

# THE CROWN PRINCE OF GUA BAO:

## An Interview with Eddie Huang of Baohaus

by Sara Camp Arnold



AT THE FORK-TENDER AGE of twenty-seven, Eddie Huang has established himself as the crown prince of gua bao, Taiwanese steamed bun sandwiches. Filled with pork belly, steak, or tofu, “red-cooked” in a Mandarin style, Huang garnishes bao with cilantro and peanuts, and sells them at Baohaus, his shotgun counter-service restaurant on New York City’s Lower East Side.

The son of Taiwanese immigrants, Huang grew up in Northern Virginia and Central Florida. In advance of the 13<sup>th</sup> Southern Foodways Symposium, where he will be one of the guest chefs, we asked him a few questions.

1. How did you get into cooking?

I just followed my mom around the kitchen, even at two or three years old, copying what she did. When I got older, she’d call me to start recipes that she’d come home and finish. It wasn’t until college that I got to cook for myself and strayed from her recipes.

2. You offer boiled peanuts on the menu at Baohaus; to what extent does your Southern upbringing influence your cuisine?

Definitely the flavors. I have a heavier hand than most Chinese chefs, but Taiwanese cooks have an island flavor profile that’s heavy with pork fat, dried shrimp, and bamboo—and that really fits what I learned down South. Outside Taiwanese and Chinese food, my passion is barbecue, hands down. When I moved to New York, I brought my vertical Brinkman smoker with me and smoked turkey legs on my apartment balcony. But people downstairs started heckling me, saying I was country, so I stopped!

3. What do you love most about cooking and running a restaurant? What is the hardest part?

My favorite part of cooking is how one recipe comes out so many different ways. My brother and I were just joking that everyone at Baohaus follows the same recipes, but no matter what, it tastes different. It’s a strange phenomenon; everyone just has a different flavor they bring. I don’t know how it happens, but it does. I love seeing how things will come out—it’s always surprising.

The hardest part, for me, is not responding to bloggers, “Yelpers,” etc. They flat-out lie a lot, compare apples to oranges, and really speak without knowing anything about what happens at

a restaurant. Especially with Taiwanese/Chinese food, people are misinformed... People are constantly comparing gua baoto char siu bao[Cantonese pork buns], which are entirely different items. I just wish people would take the time to explore.

4. If you weren't cooking, what do you think you would be doing?

Well, I was doing stand-up comedy until I decided to open the restaurant. I've always been opinionated. Either comedy or journalism—I did a lot of music and sports writing, too.

5. How do gua bao compare to Southern-style barbecue sandwiches?

They compare favorably, especially mine. I use cherry cola to braise my pork and beef, so that's something that people like doing down South, too. Southern food and Taiwanese food have a similarity in that both cuisines understand how to introduce sugar into savory dishes without a hitch.

6. You've been known to marinate your beef in sorghum liquor. Is this a Taiwanese or a Southern influence?

This is something I just came up with myself after making bourbon barbecue sauce. I saw the technique where people flambé whiskey for bourbon barbecue sauces and transferred the technique to "red cooking," where no one is doing that.

7. Tell us about your next project, Xiao Ye, opening in June, also in Manhattan.

Xiao Ye is inspired by night markets and late-night food in Taiwan. The atmosphere will be raucous, the food is meant to be eaten in small plates, shared, and there's a lot of exploration. I give people a lot of variety to choose from, and they build their own crazy late-night meal.

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