

Quick and delicious: Thai red curry dishes, Tom Kha, and Coconut Pumpkin Soup

By Bob Haddad

Here's how to make a good red curry dish, using any main ingredient, plus veggies. Or just all vegetarian.

Basic Thai red curry (vegetarian, fish or meat)

1) Prepare your main ingredients: pre-cook your main ingredients, but not all the way. If you're cooking hard, crunchy things (like broccoli or carrots, cook them first (steam or pan fry) before you cook softer things like mushrooms, tofu, thin slices of fish, shrimp, etc). Eventually, you end up with a mixture of all the ingredients you want, each one cooked about 2/3 of the way... not fully cooked!

2) Prepare your main curry base:

* Heat a deep pan or a wide, shallow pot with a few teaspoons of vegetable or coconut oil. When hot, lower the flame, and add a few tablespoons of red curry paste, and stir occasionally with a wooden spoon. Make sure there's enough oil or add a few drops of water to keep it wet, but keep it on the thick side. Stir occasionally for a minute or two on a low flame. When it begins to curdle, add about 1/3 cup of coconut milk, and stir slowly on a simmer. Cover, and now get ready to add a bit of saltiness (a teaspoon of soy sauce/tamari, or a large pinch of salt) AND a bit of sweet (I like to use coconut palm lump sugar, but white sugar is fine. Stir for a few seconds, and when all the ingredients are combined, add more curry paste and more coconut milk. Taste as you go, to make sure you get the right heat you desire. Obviously, less paste and more milk makes it less intense. When you have the volume of sauce that you want, cover and simmer at a very low flame. After a minute, taste again, and adjust once again for spicy, sweet and salty. (p.s. If you use coconut cream instead of milk, you might add a few drops of water to the initial blend with the curry paste)

3) Add the ingredients to the curry/coconut base, and stir gently once to distribute. Cover the pot and continue to simmer for another few minutes, until the ingredients have soaked up the curry base and are fully cooked. Finally, taste once more, and adjust again if necessary for hot, sweet, salt.

4) Prepare a thick sauce of tapioca (cassava) starch (or potato starch or corn starch) and warm water (stir briskly as you add the water to the starch – I use my index finger – it's fun !) Make sure there are no lumps. It should be a thick watery mixture, the consistency of kefir. Remove the lid from the pot and with a wooden spoon, stir the starch water into the curry milk slowly, and watch to see how much it thickens. Add more to make it thicker, less to keep it more soupy (you can experiment with the thickness of the curry for different dishes)

Cover the pot again, turn the flame off, let it sit for a minute, and you're ready to serve. Eat with rice, or just in a bowl.

Basic Tom Kha

- 1) Make your herb and root base: Boil strong tasting herbs and veggies in a few cups of water. Thais use crushed ginger root, crushed lemongrass stalks, crushed garlic, basil, kaffir lime leaves (if you can get them); diced onions, etc.) Cover and low-boil until it reduces in volume and gets strong-tasting and darker in color. Strain the broth from the herbs and veggies, and retain the water on the side.
- 2) In another pot, heat a large amount of coconut milk (or coconut cream+ a little bit of water), and add the sweet and the salty combination (as in the red curry recipe). Add a few drops (or a hardened teaspoon) of coconut oil to the base, and stir on a medium flame. Now add the vegetable broth from step 1, and stir. After a minute, add a few teaspoons of curry paste... not too much, but just enough to give it a little heat. Now you can add anything else you like to the tom kha: pak/taohu (pre-cooked veggies and tofu) or gai (uncooked think slices of chicken), pla (slices of white fish like tilapia) or gung (uncooked shrimp). Cover and continue to simmer until the other ingredients are cooked. Now get a big bowl and enjoy !

A fabulous, easy pumpkin/coconut soup

Heat one can of coconut milk in a pot on a low-medium flame, and when it's hot, add 1 or 2 cups of canned mashed pumpkin (or freshly cooked and mashed pumpkin meat), and stir the mixture. Now add sweetness and salt, and finally, add a few teaspoons of red or green curry paste. Taste for balance and adjust. Done ! You can add frozen peas, corn, or small chunks of cooked potatoes or cooked pumpkin if you like, but it is wonderful only with the coconut milk, pumpkin and curry paste. It is especially good during cold weather.