Sides / Thailand

Green Papaya Salad (Som Tam)

A study in controlled violence — green papaya, bird's eye chilies, garlic, lime, fish sauce, and palm sugar pounded in a clay mortar until the papaya weeps its juices into the dressing, creating a salad that is simultaneously crunchy, sour, salty, hot, and subtly sweet. Born in the rice paddies of Isan, eaten everywhere in Thailand.

Time 20 min **Servings** 4

What you'll need.

- ☐ 4 parts Green (unripe) papaya, peeled and julienned (about 2 cups)
- ☐ 1 parts Bird's eye chilies (prik kee noo), 2–5 depending on heat preference
- ☐ 0.5 parts Garlic cloves, peeled
- ☐ 1 parts Fish sauce (or soy sauce for vegan version)
- ☐ 1.5 parts Fresh lime juice (from 2 limes)
- ☐ 0.5 parts Palm sugar, grated
- ☐ 0.5 parts Dried shrimp (kung haeng), small
- ☐ 1 parts Roasted peanuts, roughly crushed
- ☐ 1 parts Cherry tomatoes, halved (or 1 Roma tomato, quartered)
- ☐ 0.5 parts Long beans (tua fak yao), cut in 5 cm pieces (optional, traditional)

Let's make it.

01 Place the bird's eye chilies and garlic in the mortar. Pound with decisive, rhythmic strokes until they are roughly broken — not a paste, but crushed and fragrant. The goal here is not smoothness but bruising: you want the cell walls ruptured so their oils bleed into the dressing. This takes 30–60 seconds of firm pounding. The garlic should be in irregular pieces, the chilies split and releasing seeds. The heat you see here is proportional to the number of chilies — taste a tiny piece before committing.

02 Add the palm sugar and dried shrimp to the mortar. Continue pounding, this time more gently — you are trying to dissolve the palm sugar into the chili-garlic juices and break the dried shrimp into small pieces, not pulverize everything further. Pound for 30 seconds, then add the lime juice and fish sauce. Stir to combine with the pestle rather than pounding. Taste the raw dressing: it should be aggressively seasoned — very sour, very salty, visibly spicy. It will seem over-seasoned until the papaya absorbs it.

03 Add the cherry tomatoes and long bean pieces to the mortar. Use the pestle to lightly bruise them — you want the tomatoes to burst and release their juice into the dressing, and the beans to be lightly crushed to absorb flavor, not turned into mush. 3–4 firm presses on each tomato is sufficient. Use a large spoon or spatula to fold the released tomato juices into the dressing. The mortar should now be a fragrant pool of intensely seasoned dressing with tomato, bean, and shrimp pieces.

04 Add the julienned green papaya to the mortar in batches. Using a combination of the pestle and a large spoon, toss and lightly pound the papaya — you want to bruise it enough to absorb the dressing without turning it limp or breaking the shreds. Add the remaining lime juice and fish sauce, fold to combine. Add more lime juice, fish sauce, or palm sugar to calibrate: the best som tam is loud and assertive on all three axes. Pile onto a plate or serve directly from the mortar. Scatter crushed peanuts over the top immediately before serving. Serve with sticky rice.

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