

RICE

Kao | ຂາວ

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The Heart of a Thai Meal

Rice is the foundation upon which a Thai meal is built. It is the canvas upon which each dish is painted. We eat rice for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and dessert. In a Thai home, the rice is cooked before the meal has even been decided on, because whatever dinner is going to be, there will be rice. Rice is not a side dish.

The importance of rice shows in our language. For us, when we want to say “Let’s have a meal,” we say, “Let’s eat rice.” And our term for the dishes on the table—the curries, the stir-fries, and all of that—is *gub kao*, which literally means “with rice.” If there is no rice in the meal, then it’s highly likely that there are rice noodles.

I discuss rice and sticky rice at length in this chapter because it is important to get them right in order for the meal to be a success. I also included a recipe for *kao tom*, or plain rice porridge, because there are many dishes in this book that make a wonderful *kao tom* pairing.

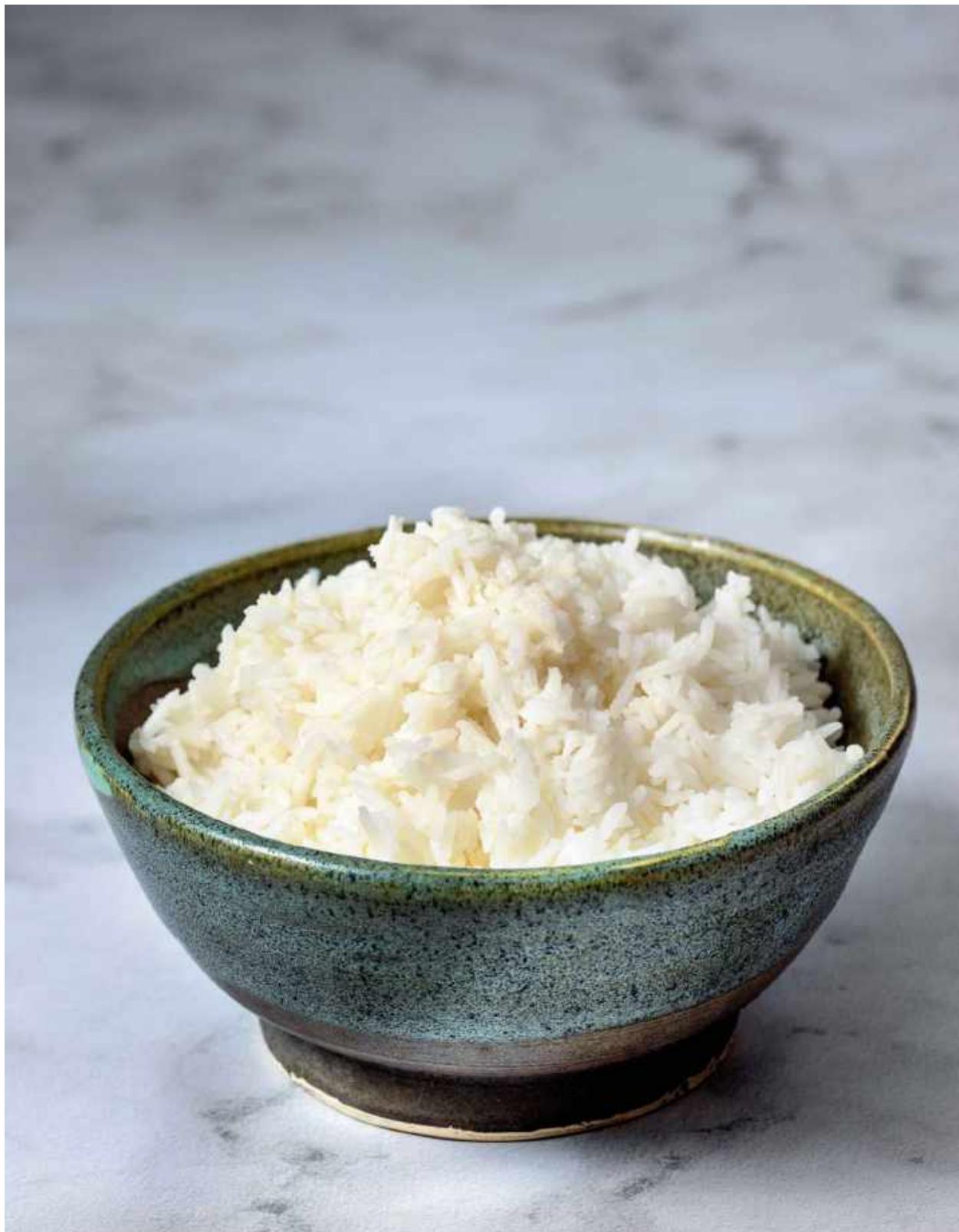
Don’t Add Anything to Your Rice

When I posted a video on how to cook rice on YouTube, I had a few people ask, “Wait, you don’t add any salt?” And my reaction was, “Wait, you *do*?”

In Asia, our rice is always served plain. No salt, no oil, no butter—just rice. This is because, as I said, rice is meant to be a canvas for other dishes. It’s not a carb you eat *alongside* other things, like mashed potatoes, it is supposed to be eaten *in the same bite* as other things. (Note: There is such a thing as coconut rice, but that’s traditionally served with only a few specific dishes, and is actually not all that common in Thailand.)

Also, if your experience with rice has been with generic “long grain white rice” or rice that comes in a box, I can understand why you might need to add salt and butter to it. But properly cooked, genuine Thai jasmine rice is delicious. It’s soft, fragrant, and slightly sweet...it really doesn’t need anything.







Perfect Jasmine Rice

Kao Suay | ข้าวสวย

For many of you, it may seem silly that I should dedicate a section to how to cook rice, especially if you grew up cooking and/or eating rice every single day, like I did. But for others, it's going to resolve all your frustrations over rice that never quite turns out perfectly, even when cooked in a rice cooker.

Use Thai Jasmine Rice

Most Thai meals are served with Thai jasmine rice, known as *hom mali* rice. If you want brown rice, go for brown jasmine rice. It's not about patriotism here; it really is the perfect rice for the kind of food that we eat.

Our dishes include a lot of sauces that need to be absorbed into the rice, and jasmine rice has the perfect combination of fluffiness, softness, and stickiness to allow for that. Short-grain rice is too dense to absorb the liquid. And while basmati rice goes well with thick Indian curries, the grains do not hold on to each other well enough and will just end up swimming in the thinner sauces of Thai curries and stir-fries. Not surprisingly, different cuisines have designed their food to pair perfectly with their kind of rice!

For some Thai meals, sticky rice is the rice of choice. More on that on [this page](#).

How Much Rice to Cook

For a Thai meal, where rice is the main carb, estimate 1 cup (250 ml) uncooked rice for two people. This will yield about 3 cups (750 ml) cooked rice, which is probably a little more than two people will eat

(though if you've got big eaters, you might want to make even more), but it is an absolute catastrophe if rice runs out during a Thai meal, so making just enough is not good enough.

If you didn't grow up in an Asian household, you might think that 1½ cups (375 ml) cooked rice per person sounds like a lot. But remember that rice is the *foundation* of the meal. It is not a side dish. Every bite of food you take is supposed to have rice in it.

Storing and Reheating Rice

Don't worry about cooking too much rice, since it keeps well in the fridge or freezer. In my house, there is always rice. If it's not hot or ready to go into the rice cooker, it's in the fridge. Leftover cooked rice should always be refrigerated, as it can be a source of foodborne illness if left at room temperature for too long.

Jasmine rice will keep in the fridge for a few days with no issues, but if it has been several days, you might want to mix a little water into it when you reheat, to make up for lost moisture. You can also freeze it for up to a month before it starts to dry out. When you freeze rice, keep it separated in portions, in flat disks for easy reheating.

Microwaving is how I reheat it, but be sure to get it back up to steaming hot or it will not regain its softness fully. If you don't have a microwave, steaming is the best way.

Washing the Rice

WHY WASH RICE? You need to wash white rice before cooking, not because the rice is dirty but because there is a tiny amount of loose starch in the rice that's left from the process of removing the bran. If not washed away, it will behave like rice flour in your cooking water, resulting in a layer of rice goo at the bottom of the pot, and also the grains will stick to each other a bit more.

HOW TO WASH RICE: Add plenty of water to the rice and swish it around vigorously with your hands until the water is cloudy, then pour off the water and repeat. For plain rice, wash it two to three times, until the water

is significantly clearer than the first rinse; a little cloudiness is okay. If making fried rice, however, you need to minimize stickiness between the grains, so give it a few extra washes, until the water runs clear.

DO YOU NEED TO WASH BROWN RICE? Brown and any other whole-grain rice doesn't have any loose starch needing to be removed because the bran is still intact. But I always give it one rinse, as there can sometimes be loose rice hulls or dust that will float to the top of the rinsing water and can be poured off.

How Much Water to Use for White Jasmine Rice

In general, for 1 cup (250 ml) white jasmine rice, you will need 1½ cups (310 ml) water. You can use any kind of cup—it doesn't have to be a measuring cup—because what matters is the ratio of rice to water.

However, this is just a starting point. How long the rice was dried before packaging, the specific variety of rice, and your own preferences will affect how much water is really needed. For example, “new crop” rice, which is rice that has been dried for a shorter amount of time after harvesting, doesn't need as much water because it's not as dry. After trying this ratio once, you can then determine whether you need more or less water for the rice you currently have in your cupboard, and you may need to adjust again with a new brand of rice.

How Much Water to Use for Brown Jasmine Rice

If you don't like brown rice, maybe it's because you have not tried Thai brown jasmine rice! Brown jasmine rice is tender and fragrant, and doesn't taste like twigs the way some brown rice can.

In general, for 1 cup (250 ml) brown jasmine rice, you will need 1½ cups (375 ml) water. Again, it is about the ratio, so you can use any kind of cup to measure, even a coffee cup. If possible, allow the rice to soak in the water for at least 30 minutes before cooking, to yield more evenly cooked grains. You could even start soaking it in the morning, before you leave the house, and cook it when you get home. To be clear, the rice should be soaked in the measured amount of water, and cooked in that

same water. You're just giving the rice time to absorb the water before cooking.

Cooking Jasmine Rice in the Rice Cooker

Just because you have a rice cooker doesn't mean all your rice problems are solved. You still need to do the most important thing: add the correct amount of water. Now, you might be wondering, if the rice cooker pot comes with those lines inside that tell you how much water to add, can't you just go by that? Well...sometimes.

Those lines are for specific kinds of rice, so for Japanese machines, for example, they are for short-grain rice, which takes water at a one-to-one ratio—quite different from jasmine rice. Most non-Japanese brands of rice cookers have lines for long-grain rice, which generally works for jasmine rice. But again, you may need to adjust.

Note too that these lines are made for the rice measuring cup that comes with the rice cooker, not a standard measuring cup. The rice cup is equivalent to $\frac{3}{4}$ cup (185 ml) of a standard measuring cup.

How to Cook Jasmine Rice on the Stovetop

Wash the rice as per the instructions on [this page](#), then drain and place in a heavy-bottomed pot with a tight-fitting lid.

Add the measured amount of water (see [this page](#) or above for ratio) to the rice, cover the pot, and bring to a simmer over medium heat.

Once simmering, turn the heat down to low and allow the rice to cook gently for about 20 minutes, until all the water has been absorbed.

After 20 minutes, check that the water has been absorbed by inserting a rubber or silicone spatula along the side of the pot and pushing it slightly to reveal the bottom of the pot. If the bottom of the pot is dry, you can turn off the heat, cover the pot, and let it sit for another 10 minutes to allow any residual moisture to fully absorb into the rice.

Fluff the rice and keep warm until serving. If the rice is too firm, you can add a splash of water, drizzling it evenly over the rice, and let it cook for another 5 to 10 minutes.





Perfect Sticky Rice

Kao Niew | ข้าวเหนียว

Sticky rice is the second most important grain in Thailand, next to jasmine rice, and it's eaten most commonly in the northern and northeastern regions of the country. In desserts, however, it is unquestionably the most important grain because of its chewy and dense texture, which holds up to sweetness really well.

When to Serve Sticky Rice

In savory applications, sticky rice is served in a couple of situations. The first is with a northern or northeastern (*Isaan*) meal, reflecting the two regions in Thailand where sticky rice is most consumed. The other is with grilled or fried meats, such as grilled pork skewers, barbecued chicken, or fried chicken. Eating fried chicken with jasmine rice just isn't as satisfying as eating it with sticky rice, for reasons I cannot explain. I find that any protein-heavy dish is perfect with sticky rice, even the Thai Tuna Salad ([this page](#)).

Choosing the Right Sticky Rice

Not all types of sticky rice are the same, so make sure you buy sticky rice from Thailand. The bag is labeled as either “glutinous rice” or “sweet rice,” even though the rice itself is not sweet—it just signifies that the rice is commonly used for dessert. The grain should be thin and medium length, and opaque white. Short-grain glutinous rice is not what we use in Thailand.

Storing and Reheating Sticky Rice

If you have leftover sticky rice that you don't plan on eating in the next day or two, it's preferable to freeze it for up to 1 month. Sticky rice gradually loses its stickiness when refrigerated, and this becomes obvious after more than two days in the fridge. When you freeze sticky rice, keep it separated in portions, in flat disks for easy reheating.

Because sticky rice dries out easily, the less convenient but best way to reheat it is to steam it. Microwaving is fine, but you'll want to spray or sprinkle the sticky rice with a little bit of water and then cover it with a moist paper towel first. Microwave it until it is steaming hot all the way through; otherwise, it will not regain its softness and stickiness.

To Soak or Not to Soak the Rice

There are generally two methods for making sticky rice. The best and the traditional way is to first soak the rice for at least 3 hours, or 4 hours if your rice is older, until the grains are fully saturated with water. Then you steam the rice *out* of water, allowing the absorbed water to cook the grains from within. This is a foolproof method because there is no chance of adding too much or too little water, so the texture is perfect every time. The downside is that you need at least 3 to 4 hours, which of course we don't always have.

Because of this, people have tried to figure out how to get around the soaking. And while there are ways to do it, they are more finicky and aren't foolproof, since sticky rice is not forgiving when it comes to using the wrong amount of water. Add even a little bit too much, and it'll be too soft. Not enough, and it'll be too crunchy. Not to mention that the amount of water needed varies depending on the brand, the specific variety, and even the age of the rice, so the process will always require a bit of trial and error. This is why soaking is, again, ideal. Once you nail one of the no-soak methods,

though, the result can be perfectly satisfactory, considering that now you can have sticky rice any time without any advance planning!

How to Cook Sticky Rice: 7 Methods

There are many different ways to make sticky rice, and one of these should work with the equipment and time you have. It might be easier to see these methods in action, so check out the video for all seven methods in the QR code below.



7 Ways to Cook Thai Sticky Rice

SOAK AND STEAM METHODS

The first four methods require soaking the rice first. Regardless of which you choose, start by washing your rice in room temperature water a few times, until the water runs mostly clear.

Soak the rice in plenty of room temperature water for a minimum of 3 hours, preferably 4, and up to 12 hours.

Drain the rice directly into your steaming implement, being gentle with it, as the soaked rice grains are quite brittle. Steam the rice until cooked through, using one of the following four methods.

1. TRADITIONAL BAMBOO CONE STEAMER: Add about 2 inches (5 cm) of water to the pot and bring to a boil, making sure the water will be at least 1 inch (2.5 cm) lower than the bottom of the cone. Meanwhile, soak the bottom half of the bamboo cone in water, to prevent the rice from sticking.

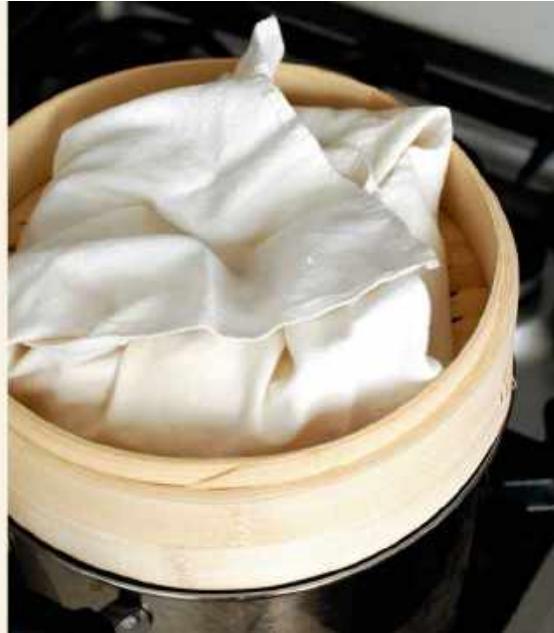
Once the water boils, place the rice in the cone and put a lid on top (any pot lid that fits will do). Set over the hot water and steam for a total of 20 to 30 minutes over high heat (a large batch will take

closer to 30), flipping the rice halfway through. To flip the rice, simply grab the edges of the cone and take it off the water, toss it until the rice ball is flipped over, then put it back on the water to finish steaming. Roll the finished rice into a serving bowl then use a spatula to loosen up the rice ball. Keep covered with a folded kitchen towel until ready to serve.



2. STEAMER RACK: You can use a regular steamer rack that sits on top of a pot, like the bamboo ones you see at dim sum, lined with damp muslin or a double layer of damp cheesecloth. You want to make sure the cloth is damp, to prevent the rice from sticking to the cloth. Fill the pot with about 3 inches (8 cm) of water and bring to a boil.

Place the rice in the cloth-lined steamer and clear a hole in the middle (so you have a rice doughnut) to allow steam to escape. Leave some space for the steam at the edges as well. Fold the edges of the cloth up to cover the rice and steam for 20 to 25 minutes over high heat. Place the finished rice into a serving bowl then use a spatula to loosen up the rice. Keep covered with a folded kitchen towel until ready to serve.



3. METAL SIEVE: This is a bit of a hack, but it'll work if you have a metal sieve that is the same diameter as a pot. Add some water to the pot, making sure there will be at least 1 inch (2.5 cm) of space between the water and the bottom of the sieve. Bring the water to a boil.

Place the soaked rice in the sieve, but don't fill up the whole sieve or the rice will block the steam from coming up the sides and reaching the rice on top, making a hole in the middle also helps. Put the sieve on top of the pot and cover with a lid. Steam for 20 to 25 minutes over high heat. Place the finished rice into a serving bowl then use a spatula to loosen up the rice. Keep covered with a folded kitchen towel until ready to serve.



4. SOAK-STEEP-STEAM: *For extra-soft sticky rice that stays soft when cool.*

Sticky rice made using the traditional soak-and-steam method is perfect when hot, but once cool it dries out and hardens quite quickly, and it needs to be remoistened and reheated to get soft again. So, if you're going to serve it at a potluck, or if you're taking it on a picnic where the rice will sit out for a while, there is a hack to make rice that will stay soft when cool.

After soaking, drain the rice and place it in a heatproof bowl. Pour hot off-the-boil water over the rice, just enough to cover it, and steep uncovered for 10 minutes. Drain the rice and then steam as usual.

This method forces the rice to absorb a little bit more water. The rice will cook up softer, and it won't be quite as chewy when it's hot, but after it cools down to room temperature it will stay soft and is perfectly fine to eat without reheating.

NO-SOAK METHODS

Still game to try making sticky rice without soaking? Below are a few methods I've used successfully. But first...

Wash the rice in room temperature water a few times until the water runs mostly clear.

Using a sieve, drain the rice extremely well, as any extra water can make the rice mushy. Shake the sieve until water is no longer dripping from the rice.

Measure the water at the ratio of one part rice to two-thirds part water. So, if you're using 1 cup (250 ml) rice, you'll need $\frac{2}{3}$ cup (160 ml) water. This is a starting point only, so if you find that your rice comes out a little too firm or too soft with this ratio, which is normal because of the natural variability of rice, you can adjust the amount of water next time.

Now cook the rice using one of the following methods.

5. STEAM THE BOWL: Put the rice and water in a heatproof bowl and stir the rice to break up any clusters. Cover the bowl with a plate to prevent condensation from dripping into the rice, and steam the bowl over boiling water for 25 to 30 minutes. You will need more time if making a larger amount. If you can, let the rice sit in the bowl for as long as you have time for before steaming it; even a very brief soak will be better than nothing!



6. RICE COOKER: This method doesn't work with all rice cookers, but if you have one, it's worth a try to find out, because it'll mean making sticky rice is as easy as making any other rice.

For rice cookers with only one "Cook" button, it's hit and miss depending on how high the heat is. If it cooks the rice gently enough, it can work, but if the heat is too high, it'll overcook the outside and undercook the inside.

If you have a multifunction machine that has a "sweet rice" mode, use that—it's meant for sticky rice and it should do the job very well. My Zojirushi rice cooker has this function and does an excellent job, but it's best with a small amount of rice. Larger amounts yield some unevenness, though it is still acceptable. If your rice cooker doesn't have a sweet rice function but does have a brown rice function, it's worth trying that out, as it's supposed to cook rice more slowly.

Simply add the washed rice and the measured amount of water to the rice cooker, give it a stir to break up any clusters of rice, and let it do its thing. As with the steam-the-bowl method, if you can, let the rice sit in the water for as long as you have time for before cooking it; even a very brief soak will be better than nothing.

7. MICROWAVE: This method should be your last resort, as it's quite finicky and yields less than ideal rice. But in times of desperation—when you have BBQ chicken in your dorm room and only *kao niew* will do—it will work well enough.

Start out with a quick soak by placing the rice in a microwave-safe bowl and adding hot off-the-boil water so it comes up about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch (1.2 cm) over the rice; let it sit for 15 minutes. Drain very well, then add the measured amount of cold water.

Cover the rice with a microwave-safe plate and microwave on full power for 3 minutes. Stir the rice to distribute any hot spots, then microwave it again for 2 minutes, then stir, being sure to fold the bottom up to the top. Microwave it one last time for 1 minute, then stir and let it sit, covered, for 5 minutes before serving.

Note: I tested this using a 900-watt microwave, and when I used a 1100-watt machine, I reduced the first round to 2 minutes. Your machine might require more or less time, but the idea is that you want to take it out and stir it a couple of times in between intervals of cooking. You can also experiment with a longer soaking time and using a little less water, or try using a longer cooking time at lower power. There are lots of variables you can play around with here!

Plain Rice Porridge

Kao Tom | ຂາວຕົ້ນ

While we eat jasmine rice with most meals, sometimes we eat something a little more comforting and soothing: rice porridge. Rice porridge, or *kao tom*, is an integral part of the Thai diet, yet it is so little known outside Thailand. Simply put, it's rice cooked with a lot of water so that it has the consistency of loose oatmeal. Because of the large amount of water, a bowl of *kao tom* actually contains very little rice, making it very light, which is why it is most commonly consumed when you don't want a heavy meal: at breakfast, late at night, or when you're sick.

I have a theory that the tradition of *kao tom* for breakfast started because it's the perfect way to repurpose old, dry rice left over from last night's dinner. And indeed, when I see rice in the fridge looking dry, it's my cue to make *kao tom*.

What to Eat with Kao Tom

You can eat anything with *kao tom* provided it's not too soupy or saucy, since the rice is already wet—so no curries. But salads, stir-fries, egg dishes, and fried fish are all commonly eaten with *kao tom*. Also, because of its plain flavor, we love to pair it with salty preserved ingredients such as salted duck eggs, salted fish, pickled mustard greens, or preserved daikon radish. Try serving it with Thai Tuna Salad ([this page](#)), Chinese Sausage Salad ([this page](#)), Ginger Soy Chicken ([this page](#)), or Kabocha Squash & Thai Basil Stir-Fry ([this page](#)).

How to Make Kao Tom

Although you can make *kao tom* from uncooked rice, it's much easier and faster to start with cooked rice. For a healthier *kao tom*, you can mix in some brown, red, or black rice, but keep at least 30% white rice to maintain a creamy texture.

For water, use a ratio of one part cooked rice to two parts water, and you can cook it either on the stovetop or in a rice cooker (see the instructions for both methods on [this page](#)).

An important note for serving: after it's done, *kao tom* will continue to thicken as it sits, as the rice continues to absorb more water. So, if you find it has gotten too thick when you're ready to serve, simply stir in some hot water to loosen it.

STOVETOP: Add the rice and the water to a pot and bring to a boil over high heat. Once boiling, turn the heat down to low to maintain a gentle simmer. Let it simmer for about 15 to 20 minutes, uncovered, stirring occasionally once it starts to thicken to make sure nothing is sticking. The rice is done when the grains are burst open and the porridge has a loose oatmeal consistency. You can adjust the thickness of the porridge to your taste by adding more water to loosen or by simmering it longer to thicken.

RICE COOKER: Add the water and the rice to a rice cooker and press the "Cook" button. Let it cook until the rice cooker stops, but check in on it occasionally after about 15 minutes or so to give it a stir and make sure there's still enough water in the pot. You may also decide that it's done before the rice cooker stops, depending on the consistency you want. Here I'm assuming you have a simple rice cooker with no porridge function; if you have a porridge mode, you can follow the manufacturer's instructions for that.



