

Chicken Tikka Masala

Making curries can be tricky but rewarding. My own personal love affair with spices and heat has increased gradually year in and year out but I still think the key is getting the balance right, the flavour of the food that is being spiced must always be there.

To make 8 skewers (4 pieces of chicken on each skewer)

Ingredients

4 chicken breasts, skinless and cut into 2.5cm (1") chunks

The marinade:

15 ml (1 tbsp) fresh grated ginger

3 garlic cloves, crushed

30 ml (2 tbsp) lemon juice

10 ml (2 tsp) ground cumin

2.5 ml (1/2 tsp) chilli powder

2.5 ml (1/2 tsp) garam masala

80 ml natural yoghurt

2.5 ml (1/2 tsp) turmeric

15 ml (1 tbsp) tomato puree

Instructions

Fry the cumin seeds to bring out the oils and the flavour, chop the garlic and skin the ginger and combine this with the rest of the ingredients in a bowl. Add the natural yoghurt and lemon juice last and stir it in immediately otherwise it will curdle.

Chop the chicken into tikka pieces, which basically means chunks, add to the marinade and coat it thoroughly. Cover and leave to marinate overnight or for at least 4 hours.

To cook them, pre-heat the grill. Place 4 pieces of chicken onto each skewer and grill until tender. To prevent the chicken sticking to the grill pan, try laying each end of the skewer on pieces of potato to raise the meat off the tray. Serve with the masala sauce.

Alan's tips

To chop garlic, roughly chop it first then place the chopped garlic on top of some salt, using the blade of a knife and a twisting action (as if riding a motorbike), squash the garlic into the salt, simply rev and go!

To remove the skin from ginger try taking a teaspoon and just scraping it along the skin. A very thin layer of skin will be removed. If you buy or have peeled too much ginger, simply wrap the peeled ginger in a freezer bag and freeze it. This

will last for up to 3 months and each time you need ginger, simply grate it from frozen.

Q. Ever wondered what Garam Masala is made of?

A. Coriander seed, black pepper, cumin, allspice, cardomom, turmeric, nutmeg, ginger, cloves, bay leaves, cinnamon, chilli powder.

Wonder ingredients..

The strong smell from garlic is actually a part of the plant's defensive mechanism. It's the same with chillies: the intense heat is meant to stop animals from eating it, rather than tempting us to cook with it. Some spices, like chilli, turmeric and garlic, actually kill some bacteria. So marinating meat in the right spices can help to keep bacteria levels down. This would have been much more important in hot countries and where people had less access to refrigeration. Ginger is another great ingredient, it actually helps your digestion and your circulation and it even interferes with some of the areas in your brain that are in charge of making you feel nauseous so can help with travel and even morning sickness.

Tenderising..

Acid in the yoghurt and lemon juice helps break down the muscle fibres in the meat, making it more tender. You can add pineapple or papaya too, as they contain enzymes which speed up the reaction, making the meat tenderise faster. The longer you leave the meat in the marinade for, the better. You give time for the meat to get more tender, and the fat in the chicken has time to soak up all the flavours, making it tastier.

Masala sauce

Unsalted butter to make the ghee

1 onion, finely sliced

15 ml (1 tbsp) of ghee

3 tomatoes, peeled and chopped

2.5 ml (1/2 tsp) yellow mustard seeds

2 fresh green chillies, chopped

120 ml (4 fl oz) coconut milk

45 ml (3 tbsp) chopped fresh mint

45 ml (3 tbsp) chopped fresh coriander

2 garlic cloves, crushed

Instructions:

First make the ghee, also known as clarified butter, this is essential to Indian cooking and it's easy to make your own. All you need to do is take a knob of butter place it into a pan and bring it up to the boil, let it boil rapidly for a few moments before taking it off the heat. Leave it in a warm area, the fats will rise to the surface (the ghee). Use a spoon to skim off the fat foam that has risen to

the top. Pour or spoon the clear liquid (ghee) into a container, leaving the unwanted thicker milky substance at the bottom.

Heat the ghee in a medium saucepan and add the onions, stir in the onion and soften, but don't colour, for 3 - 5 minutes. Then add the mustard seeds, chilli, garlic, tomato and coconut milk. Bring to the boil then simmer for 20 minutes and finally stir through the mint and coriander. Puree in a liquidiser or food processor and serve with the chicken.

Alan's tip

Stick your onion into the freezer peeled with the root on, leave it for two to three minutes, and then bring it out and chop your onion. This will chill down the vapours that would normally be released in the air therefore preventing all those tears.

Chillis

When using chilli peppers, a basic rule of thumb is: the smaller the hotter, the larger the milder, and red chillies are not necessarily hotter than green ones.

Before you start preparing chillies, place a little oil on a little kitchen paper and rub this onto your hands. It will give you a protective layer that will act as a barrier between fingers and the chilli.

Great Ghee

It's really worth making ghee. Butter itself isn't so good for frying because the milk and the whey burn once you start getting to high temperatures. Just using the butter fat means you can get to those really high temperatures, which are much better for bringing out the flavours of the other ingredients.

Cutting Onions

As soon as you cut into an onion you get a whole cascade of chemical reactions. Some sulphur compounds are produced which react with the water in your eyes, producing sulphuric acid. So it's not surprising they make you cry. Alan's tip of putting them in the fridge will help to stop the molecules ending up as a gas and getting to your eyes.

Cooking Onions

Cooking onions slowly and gently for a long time makes them much sweeter. The carbohydrates in onions break down more and more into sugars; and the more sugars, the sweeter your onions. Some of the odour molecules produced in onions also seem to be converted into a complex molecule that's around 60 times sweeter than sugar!

Killer Chilli

Capsaicin is the lethal thing in chilli- it's actually used in anti-mugger sprays it's so nasty. It seems a bit bizarre that we enjoy it so much, when it's intended, by the plant, to be off-putting. Our bodies' natural responses are all defensive ones: pain; watery eyes; a runny nose. Our enjoyment of chillies could perhaps be linked to the way we can enjoy risk-taking: especially when it's a controlled risk. Some have even suggested that the brain secretes endorphins, the body's own opiate substances, in response to a burning tongue, which will give the whole meal even more of a pleasurable feeling. Capsaicin, just like many flavours, gets absorbed by oil, not water. So if you have oil covering your hands when you chop chillis, the capsaicin will get absorbed into that rather than you. Similarly, if your mouth is feeling too hot, forget about water or lager - drink or eat something with fat in to soak up the flavours. Coconut milk, cream and yoghurt should all do the trick. It's no co-incidence that Indian restaurants serve their yoghurt-based lassi drinks.

Accompaniment

Saffron rice goes well with the chicken for several reasons. Rice makes a great starch accompaniment that is nutritious and inexpensive, it also absorbs flavours within and around the dish. I have used saffron not only for its flavour, but for its contrasting colour to the tikka.

Before cooking savoury rice, remember to wash it. This removes the starch that has been created as the grains rub against each other in the packet. Starch makes the water and the rice very sticky and stodgy, definitely not the fluffy grains perfect with a good curry.

Saffron Rice.

3 tblsp ghee or clarified butter
2 medium onions, finely sliced
2 sticks of cinnamon
6 cardomom pods
6 cloves
1/4 tsp saffron
550g (18 oz) long grain rice
4 cups /32 fl oz /1 litre chicken stock
1 tsp salt

Instructions

Heat the ghee or clarified butter in a large heavy based pan and fry the sliced onions. Add the cinnamon, cardomons, saffron and cloves. Cook for 3 - 4 minutes gently. Add the rice and stir well. Add the stock and salt and simmer. Turn the heat down to very low. Cover with a tight fitting lid and cook for around 20 minutes. Turn off the heat and leave to stand for 5 - 6 minutes.

Alan's tip

When cooking rice, stir only at the start. Do not stir during the cooking as this breaks the rice and releases starch that turns the rice into a pudding, as opposed to light fluffy grains.