Sauces / Vietnam

Nuoc Cham

Vietnam's essential dipping sauce — a balance of fish sauce, lime, sugar, garlic, and chiles that is simultaneously salty, sour, sweet, and pungent, the condiment that appears at nearly every Vietnamese table.

Time 10 min **Servings** 4

What you'll need.

- ☐ 90 ml Warm water
- ☐ 60 ml Fish sauce (good-quality, 40+ protein)
- ☐ 2 cloves Garlic cloves, minced to a fine paste
- ☐ 40 g Carrot, finely julienned (optional)
- ☐ 30 g Granulated sugar
- ☐ 45 ml Fresh lime juice
- ☐ 2 chiles Bird's eye chiles, thinly sliced

Let's make it.

01 Combine the warm water and sugar in a bowl or mortar. Stir vigorously for 1-2 minutes until every granule of sugar has dissolved and the water is completely clear. The water should be warm — around 50-60°C — not hot, which would drive off aroma, and not cold, which leaves the sugar undissolved and the sauce grainy.

02 Add the fish sauce, then the lime juice to the sugar water. Stir gently to combine. Taste immediately and assess the balance using the classic Vietnamese ratio: equal parts salt, sour, and sweet on the palate, in that order of arrival, finishing clean. The fish sauce should not smell raw or aggressive — it should be oceanic, savory, and rounded. Adjust at this stage: more fish sauce for salt and umami, more lime for acidity, more sugar syrup for sweetness.

03 Mince the garlic to a very fine paste — almost a puree — by rocking the knife across the cloves and then using the flat of the blade to crush and smear them against the cutting board with salt. For the chiles, slice them into thin rounds; leave the seeds in for full heat. If you prefer less heat, slice the chiles lengthwise first and scrape out the seeds before slicing into rounds.

04 Stir the garlic paste and chile rounds directly into the base sauce. Let the mixture sit for at least 5 minutes before tasting again — the garlic needs time to lose its sharpest raw edge and infuse its sweetness into the liquid. Do not skip this rest; raw garlic immediately added and immediately tasted will seem too aggressive and cause you to under-garlic the sauce.

05 Add the julienned carrot to the sauce if using — this is the do chua version common in central Vietnam, and it adds crunch and color, not just garnish. The carrot should be cut into threads no thicker than a matchstick. Serve immediately or chill up to 3 days (the carrot will soften over time; add fresh carrot to order if serving multiple days). Makes about 200ml of finished sauce.

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Servings are an estimate; check quantities in the source recipe.
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