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FOOD & DRINK

The Spark So Many Recipes Need: Umeboshi

Sour, salty, so delicious, these pickled plums pack a scrumptious punch



NE PLUM ULTRA Keep salty-sour umeboshi on hand to punch up dishes and drinks. PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/ THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Jane Black

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I FIRST FELL IN LOVE with the puckery-tart flavor of *ume* plums at the sushi bar. Frugality led me to it: A vegetarian roll made with salty plum paste and grassy shiso leaves was a very pleasant way to keep my bill in check.

Though the common translation for “ume” is “plum,” in fact the tiny, tart fruit is more closely related to an apricot. Pickled, the fruits are called *umeboshi*. I don’t know why it took me so long to think of using this ingredient in anything but a sushi roll. Umeboshi’s mix of salty and sour—like a darker, more mysterious cousin to the popular salty-sweet flavor profile—can make so many dishes more interesting.

In Japan, round, red umeboshi are famously nestled into the center of *onigiri*, or rice balls, so that they resemble the Japanese flag. They are also deployed as a cure-all: Parents make porridge laced with umeboshi for sick children and umeboshi-steeped green tea for themselves. (Many also claim umeboshi can cure a hangover.)

HOW TO USE IT

- • Brew a traditional cold-and-flu cure: Mash one salted plum with a dash of soy sauce and top off with hot green tea.
 - • **Dress up a bold brie:** Finely chop umeboshi and serve atop creamy cheese at room temperature
 - • **Give noodles a nice kick:** Boil some udon noodles, reserving cooking water. Sauté chopped umeboshi with minced ginger and wild mushrooms. Add soy sauce and a little cooking water from the udon, and toss with the noodles. Garnish with julienned shiso.
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Stateside, chefs and bartenders are finding creative ways to take advantage of umeboshi's umami punch. At Prairie in San Francisco, chef-owner Anthony Strong makes a roast chicken with umeboshi brown butter. And at Andy Ricker's Pok Pok, in Portland, Ore., umeboshi spike a classic vodka Collins.

The traditional way to produce the pickle, according to Ayako Iino, founder of Yumé Boshi, an artisanal producer in Oakland, Calif., is to pack the fruit with salt and let it sit for several months. Red shiso is then added, imparting the signature crimson color, and finally the fruit is dried. In addition to the salted plums themselves, Ms. Iino's line includes jams and vinegar. I'm especially partial to her ethereal ume syrups—just add to sparkling wine for an exhilarating aperitif.

Where to Buy It

If you're looking for a small-scale, handcrafted product, Yumé Boshi offers salted whole California-grown plums (*\$16 for 4.5-ounce jar, yumboshiplum.com*) and fragrant jams and syrups, all worth the splurge. Organic giant Eden's umeboshi and umeboshi paste are available on its website (*\$18 and \$13, respectively, for 7-ounce pack, edenfoods.com*) and at Whole Foods. Beloved macrobiotic brand Ohsawa sells fruit and paste at specialty markets around the U.S.

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