Sides / Thailand

Som Tum (Thai Green Papaya Salad)

Shredded raw papaya pounded with garlic and chili in a mortar, then tossed with lime, fish sauce, palm sugar, and dried shrimp — sour-hot-sweet-salty in such precise balance that each component disappears into a single electrifying punch.

Time 25 min **Servings** 4

What you'll need.

- ☐ 300 g Green (unripe) papaya, peeled and shredded
- ☐ 6 g Fresh Thai bird's eye chilis
- ☐ 15 g Palm sugar (or light brown sugar)
- ☐ 20 g Dried shrimp
- ☐ 60 g Long beans (yard-long), cut into 3cm pieces
- ☐ 10 g Garlic cloves
- ☐ 30 ml Fish sauce
- ☐ 45 ml Fresh lime juice
- ☐ 100 g Cherry tomatoes, halved
- ☐ 30 g Roasted peanuts, roughly crushed

Let's make it.

01 In a large granite mortar and pestle, add the garlic cloves and whole bird's eye chilis. Pound until they are bruised and broken — not a paste, but no longer whole. This releases the allicin in the garlic and the capsaicin oils in the chili without making them disappear into a paste. In som tum, you want visible shards of garlic and chili throughout, not a homogenous sauce. The technique is to pound and tumble, not grind.

02 Add the dried shrimp to the mortar and pound briefly to break them up. Add the shredded papaya and the long bean pieces. Now use a combined pound-and-toss technique: pound gently with the pestle while using a large spoon to toss the mixture. The goal is to bruise the papaya strands so they absorb the dressing, not to mash them. You want the papaya strands to remain intact but softened and pliable from the pounding. Add the halved cherry tomatoes and give them 2–3 gentle pounds to lightly crush them so they release their juice.

03 Add the palm sugar, fish sauce, and lime juice to the mortar. Toss and lightly pound everything together to combine. Taste constantly — som tum is about precision balance between the four flavors: sour (lime), salty (fish sauce), sweet (sugar), and umami-hot (chili + fish sauce). Adjust one element at a time: more lime for brightness, more fish sauce for depth and salt, more sugar to soften if too harsh. No two batches are identical — the lime juice and papaya's natural acidity vary. The finished salad should be aggressively seasoned by Western standards — this is intentional.

04 Transfer the som tum to a plate using tongs, keeping the papaya strands intact and arranged loosely. Pour any remaining dressing from the mortar over the salad. Scatter the crushed roasted peanuts over the top. Serve immediately alongside sticky rice. Som tum does not hold — the salt and acid will continue to wilt the papaya and the salad will be soggy within 30 minutes. Make and eat.

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