**Kohlrabi-licious**

It's time to get excited about summer produce. The tomatoes are ripening. We can’t wait for the peaches, corn and melons. Some of us are even pumped for zucchini. But does anyone get impatient for kohlrabi?

It doesn’t help that a kohlrabi plant looks like a snake that recently swallowed a beach ball. The edible part is the swollen section of stem, an incongruously large growth in the neck of an otherwise small plant.

Kohlrabi is perhaps most popular with farmers looking for some early season variety in their market displays, CSA boxes or farm stands. Thus, kohlrabi finds its way into the fridge and lurks there, for weeks or longer, never spoiling, never letting you off the hook.

If you take the time to peel one you will be rewarded with a crisp, watery bite and a faint hint of spice, like a cross between jicama and a mild radish. A nice flavor, but you need to try a little if you want to excite people. On a platter next to some dip, kohlrabi slices may be overlooked. Sliced thinly or shredded, however, it clings to sauce like angel hair pasta, which opens up many possibilities. My favorite is in som tum, a green papaya salad that is one of the world’s favorite Thai dishes. Green papaya are scarce in my parts, and kohlrabi is quite available. So I use kohlrabi, along with shredded carrots. The salad has something for every taste bud, including salty, sweet, spicy and acidic flavors, a bitter garlic pungency and plenty of umami.

In Bangkok, years ago, I spent some time seeking out the best som tum in town, a mission that took me to a certain outdoor market on the edge of the city. I found my way to the section where stall after stall serves nothing but som tum, and bowed to a man with a bandana on his head.

The “som” in som tum refers to its sour taste, while the “tum” mimics the sound of the pounding of a pestle into a mortar. I’m not sure what I tried to say, or what he heard, but he nodded. He put a handful of small crabs into a tall wooden bowl. The were black, and still alive. His heavy wooden pestle went “tum tum tum” on those crabs until they were a crunchy, gooey paste, to which he added spices and pounded some more. Then he ladled in some fish sauce, generously — the way you would want someone to add hot fudge to your ice cream.

The som tum maker swapped his pestle for a pair of wooden forks and added shredded green papaya, herbs and, for good measure, more fish sauce. He stirred it all together, scooped the salad into a paper bowl, and handed it to me.

It was a bit fishy, and spicy hot enough to burn a hole in the sun. But the rich array of flavors was dazzling, and the way the intense flavors balance one another is impressive. Each one would be too overpowering on its own, but together they neutralize each other, like a mutually assured destruction in which the missiles are actually launched.

I respected that som tum, even though I didn’t take too many bites. In looking into that abyss I learned something, and returned to my quarters with the thrill discovery.

When I make som tum with kohlrabi, I call it kohl som, which translates to something like “Thai-style sour kohlrabi.”  It can be just as much of an adventure, too, even if you skip the crabs. Which I do.

**Kohl Som**

When summer is in full swing, fresh cherry tomatoes will take this to the next level. You can also mix it up with chopped string beans and other forms of greenery too, as available.

1 baseball-sized kohlrabi, peeled and grated or shredded (about 3 cups)
1 large handful cherry tomatoes, sliced into halves or quarters
1 medium carrot, grated (about a cup)
1 medium-sized clove garlic, pressed or grated
½ teaspoon salt
1 or more tablespoons fish sauce
Juice of 1 lime (or 3 tablespoons lime juice)
Chile flakes, to taste
Up to 1 tablespoon brown sugar
2 green onions, chopped
½ cup chopped cilantro (or parsley)
Optional garnish: 2 tablespoons peanuts, dry roasted in a pan
Another option: sliced jalapenos instead of red peppers

Give the tomatoes a squeeze to crush them a little. Combine the kohlrabi, carrot, tomatoes, garlic and salt in a mixing bowl. Set aside. Combine the fish sauce, lime juice, sugar and chile flakes, and stir until the brown sugar is fully dissolved. Add this sauce and the green onions, cilantro and jalapenos, if using, to the mixing bowl. Toss the salad and serve, garnished with peanuts and extra cilantro.