

Party Pickle

Why amba should be at your summer entertaining table

By Lucy Simon

As a child, I was always afraid of the bowl of ambiguous yellow sauce camped at the end of our dinner table. It was sour and spicy, a little fruity and a lot funky; my elementary-aged palate struggled to decipher its complexity. The sauce is amba, a condiment made of pickled mango and pungent spices. And nowadays, I can't get enough of it.

Amba is a diaspora food that tells the story of the Jews of Iraq. Iraq was once home to the oldest and largest population of Jews in the world; there have been recorded populations since 586 B.C., during Babylonian times. Now there are fewer than five Jews. My obsessively recorded family history in Iraq dates back over 2,500 years, since the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem. We had roots there until my grandparents (along with much of the Jewish population) fled in the late 1940s, a time of increasing persecution of the community. In the mid-20th century, displaced Iraqi Jews traveled to Israel, and as they found a home in the newly established country, amba became popular, too. Amba finally made its way to the U.S. with families like mine, bringing its punchy flavor to celebrations throughout the year, complementing everything from grilled meats at summer cookouts to turkey and mashed potatoes at Thanksgiving.

My family's amba recipe comes together quickly in a blender, though I keep some of the mangoes chunky for a satisfying bite. I also like a little sweetness, so I add agave to balance out the sour green mango and white vinegar and to help bring out the flavor of the spices. At my dinner parties, I sometimes mix in some labneh and make it into a dip. I've fully embraced the sauce of my childhood and made it my own.

Amba (Pickled Mango Sauce)

ACTIVE 20 MIN; TOTAL 1 HR

MAKES ABOUT 1 CUP

A blend of unripe green mango, white vinegar, and spices like fenugreek, cumin, and tart sumac punches up this sour condiment. Some versions of amba are fully pureed, but this recipe retains chunks of just-tender mango to give the sauce luscious body and bite. Try amba as a condiment for roasted meats, or do as Lucy Simon does and mix it with labneh for a fast-fix dip.

- 1 large (12-oz.) unripe green mango
- ½ cup white vinegar
- ¼ cup water
- 1½ tablespoonful (Tbsp.) agave
- 2 teaspoonful (tsp.) Dijon mustard
- 1½ teaspoonful kosher salt
- 1½ teaspoonful ground fenugreek
- 1 teaspoonful ground sumac
- ½ teaspoonful ground cumin
- ½ teaspoonful ground turmeric
- ¼ teaspoonful cayenne pepper
- 1 medium garlic clove, grated (about ¼ tsp.)
- Roasted meat or vegetables, for serving (optional)
- 1 cup labneh (optional)

Step 1/

Peel mango. Cut mango in half lengthwise; remove and discard pit. Chop 1 mango half into ¼-inch pieces; set aside. Bring vinegar, ¼ cup water, agave, mustard, salt, fenugreek, sumac, cumin, turmeric, cayenne, and garlic to a boil in a small saucepan over medium, stirring occasionally. Add chopped mango; return mixture to a simmer over medium. Simmer, stirring occasionally, 2 minutes. Remove from heat; let cool until some of the mango pieces are translucent, about 10 minutes. Meanwhile, chop remaining mango half into ½-inch pieces; set aside.

Step2/

Transfer cool mango-vinegar mixture to a blender; do not wipe saucepan clean. Process mixture until smooth, about 30 seconds. Add ½-inch mango pieces; using short pulses, pulse until sauce is a chunky consistency with a mix of small and large mango pieces, 1 to 2 pulses.

Step3/

Scrape mango mixture into reserved saucepan. Bring to a gentle simmer over medium. Simmer, stirring often, until amba turns 1 or 2 shades darker, about 3 minutes. Remove from heat; let cool 30 minutes. Serve alongside roasted meats or vegetables, or stir in labneh for a tangy and creamy version of the condiment.

- LUCY SIMON

MAKE AHEAD

Amba must be stored in an air-tight container in refrigerator up to 2 weeks.