'RAFUTĒ': OKINAWAN SLOW-STEWED PORK-BELLY IN SWEET-SALTY SAUCE

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The Okinawan islands have a fascinating and diverse food tradition that has been shaped by their ancient indigenous culture, the long history of exchange with mainland Japan, China and Southeast Asia, and the recent North American influences. The Okinawan cuisine is the only Japanese cuisine in which red meat, specifically pork, traditionally features in the staple diet—a manifestation of the Chinese and Southeast Asian influences. In an island environment with limited land and natural resources, pigs have been revered and every part of the animal is used—as the local saying goes, 'everything except the squeals of a pig'!

'Rafutē' is a celebrated Okinawan dish of pork belly (or ribs) dating back to the times of the Ryūkyū Kingdom. Unlike in most other cuisines, Okinawans pre-boil the pork belly before cooking to leach out excess fat. In addition, rafutē traditionally represented a method of preserving the pork belly, and was consumed over many days in small quantities as part of a diverse, vegetable-dominated diet. This may explain the apparent paradox of the Okinawan cuisine: the only meat-based food tradition in Japan, yet one of the healthiest diets on the planet. The classic rafutē is flavoured with soy sauce, awamori (Okinawan shochū) and sugar. The variant presented here adds miso which has a tenderising effect, as well as lending additional umami flavour to the dish. The result is a spectacularly tender and deeply flavoured pork belly—enjoy!

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INGREDIENTS

• Pork belly block, boneless and skin on	600–700 g
• Konbu–katsuo or konbu dashi liquid (see separate recipe on how to make this)	750–800 ml (c. 3 to 3½ cups)
• White miso	100 g (c. 1/3 cup)
• Awamori (Okinawan rice shochū; can be substituted with shochū or vodka)	1 to 1 ½ cups (½ to ¾ cup if using vodka)
• Sugar	3 to 4 level tablespoons, or to taste
• Soy sauce (or tamari)	2 to 3 level tablespoons, or to taste
• Ginger root, minced or finely chopped	2 to 3 level teaspoons

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Quickly rinse the pork belly block with freshly boiled water, then place in a saucepan, cover with plenty of water, and boil on medium–high heat for c. 1 hour. From time to time, skim and discard the froth or scum that floats to the surface.

2. Remove the boiled pork belly block from the water (the boiling water can be retained for use as soup stock; see the note at the end), and allow to cool for handling.

3. Cut the pork belly into slices c. 2 cm thick and c. 5 cm wide.

4. Combine the pork belly slices, about three-quarters of the dashi liquid, awamori (or shochu/vodka), and ginger, and gently boil uncovered for c. 10 minutes on medium–high heat. Skim any froth or scum that floats to the surface.

5. Dissolve miso in the remaining dashi liquid and add to the saucepan, together with sugar and soy sauce (or tamari). Lower the heat to low, cover with a lid, and simmer gently for at least 1 hour until very tender.

6. Remove from the heat, and allow to stand covered for c. 30 minutes before serving. If desired, top with chopped parsley or other green herbs, finely julienned ginger root or yuzu (or lemon/lime) peel, shichimi (Japanese seven-spice chilli powder), or even wasabi. Enjoy with steamed rice and vegetable accompaniments.

7. Rafutē can be kept in the refrigerator for at least a week. As with most stewed dishes, the flavour tends to improve over time.

NOTE: The boiling water (broth) from Step 1 can be used as a stock for ramen broth, stews and stir-fries, as has traditionally been done in Okinawa. To remove the fat and undesirable aromas, transfer the broth to a bowl and place in the fridge overnight. The solidified fat (together with the undesirable aromas) can simply be skimmed off with a spoon. Traditionally, in the spirit of Okinawan frugality, this fat is also 'recycled' for frying—however, it can have a strong aroma that some may find unappetising.