

## Tastes of Thailand - Thai Condiments

### Thai Sauces



**Fish Sauce** (*Nahm Bplah*), a pale amber liquid derived from a brew of fish or shrimp, is considered by many chefs as the single most important flavoring ingredient in Thai cooking. Used like salt in Western cooking and soy sauce in Chinese cooking, good-quality fish sauce imparts a distinct aroma and flavor of its own, often referred to as “umami.” The savory, subtle taste of umami, which comes from glutamate, rounds out other flavors and helps make food taste delicious. Not only is fish sauce indispensable in the Thai kitchen, but it is rich in magnesium, calcium, and

Vitamin B6. Water or juice extracted from fish flesh through prolonged salting and fermentation creates fish sauce. The sauce is produced from fresh or saltwater varieties of fish that are too small to consume, making it very valuable to the fish industry. Some regions in Thailand have their own popular versions of fermented fish sauce that add “down home” flavors to dishes.

**Shrimp paste** (*Gkapi*) is a concentrated product of salty, finely ground, sun-dried shrimp and is one ingredient in Thai curry paste. Packaged in small, plastic jars, Thai shrimp paste is the consistency and color of thick mud or soft clay. It has a very strong, fishy flavor and smell, so keep that lid on tight! A small amount of this concentrated paste adds a significant, delicious shrimp flavor to foods



with which it is cooked. Try one or two teaspoons in soups and fish sauces. Rich in protein and vitamin B, shrimp paste is an essential ingredient in making chili and curry pastes. When pounded and blended with an array of aromatic herbs and spices, shrimp paste loses its powerful smell and dispenses a lovely fragrance. Thais like to use *gkapi* as the primary ingredient in a very pungent dipping sauce for raw or lightly blanched vegetables and fried fish, called *nahm prik gkapi*.



**Chili Sauce** is one of the most popular dipping sauces in Thailand and originates in the coastal province of Sri Racha on the Eastern seaboard. Similar in consistency to ketchup, this bright red sauce is available in different degrees of hotness. The hottest version usually sports a “strong” warning sticker near the lid. Although chili sauce is sometimes referred to as Thai Tabasco sauce, it is sweeter and has a stronger garlic essence. Thai chili sauce is used at the table to add quick heat and chili flavor to finished dishes and in cooking in combination with other flavoring ingredients. Thai chili sauce is especially tasty served on grilled or fried chicken or as a replacement for cocktail sauce with cold shrimp.

**Oyster Sauce** is used extensively to season stir-fried vegetables and as a flavor ingredient in meat, seafood, and noodle dishes. This richly flavored, dark brown sauce is made from oysters, combined with salt and water, thickened with cornstarch, and color-enhanced with caramel or burnt sugar. Unlike the Chinese



sauces from which Thai oyster sauce originated, Thai versions are less salty and have a more pronounced oyster flavor.

**Roasted Chili Jam** (*Num Prik Pao*) is made primarily from roasted red chilies and ground dried shrimp. Treasured for its delightful mellow taste, the chili jam adds flavor to soups, including the popular hot-and-sour soup *Tom Yam Kung*, as well as to stir-fried vegetables, shrimp, noodle dishes, salad dressings, and dipping sauces. Because of its sweet taste, roasted chili jam often is spread on toast, crackers, or shrimp chips for a quick snack. Frequently Thais dip vegetables such as cucumbers, cabbage, and yard-long beans into the sauce and eat them with rice. *Num prik pao* also is delicious eaten with rice alone.



**Tamarind Paste** (*Makham Piak*) is one of the primary souring agents in Thai cooking, imparting a delicious, fruity tartness to soups, salads, stir-fried dishes, curries, and sauces. Tamarind paste is the pulp from the ripe pod of the tamarind tree. When the pods ripen from green to brown, the sweet-tart, dark brownish-red sticky pulp inside, which surrounds smooth brown seeds, is removed and compressed into blocks to preserve it. Tamarind pulp is high in vitamins C and B, calcium, carotenes, and antioxidants and may be used to improve digestion, relieve gas, and fight colds. A natural coolant, tamarind juice makes a refreshing drink on hot days.



Coconuts play an important role in Thai cooking. **Coconut Milk**, the diluted cream pressed out from the thick, white flesh of a well-matured coconut, is the base of most Thai curry sauces. To make the curry sauce, coconut cream first is reduced over fairly high heat to break down the cream and allow the oil to separate. This oil picks up the color of the curries, resulting in an appetizing appearance. Then the curry paste is added and fried in the coconut oil until all the herb and spice flavors are released and blended. The remaining coconut milk is added to finish the sauce.



Many independent studies have shown that the saturated fat in coconut milk is beneficial, easily metabolized to provide quick energy. Cultures around the world that depend on coconut as their main source of fat have proven to be free of heart disease. The principle fatty acid in coconut milk, lauric acid, is abundant in human mother's milk and known to promote normal brain development and contribute to healthy bones. It also has important anti-carcinogenic and anti-pathogenic properties and is less likely to cause weight gain than polyunsaturated oils. While thick coconut milk is high in calories, "lite" versions are available.

**Coconut juice or coconut water**, the liquid inside young, fresh coconuts, makes a delicious, healthful, thirst-quenching drink on its own and can be blended with fruit juices to create other beverages. Coconut water contains electrolytes, calcium, potassium, and magnesium. In Thailand and increasingly in the United States, juice is not just found in cans or bottles, but sipped through a straw stuck into fresh, green coconuts.

**Desiccated coconut**, dried, shredded or flaked meat from mature coconuts, imparts texture and coconut flavor to food. It is used in sweetened form in desserts and in savory dishes when unsweetened.

**Coconut oil** may be used as a cooking oil or rubbed on the skin or hair. It has been recognized for its potent anti-viral, anti-fungal and anti-microbial effects and is rich in vitamins and minerals.

**Palm sugar** (*Nahm Dtahn Bpeep/Buk*) and **coconut sugar** (*Nahm Dtahn Maprao*) are the most common sugars found in Thai cooking. Although they have different properties, these two sugars often are used interchangeably. Palm sugar comes from the palmyra or sugar palm, while coconut sugar is derived from the coconut palm, but both are produced from the sweet, watery sap that drips from cut flower buds. The sap is collected each morning and boiled in huge woks on the plantations until a sticky sugar remains, which then is whipped and dropped in lumps on cellophane or into containers. Because palm and coconut sugars are not highly processed as is traditional brown sugar, the color, consistency, flavor, and level of sweetness may vary from batch to batch, even within the same brand. Although these two sugars are used primarily for making sweets and desserts, their creamy, caramel-like sweetness also enhances the flavor of curries and rich sauces for savory dishes.

## Thai Curry Pastes

Curry, a savory, stew or soup, is popular in Thai restaurants around the world. The essential ingredient is curry paste, a blend of fresh and dried herbs and spices. Most Thai curries consist of coconut milk or water, curry paste, and meat, poultry, or fish, and they tend to be thinner than their Indian cousins. Brimming with vitamins and protein, curry is a staple of the Thai diet. Following are descriptions of the various types of curry paste that form the base for a wide range of Thai dishes.

**Green curry paste** (*Kreung Gaeng Keo Wahn*) traditionally is the hottest of Thai curries. Green curry paste usually is a blend of fresh green chilies, shallots, shrimp paste, sea salt, and such herbs and spices as lemongrass, galangal, white pepper, coriander root, garlic, and kaffir lime rind. Sweet basil leaves, round green eggplant, and kaffir lime leaves add to the overall lovely green hue of the finished dish.

Green curry is popular in Thailand, especially as green chicken curry (*Gaeng Keow Wahn Gy*) and with fish dumplings. Although this very spicy curry paste is typically Thai, it has become part of fusion food and features in recipes for salmon, spaghetti, pizza, and other dishes creative cooks concoct.



**Yellow curry** (*Gaeng Leung* or *Gaeng Karee*) is a Thai staple that incorporates Indian and Thai spices and flavors. Yellow curry paste (*Nam Prik Gaeng karee*) is a mellow sweet-spicy paste blend of turmeric and curry powder pounded together with coriander, cumin, lemongrass, galangal, shrimp paste, dried red chilies, sea salt, ginger, garlic and shallots. This mild paste is usually used in fish stews or combined with coconut milk, chicken, onions, and

potatoes for yellow chicken curry.



**Red curry paste** (*Kreung Gaeng Phet Daeng*), with its distinct rusty hue, is the most versatile of Thai curry pastes and is used in the widest range of dishes, including coconut milk-based red curry chicken with bamboo (*Gaeng Phet Naw My Gy*) and Thai curried fish mousse in banana leaf cups (*Haw Mohk*). Red curry paste may be made with dried long red chilies (*Prik Chee Fah*), cilantro roots, coriander, cumin, garlic, shallots, kaffir lime rind, white peppercorn, lemongrass, shrimp paste, sea salt, and galangal. This very spicy curry paste often is added to chicken, duck, beef, pork, shrimp, and stir-fry dishes.

**Panang Curry**, named after the island off Malaysia's west coast, is richer, sweeter, and drier than some other types of Thai curry. Panang curry is notable for its thick coconut cream. Panang curry paste may include dried red long chilies, shallots, garlic, galangal, lemongrass, kaffir lime rind, coriander root, white pepper, salt, and shrimp paste. This curry is especially popular with foreigners because of the peanuts that sometimes are added to the dish. Usually Thais prepare this fiery hot curry with beef, a dish called *Panang Nuea*.



**Masaman curry** includes Persian-influenced spices, making it unique among Thai curries. Originating in the deep south of Thailand on the border with Malaysia, where the population is largely Muslim, Masaman curry most often is prepared with lamb or beef, rather than pork, which Islam forbids. Masaman curry paste combines dried red chilies, shallots, garlic, galangal, lemongrass, coriander, cumin, cloves, white pepper, salt and shrimp paste. The thick, stew-like curry dish itself

includes peanuts and whole spices such as cinnamon, white cardamom, and nutmeg, which is unusual for a Thai curry, and has a mild, slightly sweet taste, with the flavor of roasted spices. Masaman curry chicken (*Gaeng Masaman Gai*) is a favorite dish in Thai restaurants in the United States.