until the rice has "flowered" (the rice grains will swell and the ends will look blossomed out).

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Meanwhile, in a small bowl, soak the dried scallops in $\frac{1}{2}$ cup cold water for 2 hours, or until softened. Drain, reserving the scallop liquid. Remove and discard the small hard knob from the side of the scallops.

Add the scallops and reserved soaking liquid to the rice in the saucepan, and continue simmering 1 hour, or until scallops are tender and porridge is almost smooth. Add a little salt to taste. Serve piping hot.

If desired, serve with beef and ginger. Halve the flank steak with the grain into 2 strips. Cut each strip across the grain into scant $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-thick slices. Divide the slices and ginger among large soup bowls. Bring porridge to a boil over medium heat. Ladle hot porridge over beef and serve immediately. The hot porridge will cook the beef to the medium—rare stage.

Serves 4 to 6 as part of a multicourse meal.