



Adventures in Thai Cooking & Travel

Roasted Chilli Paste

(*Nahm Prik Pow*)

A recipe of Kasma Loha-unchit

Copyright © 2000

One of the most commonly used seafood-based chilli pastes in Thai cooking is *nahm prik pow*, or literally “roasted chilli paste.” It is most frequently made with dried shrimp and *gkabpi* shrimp paste, but there are also versions made with dried fish instead of shrimp.

In this paste, a ground-up mixture of roasted and fried ingredients, including plenty of dried red hot chillies, dried shrimp or dried fish, shrimp paste, garlic and shallots, is seasoned with fish sauce, tamarind and palm sugar and cooked together in oil into a thick, well-blended paste with a very dark, burnt red color. Against a fragrant backdrop of roasted flavors, the paste is hot and shrimpy, as well as sweet and tangy, complimenting seafood dishes especially well.

Nahm prik pow is used to flavor soups, including the popular hot-and-sour prawn soup; stir-fries with seafood, meats or vegetables; noodle dishes; dipping sauces and dressings for salads. Its sweetness also makes it a likable ready-to-use spread to put on toast, crackers or shrimp chips for a quick snack.

Recipe

Ingredients:

- 1 1/2 cup thinly sliced shallots (about 8-10 heads)
- 1 cup thinly sliced garlic (about 30-40 cloves, or 3-4 heads)
- 3/4 cup peanut oil
- 25-30 dried red chillies (or 1/2 - 3/4 cup)
- 1/4 tsp. salt
- 1/2 cup dried shrimp
- 1 1/2 Tbs. shrimp paste (*gkabpi*)
- Small piece of banana leaf or aluminum foil
- 2 1/2 - 3 Tbs. tamarind juice the consistency of fruit concentrate
- 1-2 Tbs. fish sauce (*nahm bplah*), to taste
- 1/3 - 1/2 cup palm sugar, to taste
- 2 Tbs. water

Spread the sliced shallots and garlic in a single layer on a platter or cookie sheet and allow to dry out for several hours or a day in a well-ventilated room. To hasten the drying process, place under an electric fan, in the sun, in a slightly warm oven, or in a dehydrator.

When sufficiently dried, fry the shallots in the peanut oil in a wok over medium heat, stirring occasionally until they turn golden. Continue to fry, stirring constantly until the pieces evenly turn a rich brown color. Strain from oil with a fine wire-mesh skimmer. Add the dried garlic to the oil and fry, stirring frequently until golden brown. Strain from oil and drain. Leave oil in wok for later use.



In a dry cast iron pan, roast the dried red chillies with the salt over medium heat, stirring frequently until they are dark red in color. (Salt reduces chilli fumes.) Remove from pan, wipe pan clean and roast the dried shrimp, stirring frequently until they are fragrant and lightly browned. Let both chillies and dried shrimp cool before grinding to a fine powder in a clean coffee grinder or spice mill.

Wrap the shrimp paste in a small piece of banana leaf or aluminum foil and roast for a few minutes directly in the flame of a gas burner, holding the packet with a pair of tongs (or place directly on a hot electric coil). Turn frequently until the leaf is well charred and the aroma of the shrimp paste strongly comes through. Let cool.

When the fried garlic and shallots have cooled, grind each separately in a food processor or clean coffee grinder. Transfer to a heavy stone mortar and pound each by itself until completely reduced. Then combine the two with the ground chillies and dried shrimp.

Mix well and pound together (in two or three batches if your mortar is small) until all the ingredients are of one texture. Cut the roasted shrimp paste into small chunks and add to the mixture. Continue to pound until well blended.

Combine 2 1/2 tablespoons tamarind juice, 1 tablespoon fish sauce, 1/3 cup palm sugar and 2 tablespoons water in a small dish and set aside. Reheat the wok with the remaining oil. Add the chilli mixture and fry over low to medium heat until fragrant. Stir in the seasoning mixture. Reduce heat to lowest setting and slowly “roast” the mixture, with frequent stirring, until the flavors have become fully integrated and the mixture turned a dark, burnt red color and thickened to the consistency of a very thick salsa. If the mixture is too dry, add 1 to 2 tablespoons water, stir well and roast a few more minutes to blend the liquid in with the paste. Taste and make adjustments as necessary by adding a bit more fish sauce, palm sugar and/or tamarind to the desired combination. The paste should be noticeably sweet.

Transfer to a clean jar. Cover when cool and store in the refrigerator. Makes about 2 cups. Keeps for several months.

Use this home-made chilli paste in recipes calling for *nahm prik pow* (roasted chilli paste). Or serve as a condiment for rice, as a jam for toast and crackers or as a spread for fried pork rinds and shrimp chips.

Notes and Pointers:

The garlic and shallots may also be fried without pre-drying. Because shallots contain a fair amount of juice, it is important that they are fried over low heat for a prolonged period of time so that they dry out before they begin to brown. This may take 30 minutes or longer. As for garlic, it can be fried at medium heat and will brown and crisp much faster.

Crispy fried garlic and shallots are also available in plastic bags or small containers in many Asian markets. To substitute the fresh aromatics with these pre-packaged products, use 3/4 cup of each (use *Nang Fah* brand from Thailand for best result). Though these substitutes save time, they generally do not produce as fresh-tasting a paste.

This recipe originally appeared on pages 175 & 176 of *Dancing Shrimp: Favorite Thai Recipes for Seafood* by Kasma Loha-unchit. Graphics are Copyright © 2000 Toby Goodenough, all right reserved.