



## August - Time to Make Some Spicy Sauce!

*Article and photo by Suzan Gallup*

The Asian plum tree in my neighbor's yard is heavy with fruit again. The deep red leaves and shiny fruit are one of my favorite summer markers. When its large branches droop low, onto my side of the fence, it makes it hard to walk down the vegetable garden path, and I know it's time to harvest when I hear small occasional "thumps" as the ripe fruit lets go of the branch and rolls on to the pathway. This is an off year for the fruit, meaning not so many plums are produced that the branches are so full that they are bent to what seems almost breaking point and touch the ground. But even

in this off year, there are plenty of plums to make sauce. When I moved into this house 8 years ago and I was just learning the plants in the garden, the neighbors tree, then laden with summer fruit, became the topic of an over-the-fence-conversation. As she and I stared up into the branches at the clusters of dark magenta globes she pronounced "it's time to make sauce". She sent her husband out to the store for some of the special ingredients and we agreed to meet later that afternoon for a canning session and introduction to the divine Asian marriage of sweet and hot spice. My assignment for the day was to get a dozen jars and lids to contribute...and help pick and pit the plums. In the heat of an August afternoon we sat on stools at the kitchen counter, our forearms slick to the elbows with plum juice and a lovely thick soup of fruit pulp and skins growing ever larger in our bowls.

Asian plums are not large (rather like an over-sized cherry), and sadly their fruit does not pull away from the pit like Italian prunes do. These plums belong to the "cling fruit" family like peaches and most other larger plums, meaning their flesh is tight to the pit and never comes away clean. Over the eight years of making this sauce I have tried various methods of removing the flesh, one of which was a clever cherry-pitting device which in the end only managed to squirt juice on my kitchen wall, or my canning friend, and me, and leave me grumbling. My preferred tool now is just a serrated knife, and in three cuts I can have the pit out. The pit, with some plum goo still attached, goes back into the bowl of washed plums. After all the plums are pitted, the pits are scooped into a large mesh strainer and gooshed around enough times to get the remainder of the juice and flesh out.

The Thai chilies I use can be found in the Asian food section of most grocery stores. These tiny red chilies are not to be underestimated and pack a powerful punch. I recommend the use of rubber gloves while you remove the seeds and chop. One year I didn't use rubber gloves and the tips of my fingers were quite burned by the capsaicin oil in the chilies, throbbing for a whole day after the canning session. Lesson learned. You may wish to use pre-sliced jalapenos in a jar, saving you time on de-seeding and chopping. I throw the onion, garlic and de-seeded chilies into the food processor and whirl them all up together.

The recipe that follows is quite spicy. The eaters in this house love to add the sauce to their tacos, as a marinade for salmon on the grill, or as a drizzle on vegetables. If you are not sure about your heat tolerance, try half the recommended chili amount or a much calmer chili. When the plums are in, I can pit the plums and freeze them in baggies in the exact amount needed for the recipe. I can then make a batch of sauce on the weekends for up to a month after the plums are done.

One batch will fill 6 to 9 half pint sized jars, depending upon how thick you like your sauce. Cook for 2 hours and you end up with a thick jam consistency and fill 6 jars. Less cooking time fills more jars. You get the picture.

## Asian Plum Sauce

### Ingredients:

Approximately 4 lbs of plums

2 cups packed brown sugar – light or dark

1 cup granulated sugar

1 cup cider vinegar

¾ cup finely chopped red onion

4 tbls chopped, de-seeded chilies. I like Pickled Hot Chili (red) Ot Chua in a jar in the Asian section

2 tbls mustard seed

1 tbls 5 spice powder – also in the Asian food section

1 tbls salt

4 cloves minced garlic

1 inch square knob of fresh ginger finely diced

Pit enough plums to measure 10 cups. Add all ingredients except the plums to a large non-reactive metal soup pot. Bring these ingredients to a boil, then add the chopped plums and return the mixture to a gently rolling boil. Stir occasionally to keep sauce from sticking to the bottom of the pan for 1 to 2 hours until the sauce is as thick as you like.

Follow safe canning procedures. Have prepared enough jars and lids for all your cooked sauce. Jars, lids and sauce should be piping hot when you are ready to can. Pour sauce into the jar leaving ¼ inch room at the top of the jar. Wipe the jar rim clean if necessary so the canning lid fits evenly on the jar rim, place a screw band on the jar and tighten. You'll know when if the jar has processed correctly when you hear the 'click' of the lid button being sucked down as the vacuum seal is created when the temperature on the jar cools enough. This 'click' repeats itself for the next hour or so, and is the happiest sound in the world after a hard day of work in the kitchen.

