

CHICKEN TIKKA MASALA

Serves 4 to 6.

By Dennis W. Viau; modified from several recipes.

When I learned chicken tikka masala is one of the ten most popular foods in the world, I decided it was worth trying. Unlike classic tiramisu, there doesn't seem to be much consensus on the procedure for making this dish; so I came up with my own. This is a complex recipe, but the result is worth the effort.



Ingredients:

For the Garam Masala Spice Mix (from a recipe by Alton Brown):

2 tablespoons cardamom seeds

2 tablespoons coriander seeds

1 tablespoon cumin seeds

1 tablespoon brown mustard seeds

2 tablespoons black peppercorns

20 whole cloves

1 dried arbol chile, stemmed, seeded, and crumbled

1 2½-inch (6.4cm) cinnamon stick, broken in half

1 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg

(For many of the spices above I had the ground spice, not the whole seeds, so I substituted. See below.)

For the Marinade:

1 cup (237ml/240g) good plain yogurt (the kind with live active cultures)

2 tablespoons lemon juice

2 teaspoons ground cumin

2 teaspoons red pepper

2 teaspoons black pepper

1 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon fresh minced ginger

For the Sauce:

1½ pounds (600g) boneless, skinless chicken, either light meat, dark, or both

2 tablespoons unsalted or clarified butter (or other high-temperature oil for frying, such as a peanut oil)

1 medium onion (8 to 9 ounces/225 to 255g); diced

2 cloves garlic; minced

2 teaspoons freshly grated ginger

1 28-ounce (794g) can plum tomatoes; partially puréed

1 tablespoon tomato paste

1 teaspoon ground coriander

½ teaspoon ground cumin

1 teaspoon paprika

½ teaspoon turmeric

1 teaspoon garam masala (more if you like a stronger spice flavor)

Optional: ½ to 1 teaspoon cayenne

Optional: 1 to 2 dried árbol chiles (or jalapeño, serrano, etc.—as hot as you like them)

1 cup (237ml) heavy (whipping) cream

½ teaspoon salt

¼ cup fresh cilantro; chopped

Juice of ½ lemon

Directions:

Heat a small (8-inch/20 cm) skillet over medium-high flame and add the spice seeds, chili, and the cinnamon stick. Stir constantly to toast, about 3 to 4 minutes, and then transfer to a heat-safe bowl to cool. If substituting ground spices, toast any whole seeds first, as directed above. Place the ground spices in the skillet and heat for only a few seconds (they'll toast quickly), then transfer to a bowl to cool. When everything is cool, place the spices in a clean spice grinder or coffee mill and grind until reduced to a fine powder, about 1 minute. Can be stored in an air-tight jar for up to one month.

Combine all the marinade ingredients in a medium-large bowl. Add the chicken pieces, pressing them down into the marinade. Cover and let marinate 3 to 6 hours, preferably overnight, in the refrigerator.

To make the sauce: Heat the butter (or oil) in a large, heavy pot, such as a cast iron dutch oven, over medium heat and sauté the onions until the color changes to a medium golden, about 10 minutes. To prevent dark browning, reduce the heat as the onions cook. In the last stage the flame will be at its lowest setting.

Add the garlic and fresh ginger. Cook an additional minute or two.

While the onions are cooking, lightly purée the plum tomatoes in a blender. Small chunks of tomato will add texture. Add to the pan when the onions and garlic are done, stirring in the tomato paste as well. Blend. Add the spices (coriander, cumin, paprika, turmeric, and masala). If you prefer a hotter sauce, you can add cayenne.

Adjust the heat to medium-low and bring the sauce to a light boil. Cover, reduce the heat to low, and simmer 15 to 20 minutes, stirring occasionally, especially toward the end when the sauce is thicker.

Add the heavy cream, blend, and remove the sauce from the heat. Taste and adjust for salt. Leave covered and set aside. It will be warmed again in a later step.

Remove the chicken from the marinade, scraping the marinade from the surface. Discard the marinade. Cook the chicken on an outdoor grill, a stove top cast iron grill, in a skillet, or under the broiler, until thoroughly cooked or an internal temperature of 160°F (71°C). Total cooking time depends on the chicken pieces used and the type of cooking utensil. When cooked, transfer to a plate to cool.

Cut the chicken into 1-inch (2.5cm) pieces and stir into the sauce. Add the lemon juice, return the pan to the flame, and heat until it begins to bubble. Serve over rice or with naan bread.

For the rice, I chose to boil $\frac{3}{4}$ cup (142g) each of brown rice and wild rice in 4 cups of chicken stock for 30 minutes in a covered pan over low heat. Then I added $\frac{3}{4}$ cup white rice to the pan, covered, and simmered for an additional 15 minutes. Check for moisture toward the end of the cooking time. If the pan appears to be going dry before the rice is tender, add a little water, about $\frac{1}{4}$ cup (60ml) and continue cooking. Finish with a couple tablespoons of butter and fluff with a fork.

The **Step By Step** guide begins on the following page.

STEP-BY-STEP

1



This is my collection of spices for mixing the garam masala. I used a formula from Alton Brown; however, his recipe calls for all whole-seed spices. Most of my spices were already ground. I therefore substituted as best as I could guess on the amounts. Garam masala is a spice mix that is typically available in Indian food stores. It can also be purchased on line.

2



Using my 8-inch cast iron skillet, I toasted the whole spices first for a couple minutes. Then I transferred them to a bowl to cool.

3



Then I added the mixed ground spices and toasted them for only a few seconds. You can easily burn them, destroying the flavor, if you leave them in the hot pan too long. Transfer to a bowl and let cool.

4



Whole spices can be ground in a spice mill. I have a coffee grinder that I use only for grinding spices. Grind for about a minute until reduced to a powder. To remove any larger pieces, you can sift the mixture through a small sieve or strainer.

5



Store the spice mixture in an air-tight jar. It can be kept for about a month.

6



These are my ingredients for the marinade. I am using a good plain yogurt with live cultures. Enzymes in yogurt tenderize meats. The spices will add flavor. When possible I use freshly picked lemons because my neighbor has a lemon tree and she does not use her lemons.

7



Combine all the marinade ingredients in a medium-large bowl and mix well.

8



I prefer dark meat rather than light meat, so I am using skinless, boneless chicken thighs. You can choose whichever cut of chicken you like best. Four thighs weighed 1 pound 5 ounces, about 600 grams. Place the chicken pieces in the marinade, covering the chicken well, and then cover the bowl and refrigerate 3 to 6 hours, preferably overnight.

9



These are the ingredients for my sauce. I set aside a one-cup block of frozen chicken stock (near the salt above) to thin the sauce toward the end of cooking, if necessary. It wasn't necessary.

10



To prepare the sauce, start by dicing the onion.

11



Heat butter or oil in a heavy-bottomed pan over medium-high heat and add the diced onion. Cook until they begin to brown, reducing the heat periodically as the onions cook. Toward the end of the cooking time the flame will be at its lowest setting. When the onions are done, add the garlic and ginger. Cook a minute or two longer.

12



While the onions are sautéing, lightly purée the plum tomatoes. They don't need to be smooth. Larger pieces will add texture to the sauce.

13

Add the tomatoes to the pan with the tomato paste. Stir to blend. Add the coriander, cumin, paprika, turmeric, and masala. If you prefer a spicier sauce, you can add hot chilies or cayenne. Bring the mixture to a light bowl, reduce the heat to low, cover, and simmer 15 to 20 minutes, stirring occasionally.

14

At the end of the cooking time, add the heavy cream, blend, and adjust for salt.

15

Remove the chicken from the marinade and scrape most of the marinade from the surface. You don't need to remove it completely. Discard the marinade.

16

I am using my cast iron stove top grill to cook the chicken. Some recipes call for broiling it, others say to pan fry the chicken, others recommend cooking on an outdoor grill. Choose the method that works best for you.

17

Place the chicken pieces on the grill and cook 6 minutes on one side. If you want pronounced bar marks on the chicken, don't move them until it is time to turn them over.

18

Turn the chicken and cook on the other side until thoroughly cooked or the internal temperature comes up to 160°F (71°C). On my grill, the ends over the stove burners produced good bar marks. So when I turned the chicken, I moved the pieces without bar marks to the ends of the grill. When the chicken is cooked, transfer to a plate to cool.

19



One traditional method of serving chicken tikka masala is to spoon it over cooked rice. For this dish I used three kinds of rice—wild, brown, and white. I cooked the wild rice and brown rice in chicken stock for 30 minutes, then I added the white rice to cook and absorb the remainder of the liquid in the pan. Total cooking time was 45 to 50 minutes.

20



Cut the cooked chicken into 1-inch (2.5cm) pieces and stir into the sauce. When the rice is nearly cooked, heat the sauce mixture until it just begins to boil, stirring it occasionally to heat evenly.

21

To finish the sauce, add about $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of chopped fresh cilantro and the juice of $\frac{1}{2}$ lemon.

22

Here is my rice mixture. The different colors and textures add interest to what might otherwise be a boring rice.



To plate, spoon some of the rice onto a plate and then spoon chicken and sauce over the top. Serve immediately.

Conclusion

This chicken tikka masala is not a simple dish. There are easier recipes, but I wanted one that would capture the textures and flavors that made this dish one of the most popular foods in the world.

Notes

Although some sources claim chicken tikka masala originates from India, most sources say the dish was first created in a curry house in London, England. It is so popular in England, it is considered one of the country's national dishes.