



South Indian Chicken Curry

Coconut milk and ten spices
flavor its thick sauce

BY AMINNI RAMACHANDRAN

The land where I was raised in the southwestern part of India is known as Kerala, the place of coconut trees. It is endowed with lush, tropical growth the year round—coconut trees along the coast and, at higher elevations, an abundance of herbs and spices. It's no wonder that in this region, curries—highly spiced dishes often flavored with coconut milk and served with rice—are an important part of every dinner. The meals, always cooked fresh, are quite time-consuming to prepare. Chickens are purchased live and butchered at home; fresh coconuts are cracked open, their meat shredded, and milk pressed from the meat; and right before the cooking begins, a special mix of spices for each dish is ground by hand in a mortar and pestle.

My taste for South Indian curries hasn't changed in the 22 years that I've lived in the United States, but my method for preparing them has become much quicker. By keeping dried spices on hand and grinding them myself, using packaged, shredded coconut to make the coconut milk, and buying chicken and vegetables at the supermarket, I can prepare a rich, flavorful chicken curry in just over an hour. And it's almost as good as the curry I remember from Kerala.

SPICING THE CURRY

Indian cooks stock a number of spices that we use in varying amounts and proportions depending on

Delicious chicken curry in just over an hour can be put together from off-the-shelf ingredients from your local supermarket. Dried spices and milk made from grated coconut give it a distinctive, South Indian flavor.

what's in the dish and on what other dishes we're serving in the meal. Most of the spices are common in American cooking, while some are more specific to Indian and Asian cooking.

Assembling the spices. In my chicken curry, I like to use ten spices (see photo at right). Three of them—fennel, cumin, and coriander—are the dried seeds of plants in the parsley family. I also use the green leaves and stems of coriander, which in its fresh form is often called cilantro in the United States. Black mustard seeds, native to India, resemble poppy seeds and are used whole. Strips of cinnamon bark, cardamom pods, and dried cloves—the unopened flower buds of

the clove tree—give the dish an almost sweet taste. Black peppercorns and dried chile peppers contribute heat. Finally turmeric, the root of a plant similar to ginger, supplies a bright yellow-orange, saffronlike color.

All of these spices are commonly available in supermarkets, except the black mustard seeds, which are sold in Indian markets and in many natural-foods stores. Since ground spices quickly lose their flavor, it's best to buy the spices whole and grind them yourself. The two exceptions are turmeric and cayenne chile, which are usually sold already ground.

There's no right or wrong way to spice curries. Every cook has her own combinations of spices that she and her family like in different dishes. In fact, an enjoyable part of Indian cooking is playing with the spices and fine-tuning the mix to come up with something that suits your personal taste. I like my curry quite spicy, and so I use about a quarter cup of curry spice mix in a batch of chicken curry. If you're

Grind your own spices for deeper flavor and richer aroma. Spices rapidly lose their flavor once they're ground, so to enhance the flavor of your curry, roast whole spices briefly on the stove and grind them in a spice or coffee grinder right before adding them to the curry.





Make coconut milk quickly with shredded, unsweetened coconut.
1. Soak 1 cup coconut in 1 cup boiling water for 10 to 15 minutes.



2. Liquefy the mixture in a blender, and strain through a piece of cheesecloth.



3. Squeeze all the liquid, or "milk," out of the coconut meat.

not sure about your spice tolerance, you may want to use only two tablespoons the first time you make it.

If you don't have the individual spices on hand, you can use a prepackaged mix. The curry powder that's sold in supermarkets is simply a mixture of spices commonly used in Indian cooking. Indian markets carry both ground and unground spice mixes, called *masalas*, specifically matched to certain foods, such as chicken, fish, or vegetables. Once you've found a mix that you particularly like, your dishes will taste the same every time you use it.

Roasting and grinding. To bring out the full flavor of the spices, roast them briefly before grinding them. Leave out the black mustard seeds, which will be used whole in the curry. Put a frying pan over medium heat, and when it's hot, add about a teaspoon of oil. Once the oil is also hot, put the unground spices in the pan and, stirring frequently, roast them until they begin to brown and release their spicy aroma. The small amount of oil develops the color and flavor of the spices, but isn't essential. If you're using ground spices, you can roast them very briefly, about 15 seconds, in a dry frying pan over low heat. They burn quickly, so be ready to remove them from the pan.

Next, grind the spices fine. I use a small coffee grinder, which keeps the spices in constant motion while the whirling blade grinds them. A blender or food processor won't work because the blades are too high to cut the small spices. You can also grind them, of course, in a mortar and pestle.

MAKING COCONUT MILK

Coconut milk rounds out the taste of curries, and softens the harshness of the spices. Often mistaken for the clear liquid inside a fresh coconut, coconut milk is actually a white liquid made from grated coconut meat. Whole coconuts take a bit of work to crack, peel, and grate, and in curries that have so many spices and ingredients, the fresh coconut flavor isn't essential. While canned coconut milk can be used, I prefer not to cook with it because it is more expensive and is liable to have a "tinny" flavor.

I find that the best compromise between flavor and convenience is to make the milk from dried, shredded coconut. I keep enough shredded, unsweetened coconut on hand so that I can make coconut milk whenever I need it. Indian markets carry very finely shredded coconut, but the unsweetened grated coconut found in grocery stores and natural-foods markets works well too. Make sure you don't buy sweetened coconut, which is too sweet to use in curries.

Making coconut milk is a three-step process, usually done twice to get all the flavor out of the coconut. First soak the coconut in an equal amount of boiling water—in this case, 1 cup of coconut and 1 cup of

water (see photo 1 at left). Let the mixture sit for 10 to 15 minutes, then put it in a blender or food processor and pulverize for 1 minute. Line a bowl with cheesecloth and pour in the wet paste, as shown in photo 2. Gather the edges of the cheesecloth and squeeze out all the liquid in the coconut, as shown in photo 3. This will give you a rich, creamy, thick milk that you add to the chicken toward the end of its cooking time. The pulp that's left behind in the cheesecloth goes through the same procedure again—soaking in a cup of boiling water, chopping, and straining into another bowl. This second batch is much thinner, but when preparing the curry, it's the one you add first.

It takes about half an hour to make the coconut milk, but you can use the time that the coconut is soaking to chop the vegetables and the chicken. You can also make coconut milk in advance and freeze it.

ASSEMBLING THE VEGETABLES AND CHICKEN

Curries are variable dishes. Onion, garlic, and ginger are standard flavorings, but a variety of vegetables can be used as main ingredients. My favorites with chicken are green peppers and potatoes. The potatoes nicely absorb the coconut curry sauce, while the peppers taste sweet and meaty. Experiment with your own favorite vegetables. Squash, carrots, cauliflower, eggplant, and spinach are a few of the vegetables that taste good with chicken.

For this recipe, begin by peeling and mincing both the garlic and the ginger. Then peel the onion and cut it lengthwise into thin strips. Peel the potatoes, cut them into ½-inch cubes, and soak them in cold water until you're ready to use them. Next, cut the green peppers in half and remove the seeds and veins. Slice the peppers lengthwise into ½-inch-wide strips, and then chop those strips into two or three pieces each. Finally, wash the fresh coriander, pull off the leaves, and set them aside. Chop the stems into a couple of pieces each.

While you can of course make chicken curry with an entire chicken cut into small pieces, I frequently use just the thighs. Chicken thighs cook evenly, and their meat is moist and tender, and because they're small, the curry flavor deeply penetrates them. I remove the skin from the thighs before I cook them to keep the fat out of the curry and to make the pieces more attractive to serve.

COOKING THE CURRY

Once you've roasted and ground the spices, made the coconut milk, chopped the vegetables, and skinned the chicken, you're ready to cook the curry.

In a large pot, heat 1 tablespoon oil over medium heat until it is very hot. Add ½ teaspoon black mustard seeds, and let them sizzle for about a minute. Add

COCONUT MILK

Makes 1 cup thick milk and 1 cup thin milk.

- 1 cup shredded, unsweetened coconut
- 2 cups boiling water



To soften the flavor of the spices, and to make a creamy sauce, the author simmers the chicken for her curry in coconut milk.

the garlic, ginger, sliced onion, and coriander stems, and cook them for 5 minutes, stirring frequently. Add the ground spices and continue cooking for 6 to 8 minutes until the onions are very soft, stirring often so that the onions cook evenly. Then add the green peppers and cook until they're soft also, about 4 minutes.

When the onions and peppers are soft and have absorbed the spices, start adding the chicken, a little at a time. Stir the pieces until they're coated with the spices, and then add some more chicken. When all the chicken has been stirred in, pour the second, thinner batch of coconut milk over the chicken, add the salt and the drained potatoes, reduce the heat to medium low, cover, and simmer for 40 minutes.

When the chicken is cooked and the potatoes are tender, remove the cover and bring the liquid to a boil. Let the liquid boil for 3 to 5 minutes, until the sauce is thick. Then add the first batch of coconut milk and the coriander leaves. Bring the liquid back to a simmer, season with salt, and you're ready to serve.

SERVING

Rice is an indispensable part of a South Indian meal, and it's a perfect starch to serve with chicken curry. Put on a pot of rice before you start cooking the onions so that the rice has time to cook and sit before the chicken is ready. Serve thin, round chapati breads to

scoop up the sauce. Finally, a dab of chutney, yogurt raita, or a hot pickle adds another flavor to the plate.

VARIATIONS

I love the taste of coconut—it has been a part of my diet since I was a baby. But even in the land of coconut trees, we've discovered

that the tropical oil in coconut makes it unwise to eat every day. I frequently make this same curry, but instead of using coconut milk, I use yogurt to make the curry creamy and tangy. To do this, use water in place of the thin cup of coconut milk and yogurt in place of the the thick cup. Beat the yogurt before adding it and then mix it thoroughly with the chicken and onions to prevent it from curdling.

Many Indians are vegetarians and enjoy curries made with two or three vegetables. A nice combination is cauliflower, potatoes, and peas. Stir large florets of cauliflower into the spiced onions, and then add the coconut milk and potatoes. Add the peas when the potatoes are almost tender because peas cook very quickly.

CHICKEN CURRY

Serves six.

- 1 clove garlic, minced*
- 1-inch piece of ginger, minced*
- 3 onions, sliced thin*
- 3 potatoes, diced in ½-inch cubes*
- 2 green peppers*
- 3 stems fresh coriander (cilantro), plus ¼ cup loosely packed leaves*
- 2 pounds chicken thighs, skinned*
- 1 tablespoon oil*
- ½ teaspoon black mustard seeds*
- 2 to 3 tablespoons Curry Spice Mix (p. 21), or curry powder*
- 2 cups coconut milk, 1 cup thick, 1 cup thin (p. 22)*
- 1 teaspoon salt*

For Aminni Ramachandran, Indian ingredients are easier to come by than they were when she first moved to Connecticut 22 years ago. Still, she brings back her favorite spice mix every time she visits her home in Trivandrum, on the southern tip of India. ♦