

CHAPTER 10

Classic Thai Soups: Tom Yum, Tom Kha, and Beyond

Soup is a lot like family. Each ingredient enhances the others; each batch has its own characteristics; and it needs time to simmer to reach full flavor.

—Marge Kennedy

In this chapter are fourteen classic Thai soup recipes that you will find in various incarnations throughout Thailand. Even if you’ve never been to Thailand, you will probably recognize the first two recipes: tom yum and tom kha, the iconic soups of Thai cuisine.

The rest of the recipes are not as easy to find outside Thailand. While you may find them on some international Thai menus, they haven’t become as standardized as tom yum and tom kha. They often have dramatically different tastes and ingredients, depending on which region of Thailand they come from. For example, you’ll often find a small selection of noodle soups on international Thai menus, but Thai noodle soups are so diverse with so many influences that it’s almost impossible to find two noodle soups that are the same. I consider that a good thing.

Sometimes it’s good to make recipes without any preconceived idea of how they should taste! Without the expectation of how you think it should be, you’re less likely to be disappointed and think the results are not authentic. But don’t get too hung up on making things authentic. Over time, influences from near and far have shaped and changed Thailand’s cuisine, introducing new foods and flavors. This happens everywhere and is one of the reasons I think the word *authentic*—when describing any cuisine—can be a little misleading. For example, did you know that bird’s eye chiles (and other chile varieties grown in Thailand) are not native to Thailand? They were actually introduced by Portuguese traders in the sixteenth century. Food customs change and evolve too. Traditionally, soup in Thailand was more of a side dish

that would accompany the main meal. While this is still true today, many soups are now full meals on their own, part of busy street-food culture for working folks needing a quick meal. What's considered authentic today probably wasn't considered authentic a hundred years ago, and at the current pace of globalization, it surely won't be considered authentic a hundred years from now.

My point is to allow these recipes to guide you; however, don't feel you have to follow them too literally. Remember Thai Soup Secret #5 (page 31)! You'll learn a lot from making each soup differently every time, altering a few things, changing up the veggies or the meats, and, of course, adjusting the seasonings.

Hot and Sour Soup with Shrimp

Tom Yum Goong

Makes 3 to 4 servings



Thailand's most famous soup, tom yum is the king of all Thai soups. Popular throughout Thailand, it's on every menu in every Thai restaurant outside of Thailand too, and rightfully so. All the quintessential flavors of Thailand are present here, and though variations are widespread, there are three essential elements: The first is the fragrant triple gem of lemongrass, galangal, and kaffir lime infused in broth. The second is the heat of bird's eye chiles. And the

third is seasoning it all to taste with the sour and salty flavors of lime juice and fish sauce.

After those three constants, you'll see tons of differences among recipes for this soup. Shrimp (*goong* means *shrimp*) is the most common protein, though other types of seafood and even chicken can be used too. Some versions use sugar to give it a little added sweetness. Some use different vegetables. Many versions add coconut milk or even cow's milk to give it a creamy consistency. Many also use a canned tom yum paste that's simply dissolved in the broth, though I would encourage you not to take this shortcut as this just can't compare to fresh ingredients! Also, most commercial tom yum pastes use MSG, soybean oil (a very poor-quality oil), and other chemical flavorings.

Chiles, Chiles, Chiles!

Depending on your personal love or hate of heat and spice, you can use as many or as few chiles as you want. Many recipes call for using a lot more than what I've included here, though I've found even just three bird's eye chiles add an intense punch of heat. Start with one chile, taste the soup, and add more if needed. Or leave them out entirely if you want. It won't exactly be traditional without chiles, but who the heck cares. Ask a hundred native Thais what's the most traditional version of tom yum, and you'll get a hundred different answers. All that matters is what you like. Even without chiles, it will still have plenty of flavor.

Ingredients

- 1 quart fish broth, shrimp broth, chicken bone broth (pages 47-54), or water
- 2 stalks lemongrass, cut into ¼-inch thick slices (page 23)
- 1 (1-inch) piece fresh galangal, cut into ⅛- to ¼-inch thick slices
- 8 to 10 kaffir lime leaves, ripped in half
- 1 to 3 bird's eye chiles, sliced into thin rings (see sidebar)
- 1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
- 1 medium tomato, coarsely chopped
- 1 cup oyster, shiitake, or straw mushrooms, wiped clean and coarsely chopped
- ¼ to ½ cup fish sauce, or to taste
- ¼ to ½ cup fresh lime juice, or to taste
- 15 to 20 large shrimp, cleaned and peeled or left whole
- Cooked jasmine rice, for serving (optional)

Seasonings, to Taste

Fish sauce

Coconut sugar

Scallions, finely chopped

Fresh cilantro, coarsely chopped

Lime wedges

Directions

1. Bring the broth to a gentle boil in a medium to large pot over medium-high or high heat. Reduce the heat to medium-low or medium and add the lemongrass, galangal, and kaffir lime leaves and simmer about 10 minutes.
2. Add the bird's eye chiles, onion, tomato, and mushrooms, and simmer for 4 to 5 minutes.
3. Add $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the fish sauce and $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the lime juice, slowly adding more of each, up to $\frac{1}{2}$ cup (or more, to taste).
4. Add the shrimp and simmer for 2 to 3 more minutes, until the shrimp turn pink and are cooked through.
5. Ladle the soup into individual bowls and season with the fish sauce, coconut sugar, scallions, and cilantro to taste. Serve with lime wedges on the side. (Alternatively, you may use any combination of those to suit your own tastes.)
6. For a more complete meal, serve the soup with jasmine rice on the side (if using).

Coconut Chicken Galangal Soup

Tom Kha Gai

Makes 1 to 2 servings



If tom yum goong is the king of Thai soups, tom kha gai is the queen. Some might even say it's superior to tom yum in popularity. Whichever rules supreme, I can't say for sure, but both are equally featured on Thai menus all over the world. And both have many similarities. They both use the triple gem of lemongrass, galangal (*kha* means *galangal*), and kaffir lime leaves. They both use bird's eye chiles. They both use similar seasonings. And they both feature different types of meats, though chicken (*gai* means *chicken*) is probably most commonly