Pearl Balls

As you might guess from the name, these are plump little meat balls with a special coating of glutinous rice. During steaming, the rice becomes translucent and pearl-like. Long-grain rice won't work as a substitute.

This recipe makes two batches of meatballs. If you don't have a tiered bamboo steamer which allows you to cook two layers at the same time, you can easily improvise steaming equipment. Support round cake racks 1 inch above boiling water in frying pans by resting the racks on clean, empty tuna cans with both ends opened.

⅔ cup glutinous rice
4 medium-size dried mushrooms
1 pound boneless lean pork, finely chopped or ground
¼ cup water chestnuts, finely chopped
1 whole green onion, finely chopped
1 egg
1 teaspoon *each* salt, cornstarch, and dry sherry
½ teaspoon grated fresh ginger
½ teaspoon crushed Szechwan peppercorns or ¼ teaspoon white pepper
½ teaspoon sugar
1 tablespoon soy sauce

Cover rice with cold water, let stand for 2 hours, then drain and spread on a plate. Cover mushrooms with warm water, let stand for 30 minutes, then drain. Cut off and discard stems; squeeze mushrooms dry and finely chop.

In a bowl, add mushrooms to pork along with water chestnuts and onion. Beat egg with salt, cornstarch, sherry, ginger, pepper, sugar, and soy. Add to meat and mix lightly.

With wet hands, roll meat mixture, 2 tablespoons at a time, into walnut-size balls. Roll each ball in glutinous rice to coat completely. Arrange balls (be sure they don't touch each other) on 2 heatproof plates that will fit inside your steamer. If done ahead, cover and refrigerate for as long as 8 hours.

Pearl Balls (cont'd.)

Place plates on racks over boiling water. Drape a piece of wax paper over each plate. Cover steamer and cook, adding water as necessary to bottom of steamer, for 45 minutes or until meat is no longer pink. Makes 4 servings.