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Best Guess at Di Shui Dong Cumin Ribs
(滴水洞 孜然排骨)

James Feldkamp, a beer buddy from Shanghai, introduced me and a couple of friends to Cumin Ribs and Di Shui Dong. It’s not fancy, but the place is good, the beer selection was surprisingly good, and the Cumin Ribs were extraordinary. It’s not well known, but it’s not exactly unheard of either, and searching online for the rib recipe led to over 1,600 alternatives.

After consulting all of my Chinese colleagues with any connection to Shanghai, and after consulting all the web recipes I could find for Hunan ribs, Di Shui Dong ribs, Cumin Ribs, or Shanghai ribs, this is the best I could come up with. It appears that there is, not surprisingly, a dry rub that goes on a day or two before, possibly a wet rub or a sauce that follows, and then a coarse rub that goes on just before serving. The best source for the recipe appears to be JSOnline, though there is no authoritative source for this recipe either. It does seem to represent the closest I could find to consensus on the ingredients.

But although there is some agreement on the principal spices, there is virtually no agreement on preparation. Parboiled, then grilled? Parboiled, then wok fried? Slow grilled without par boiling? And there is no agreement on whether or not the dry rub and the wet rub should be combined, or whether the wet rub is actually a sauce.

After consultation with my expert on making Chinese cooking work in the US, who is also my expert advisor on all things relating to barbecuing, smoking, and grilling, I’ve decided upon the following:

The preparation: (1) Dry rub two days in advance. (2) No parboiling. Since I do love the taste of smoke, I will slow smoke the ribs over a sweet wood, probably apple, at a low temperature of about 175°, which should accomplish most of what I would hope to accomplish with parboiling without diluting the flavor of the meat or the initial dry rub. (3) No wet rub. No glaze. No sauce. I don’t remember anything about the Di Shui Dong Cumin Ribs that suggested that they had been coated with a thick sauce at any time in their preparation. (4) But, yeah, a mop sauce, a thin, flavorful wetness applied during smoking to help achieve the parboiled tenderness without parboiling. Applied during 3 hours of slow smoking. (5) No final grilling because there is no sweet sauce to caramelize. (6) The all-important coarse dry rub, applied just before serving. I’m virtually certain that this is the correct recipe, although the web sources omit the green onions. There was a coarse green something in the thick coating, and I think that green onions would be about right. Can’t do any harm.

And now James and his Chinese wife are coming to dinner. I had two days to get ready. I bought 3 racks of ribs, typed up the first dry rub recipe to lock it in so that I knew what to buy, and prepared an intensely spiced rub based on cumin and coriander. I provided some tien tsin kick, but left the red peppers out of the rub for Jean’s ribs, and put the ribs in the fridge to sit for a couple of days.

The recipes follow. When I made them I actually doubled the quantities in the dry rub to cover three racks of spareribs. Not baby backs, because I don’t think they used baby backs at Di Shui Dong.
James and his wife are arriving today! I was so excited the night before that I really
could not sleep. I kept waking up, wondering when to start the ribs, wondering how
long to smoke them and how long to let them rest before starting the final coarse dry
rub, wondering whether to thicken the mop sauce and turn it into a more traditional
barbecue sauce, wondering whether to add coarsely chopped scallions to the final rub.
I could not wait to get started! I took the ribs out of the fridge to return to room
temperature, and then got ready to get to work.

First I made the sauce. I remembered the master class I got in using my Shun knives —
actually the scene in Ratatouille in which Colette ridicules Linguini for his slow misuse
of his knives. I grated, chopped, sautéed, caramelized, stirred, and made a tasty sweet
and sour tamarind sauce.

Next I heated up the smoker to a
relatively low 180°, got it ready
with apple wood smoke, and
started the cooking. I let the
cooking go on for hours, since the
ribs never did appear to dry out.
After two hours to set the spices I
thickened the wet mop and ap-
plied it as a barbecue sauce. I
wanted to give the ribs some
color, and I figured that the car-
amelized sugar and dark purple
tamarind paste would serve well.
Indeed, they did, and the color
with the darkened sauce is even
gerrier.
Yeah, I like the ways these are turning out. I like the smoke. I always like the smoke. And I like the dark caramel and tamarind color on the finished ribs.

Five hours. That should be enough to make them tender enough to fall apart.

Just a little more documentation. They look happy enough, resting on a cutting board. They look lovely waiting for the final coarse dry rub. And they look exactly as I remember, sitting on a platter, waiting to be served.
The rest of the menu was a pretty typical late June, early July American barbecue. Some nibbles, then corn, tomatoes with fresh basil and mozzarella, ribs, and fruit for dessert. And beer. A great deal of beer.

James and his wife Jessie were polite enough to claim the recipe worked. Jean was pleased enough; at least, she was cheerful about the ribs and about her contribution to the dinner party and the clean up afterwards.

The worst part, breaking down and scrubbing the Bradley, is waiting for me now.

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1 Actually, I did consider having one of my Chinese coauthor, a director at one of the appropriate ministries charged with food quality inspection, subpoena the recipe, but I concluded that would be cheating.

2 That would be my brother, Dr. Peter Clemons, a great resource for Chinese cooking, barbecuing, or cooking in general.