

KIMCHI

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Kimchi is a Korean fermented vegetable preparation, usually made with cabbage and chilli, and served at every meal. It's loved for its health benefits (all those good bacteria make for happy tummies) and also for its multi-dimensional flavours. Kimchi is also a reflection of the season it's made and the person who's made it: there are as many different kimchis as there are kimchi makers.



Makes: about 1 litre.

Time: 10 minutes, plus at least an hour cabbage salting, and around 5 days fermenting



INGREDIENTS

Kimchi

- 1 wombok
- 2-3 tablespoons salt
- ½ cup spring onions, sliced
- ½ cup daikon, thinly sliced
- ½ cup carrot, julienned or grated
- small bunch mustard greens, optional
- 1 sliced nashi pear, optional

Gochujang (kimchi sauce)

- 10-20 garlic cloves, peeled
- 250 grams fresh ginger, roughly chopped, no need to peel
- ½ cup gochugaru (Korean chilli powder)
- ¼ cup good fish sauce (see Tips)
- ¼ cup raw sugar (see Tips)
- ¼ cup tamari or light soy sauce

METHOD

Kimchi

1. Remove outer leaves of wombok if damaged or discoloured. Wash and then slice lengthways into quarters then chop these lengths into bite-sized pieces. Place your sliced wombok into a large bowl (like the Varoma), sprinkle with salt and mix well. Let it sit for a few hours over the sink or even overnight if it's cool or you've room in your refrigerator. A lot of liquid will seep out so put the Varoma over a large bowl or the sink. While the wombok is draining, make the paste.

Gochujang (kimchi paste)

2. Place ginger, garlic, chilli and sugar (if using, see Tips) into mixing bowl. Chop **10 sec/speed 10**.
3. Add tamari and fish sauce Chop for a further **5 sec/speed 10**. If desired, scrape down and chop for a further **5 sec/speed 10**.



ASSEMBLY

4. Drain the cabbage, add the other vegetables and mix your paste through the vegetables well. You may want to put some gloves on for this, because you really need to get in there and mix it all in and around.

5. You could keep this in the bowl, and cover it to ferment, but I prefer to jar it. Push the vegetables down quite firmly with your fist or a tamper. You should easily have enough juice to cover all of the vegetables but you can also weigh them down to keep them under the juice. Make sure you leave 'head room' or it will bubble over as it ferments.

6. Leave this on your bench for a few days and it should start to come alive. If you happen to be using an air lock system then you'll be lucky enough to hear it bubble.

TIPS

- Add a touch more salt in hot weather.
- Add as much chilli as you desire, even doubling the amount if you like it hot. Do what you like.
- Make a double portion of the paste if you can be bothered because this is great to either freeze or jar in the fridge for next time, or to add to cucumber pickles, a marinade, dressing or mayonnaise.
- Fish sauce: make sure it's REAL by checking the ingredients. There should be only fish (eg. anchovies) and salt.
- Sugar: it's fine to omit this and replace with 1-2 sliced nashi pears.
- Buy Sharon's book, fermenting jars and other fermentogoodies at www.thefermentary.com.au
- Buy gochugaru (Korean chilli) in Asian grocers or online, for example from Herbies.

SHARON's *love letter* to KIMCHI



I'm worried that kimchi is going to be a fad with the foodies. Don't let that happen to you. It isn't a fad in Korea, it's a staple, eaten at every meal. We don't do that, but I love it because it is basically a meal in a jar and if you've not much in your fridge but a hefty jar of kimchi, you have fabulous dinner. A bowl of hot rice, add a splash of sesame dressing or (even) kewpie mayo, and then a gorgeous shiny mountain of kimchi – memorably both sweet and sour, spicy and cool, smoky and tangy, crunchy and fresh, yet old. There it is. Next time add some tofu or chicken or pork belly which loves kimchi. Anything fatty like that pairs well with kimchi because the acidity cuts the fat. Try spooning some over an omelet or a couple of fried eggs with an avocado – again the acidity goes perfectly with the fatty yolks and avocado.

This is a place to start on your kimchi journey if you haven't already, and perhaps on the way you'll gain some confidence. I'm sharing my family favourite that, no kidding, has since become loved by so many on a retail level, that we struggle to keep up with production. Once you've made it, or bought it (let's be honest I know you won't always make it), I want you to eat it a lot, so I've offered up some simple ways to enjoy it, but find your own ways too. It has potential to change your quickie meals enormously. Or inspire you to create something a bit fiddlier but lingering and memorable.

Kimchi probably won't accompany every meal you eat, like it does in Korea, because it doesn't always go with what you've made (it goes with almost every egg dish there is though), but as a meal, or in a stew, or over eggs... work on ways to keep this in your life. I needn't go into the health benefits of this, it goes without saying that fermented garlic, ginger, and this range of vegetables are more than just good in your mouth, but within you, in every way. And Koreans in particular have many theories about how many viruses and illnesses it keeps away or holds at bay.

On the day you make this, hold some back to eat fresh like a salad, as a stir-fry, or in fried rice. You can eat your kimchi at every stage of fermentation – it will be sour and ready to enjoy within a few days to a week. Slowly fermenting your kimchi somewhere between 1 to 10 degrees for 2-3 weeks is ideal. Cooler temperatures reap more complex kimchi, but don't let that stop you – a summer kimchi is delicious too – perhaps ferment it in the fridge, or only for 5 days. Taste as you go and when you feel it's ready jar it up and put it in the fridge. If you leave it out in the cooler months, and it gets more on the sour side, don't worry. Traditionally older kimchi is used for putting into stews or soups. There's a lovely sourness about year old kimchi that I love but rarely get because we almost always eat it all before it gets that way.

There are as many recipes for kimchi as there are opinions on how it should taste. You know how families have secret ingredients, and regions have their specialties? Homemade is the preference but it's there wherever you go from very refined and aged, to cheap and nasty.

There are passionate and determined opinions about kimchi; so it's comforting to know as you venture into your own kimchi making that all homemade kimchi has its own nuances, and every batch can differ slightly.

Once you've found your favourite recipe and made it a few times, you can pretty much predict the flavour hit you are going to get; so try to be as consistent as possible by reducing the variables - the temperature, vessels, ingredients, fermenting time. And put your heart into it... I know this sounds corny but food tastes a lot better when you do that; when that's missing, you can't quite put your finger on what it's missing. It tastes flat or something.

After love, you need the freshest ingredients. Your wombok should be firm and alive, strong across its body and heavy. Never floppy. It's traditional to make this heading into winter. The vegies are better then, they are tighter from being in a cold ground and juicier. The lower temperatures of early winter support a slower ferment which will in turn give you more complex and deeper flavours. Having said all that, we make it any time of year and always love it.

YOU NEED

Gochugaru - the chilli powder

Real Korean chilli is by far superior (every Korean will tell you that) and important for a good kimchi. It has a long, gentle warmth rather than a quick spicy hit. It's worth your time to make a trip to your local Korean or Asian food store to source this because it does make all the difference. No, normal chilli powder really will not cut it. Too spicy. Maybe you should plant some Korean chilli in your garden.

The kimchi sauce:

The most important thing after fresh ingredients and love is the kimchi sauce. Many recipes implore you to source the best ingredients, but in this case at you should try to find at least the Korean chilli flakes as I mentioned, and a good fish sauce.

Fish sauce! For me, until recently, it was a small bottle in the back of the cupboard used for stir-fries and splashed now and then into a dish here and there. It's no wonder nobody really likes it because most of them in the supermarkets are no longer fermented, and certainly have more ingredients than fish and salt.

True fish sauce is actually supposed to be purely salt and fish. And time. Like 2 years. A good fish sauce is sweet and mild and you could almost drink a little shot glass of it. Please hunt a bottle of these down for your cupboard and for your kimchi.

There are many other foods now that say they are fermented, were originally delicious because they were a ferment, but are now mostly flavour enhancers. So while you are checking out your fish sauce labels, have a look at your soy sauce or tamari. They should have simple ingredients too. They should contain purely soy beans, salt, maybe some wheat, koji and water. You'll see if you make your own miso what real tamari tastes like, and maybe you'll go even further and make your own soy sauce. Home made shoyu, (soy sauce) is deeply rich and complex and incomparable to the bottled stuff we are all used to.

As a commercial producer of fermented vegetables and drinks, as small as we are, I know that these are difficult things to produce and get up on shelves because they take time, which is money, and also because regulations don't like the unpredictable nature of an artisan ferment. Too many unknowns! Ancient foods are undergoing modern regulations and science requires us to control the variables by adding laboratory produced ingredients. That's why colours, syrups, preserving agents, thickeners, sweeteners and flavour enhancers have found their way into simple things like soy sauce and fish sauce. And also because it's faster and cheaper that way.

As we've become more used to buying our food ready to eat, we have become unaware of what the authentic versions taste like, especially when they are called by the same name. A powdered lab grown version of milk kefir tastes nothing like one made from the milk kefir grain yet it is allowed to be called milk kefir regardless.

I've grown to feel passionate about what we put into our gochugang due to learning about the crap versions of tamari, soy sauce and fish sauce, and then when vegans came knocking quite loudly that they didn't want the anchovy sauce - the sugar free didn't want sugar and the soy free didn't want soy or even tamari, we made them their own special version without those things. And we've found a few alternatives to play with.

No gochugaru? White kimchi is a thing too. It's Korea's oldest and original kimchi that has no chilli at all - more like a sauerkraut. We call it Kid-chi - for the kids who come over and are a bit shy about eating chilli. I won't tell a lie, I'm not patient with fussiness, and always plan to build them up to liking the spicy one but you've got to start somewhere.

And keep in mind that if you can't always make your own kimchi you can buy it. Kimchi can be found in most countries now in your Asian grocer, or health food store, if not in your mainstream store. Check the ingredients because there are quite often unnecessary preservatives in it, or starter cultures. Don't buy krauts and kimchis that have a starter culture or citric acid listed in the ingredients, and certainly not if it has been pasteurised and sitting on a shelf. It needs to be raw and refrigerated and preferably be in a glass jar over plastic, the acidity easily pulls chemicals from plastic.