

Membrillo (Quince Paste)

We all know salty/sweet is a heavenly combo. Ever have that divine pairing of the jewel-like jellied quince paste (called membrillo in Spain and similar to the guayaba paste made from guava in Puerto Rico) served with Manchego or a young, creamy, slightly salty cheese? Here's a recipe to make your own. It is fantastic with salumi and other cured meats, cheeses and hell, it's maddeningly good on a sandwich. Go ahead, impress your friends.

Ingredients:

3 pounds quince, about 5 quince
4 1/4 cups sugar
Nonstick cooking spray
Manchego cheese, for serving

Special equipment: food processor, melon baller, splatter screen, 8-inch-by-8-inch pan

Directions:

Peel and core the quince — you may need to use a grapefruit spoon to scoop out all of the core. Cut the fruit into about 1-inch chunks and put in a large, 6-quart, heavy-bottomed saucepan. Cover with cold water, about 8 cups. Bring to a boil over high heat and cook for about 15 minutes, then lower the heat and maintain a simmer for about 25 more minutes until the fruit is very tender. Drain. Puree the fruit in a food processor until smooth. Measure how many cups of puree you have, it should be about 4 1/4 cups. Return the puree to the saucepan and pour in the same number of cups of sugar; stir. Turn the heat to medium-high and bring to a low boil for 3-4 minutes. Then turn the heat to medium-low or low, just high enough to keep the puree bubbling but not erupting like lava. It will burp up, sometimes violently, but a splatter screen on top of the pan helps keep it from going all over your kitchen. Stir the puree frequently, and adjust the heat to prevent scorching. This is a sticky mass of hot puree, so be smart and be careful. After about 1 1/2 hours the puree will turn to a rosy color. Continue to cook until the puree darkens and thickens considerably to something more like a paste. The more patience you have here the better your result. You'll know it's done when you drag a spoon through the puree and it doesn't rush to fill the space. Plan on about 4 hours total.

Line an 8-inch-by-8-inch pan with parchment paper, letting it overhang on all sides. Pour the paste onto the parchment and spread to all corners evenly, smoothing the top. Let it cool to room temperature, about 2 hours. Cover with plastic wrap and put into the fridge to chill overnight, until firm enough to cut. It will pull cleanly away from the parchment when it has chilled sufficiently — and not a second before — so once again, patience is key.

Spray a sharp knife with nonstick cooking spray. Lift the parchment up by the flaps and transfer to a cutting board. Cut the paste into sixteen 2-inch squares or eight 2-inch-by-4-inch rectangles, wiping off the knife if it gets sticky. Serve with cheese and salumi on a decorative board.

Cook's Notes

Save some of the quince-flavored water before draining the fruit and use it to make a quince simple syrup for cocktails.

Manchego is traditionally paired with membrillo, but any mild sheep's milk cheese will pair well. This marriage is only heightened with the salty porky flavors of prosciutto, culatello or other salumi.

Total Time: 7 hours 20 minutes plus overnight chill (8 hours)

Active Prep: 20 minutes

Serves: Makes 8 to 16 servings

Difficulty: moderate