

PREP SCHOOL

RHUBARB'S TANG BOILS DOWN TO AN IDEAL SAUCE FOR SAVORY FOODS

BY JULIA M. USHER • PHOTO BY STEVE ADAMS STUDIO, FOOD STYLING BY JULIA M. USHER

I'm not proud to admit to this behavior, but I await the arrival of rhubarb like a spoiled child anticipating the reckless ripping open of presents on Christmas Day. Once I spot the season's first stalks, my eyes widen, visions of its culinary gifts whirl in my head and my normally generous demeanor takes a turn toward greedy. For the brief few weeks that this tart plant graces the local gardens and farmers' markets, I brazenly grab as much as I possibly can.

Not everyone appreciates rhubarb and its unusual pucker power to this extent. Nevertheless, I'm convinced that this plant would be more widely embraced if only its depth of character was better understood.

As I see it, rhubarb has been pigeonholed as a pie plant for far too long. The popular notion that rhubarb is best used in dessert is especially ironic because the part we eat, the fleshy petiole, aka stalk, isn't even classified as a fruit. (Botanically speaking, rhubarb is a vegetable.) Sadly, most cooks appreciate neither rhubarb's virtues as a vegetable nor its applicability beyond dessert; their dalliances with the plant have been limited to showering it with lots of sugar before tumbling it into pies, cobblers or tarts.

One of my favorite ways to prepare rhubarb is to stew it into savory-sweet chutneys and compotes that pair with everything from meat and fish to bread and cheese. Stewing is a straightforward stovetop process in which chopped stalks are combined with liquid and spices and then cooked over moderate heat into a luxuriously thick sauce.

What I love most about this method is that it is incredibly forgiving. Unlike the preparation of rhubarb for pie or cobbler, where you only know if you've added enough sugar once you've sampled the final product, stewing permits you to tailor the sugar to your taste buds at any point along the way. I generally use about 1 to 1½ cups of refined sugar to every 2 to 3 pounds of rhubarb, but I may adjust this ratio up or down depending on whether I'm in the mood for sweet or tart on a given day—or whether I've got other natural sweeteners, such as fruit or fruit juices, in the blend. Stewing is also a great way to make use of a bumper rhubarb crop. A bulky 3 pounds of stalks will reduce to about five 1-cup jars of neatly contained sauce that can be stored either in the fridge for several weeks or in the freezer, with little to no loss of flavor, up to a few months.

When selecting rhubarb, be sure to choose firm, slender (no more than 1 to 1½ inches thick) stalks. Thick stalks tend to be more fibrous and tough. Though the petioles come in various shades of red and green, all of which taste virtually identical, I recommend snatching the red ones first. Not only are they the newer, more tender growth in most rhubarb varieties, but they are also responsible for the rosy hue we've come to expect of this plant when it is cooked.

Despite instructions to the contrary in some recipes, there's no need to peel rhubarb if you've started with thin, young, red stalks. Since most of the red pigment is carried in the exterior fibers, you'll simply strip the sauce of its color if you peel, without materially changing its texture. It is, however, important to trim the stalks of all leaves, as they contain relatively high doses (0.5 percent, on average) of oxalic acid, which can be harmful to the kidneys or even fatal if consumed in sufficient quantity (i.e., about 1 ounce, the amount in 11 pounds of leaves, for a 140-pound person).

Though the stalks contain a much lower percentage of oxalic acid, they are still quite acidic by vegetable standards and should only be stewed in nonreactive (stainless steel or coated) pans using similarly nonreactive utensils. If rhubarb comes in contact with copper or aluminum, it will scour those metals shiny-clean, but it will also assume a tinny taste in the process.

And here's a final tip: Stewing a fruit or vegetable—especially one as high in water content (95 percent) as rhubarb—requires much less liquid than does the classical stewing technique for meat. Rather than covering the rhubarb with liquid and then immediately cooking, as is typically done with chicken or beef, I often marinate rhubarb overnight in juice or vinegar to impart the desired counterpoints of flavor and then drain off much of the liquid before applying any heat. If you choose not to marinate, that's fine, too. Just remember, you'll get thicker, more satisfying results if you cap the liquid-to-rhubarb ratio at 8 fluid ounces to every 2 to 3 pounds of stalks. You will also trap less condensation in the pot—and thereby expedite the reduction of rhubarb into sauce—if you leave the lid off while cooking.

Now that you've gotten past the superficial pie associations, stew a batch of Savory Rhubarb-Apple Chutney and revel in your new relationship with this multifaceted plant. **S**



SAVORY RHUBARB-APPLE CHUTNEY

6 8-OUNCE JARS

1¼ lb. fresh rhubarb, washed well, leaves and ends trimmed, cut into ½-inch pieces (about 6⅓ cups), divided
 1¼ lb. (3 to 4) Granny Smith apples, cored and coarsely diced
 1 cup golden raisins
 1 cup dried currants
 1 cup diced yellow onion
 1¼ cups cider vinegar
 ½ cup apple juice or cider
 ¾ cup firmly packed golden brown sugar
 ¼ cup granulated sugar
 1 Tbsp. finely minced garlic (2 to 3 cloves)
 2 tsp. peeled and finely grated fresh ginger
 1½ tsp. finely minced orange zest (about ½ orange)
 2 tsp. kosher salt
 1 tsp. ground allspice
 ¾ tsp. ground cayenne pepper
 ½ tsp. ground cloves

• Toss ¾ pound of the rhubarb pieces with the apples, raisins, currants and onion in a large bowl. Seal the remaining pound of rhubarb in a plastic bag and store in the refrigerator until ready to use.

• In another bowl, combine the remaining ingredients. Whisk them together well and then pour over the rhubarb mixture. Stir to evenly coat. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and let the mixture marinate at least 8 hours in the refrigerator.

• Drain the rhubarb mixture and reserve half of the marinade; discard the rest. Transfer the rhubarb mixture and reserved marinade to a large (4- to 5-quart) stainless steel or nonreactive pot and bring it to a boil over medium-high heat. Reduce the heat to medium. Cook uncovered, stirring regularly, until the rhubarb pieces have reduced to a thick sauce, about 25 minutes.

• Add the reserved pound of rhubarb and continue to cook until those pieces are soft but still hold their shape, another 7 to 10 minutes.

• Remove the pan from the heat and let the chutney cool completely.

• Sterilize and dry 6 8-ounce canning jars. Ladle the cooled chutney into the jars and seal tightly. Store in the refrigerator up to 1 month or in the freezer for 2 to 3 months.



Cook it! For a recipe for Sweet Rhubarb, Orange and Ginger Compote, visit Prep School at saucemagazine.com.