

Monkfish curry with coconut, lime and curry leaves

I like making curries. I find it interesting and fun to build and balance the flavours – sweet, sour, salty, pungent, hot and, above all, clean and pure. Fresh curry leaves lend the most wonderful taste – just the smell of them transports me somewhere hot and exciting. Monkfish is a good choice of fish for curries and wet dishes – its firm, white, meaty flesh is a clean foil for more complex flavours.

Serves 4–6

1 tbsp unsalted butter or ghee
 2 red onions, peeled and finely sliced
 2 tsp mustard seeds
 2 tsp fennel seeds
 1 tsp coriander seeds
 bunch of coriander, roots and stems finely chopped, leaves reserved
 2 garlic cloves, peeled and crushed
 2 red chillies, chopped (seeds left in)
 6 fresh curry leaves
 2 kaffir lime leaves
 juice of 2 limes
 2 tbsp fish sauce
 1 tbsp palm sugar or caster sugar
 2 x 340g jars (or tinned) good-quality peeled plum tomatoes
 800g monkfish fillet
 400ml tin coconut milk
 lime wedges, to serve

Place a large heavy-based saucepan over a medium-low heat. Add the butter and, once it begins to melt, add the sliced onions. Cook over a low heat for 10 minutes, stirring from time to time.

Meanwhile, toast the mustard, fennel and coriander seeds in a dry non-stick frying pan over a medium heat until the spices begin to pop and release their aroma. Be careful not to burn them or they will make the curry taste bitter. Remove from the heat and, while still warm, pound to a rough powder using a pestle and mortar.

Add the ground spices to the cooked, sweet onions along with the chopped coriander root and stems, garlic, chillies and curry leaves. Crush the kaffir lime leaves between your fingers to help release their flavour and add to the pan. Cook for a further 5–6 minutes... your kitchen will smell deliciously fragrant.

Add the lime juice, fish sauce and sugar, stir once or twice and turn up the heat slightly. Add the tomatoes and cook for 15 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Now taste the curry base. The flavour should be warm, slightly sweet, but also sour – the spices should give a deep satisfying base note flavour, the coriander will give it a clean light finish. Pause and consider whether all those flavours are apparent. If not, add a little more lime juice perhaps, or a little more fish sauce to underpin the flavours with a saltiness if needed. This curry base will sit happily for a day or so in the fridge, if you would like to make it ahead.

To finish, warm the curry over a medium heat. Using a sharp knife, slice the monkfish into 2.5cm pieces (it will shrink slightly during cooking). When the curry is simmering, pour in the coconut milk, stir, then add the monkfish. Cook for 3–4 minutes until the fish is just cooked – it will feel firm to the touch.

Scatter over the reserved coriander leaves, ladle into bowls and serve with lime wedges and plain rice or, as I do, with grilled flat bread laced with toasted fennel seeds.

SIDE DISH **Simple White Rice**
 White rice seems like an easy enough dish to make, but it can be deceptively temperamental, quickly dissolving into unpleasant, gummy grains. For really great long-grain rice with distinct, separate grains that didn't clump together, we rinsed the rice of excess starch first. Then, to add a rich dimension, we sautéed the grains in oil before covering them with boiling water. After simmering the rice until all of the liquid was absorbed, we placed a dish towel between the lid and pot to absorb excess moisture and ensure dry, fluffy grains.

SIMPLE WHITE RICE
 SERVES 2

You will need a small saucepan with a tight-fitting lid for this recipe. A nonstick saucepan will help prevent the rice from sticking.

- 1 teaspoon vegetable oil
- ¾ cup long-grain white, basmati, or jasmine rice, rinsed
- 1¼ cups water
- ¾ teaspoon table salt

1. Heat oil in small saucepan over medium heat until shimmering. Stir in rice and cook until edges of grains begin to turn translucent, about 2 minutes. Stir in water and salt and bring to boil. Reduce heat to low, cover, and simmer until all liquid is absorbed, 18 to 22 minutes.
2. Remove saucepan from heat. Remove lid, place folded clean dish towel over saucepan, then replace lid. Let rice sit for 10 minutes, then gently fluff with fork. Serve.

its target temperature. I then grasped each end of the foil sling and transferred the delicate fillets to the platter, carefully sliding the foil out from under them so that I didn't dislodge a single flake. I poured the juices from the pan over and around the fish, topped it with scallions, and drizzled it with the hot oil.

Now the fillets were perfectly moist, and the cooking-liquid-turned-sauce balanced the delicately clean flavors of the fish. Seasoning the cooking liquid with a little sugar, salt, and white pepper (more floral and delicate than black pepper) made those flavors pop even more, but it was a subtle tweak I made to the aromatics that really gave the sauce depth: Rather than place the garlic, ginger, and scallions on top of the fish, where they turned sadly limp, I laid them in the baking pan underneath the foil sling so that they could infuse the cooking liquid and wouldn't cling to the cooked fillets. Once the fillets were safely deposited on the serving platter, I strained the spent aromatics and drizzled the flavorful liquid over the fish.

I scattered the fresh scallions over the fillets and was about to pour the oil over the fish when

TESTING Metal Spatulas

A good metal spatula is an essential component of any cook's toolkit. Often referred to as a turner or flipper—likely to avoid confusion with thicker silicone spatulas that are used to fold and scrape—it's used to flip or transfer foods whenever we're working with metal cook- or bakeware. (When cooking in more delicate nonstick pans, we prefer plastic spatulas.)

It had been a while since our last review, and we wanted to know if our old favorite, the Wüsthof Gourmet 12" Fish Spatula, still held up to the competition. We bought 10 models priced from about \$4.50 to about \$50.00, including our previous winner, and put them through their paces, using them to flip and remove eggs, pancakes, burgers, fried fish, and home fries from a variety of cooking vessels and to transfer sugar cookies from a baking sheet to a wire rack. Five models were conventional spatulas, featuring sturdy square or rectangular heads, some slotted and some solid. The other five, including our former winner, were fish spatulas. Often found in restaurant kitchens, these spatulas feature long, tapered, slotted heads; as their name implies, they were traditionally used to lift and support slender fish fillets.

Once again, our old favorite from Wüsthof had the edge—literally. The end of its head curves upward with a pronounced swoop, affording more leverage for prying up roasted potatoes or lifting the corner of a pancake to check its browning. The curved head also positions hands higher, putting them at a safer distance from hot pans.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED
WÜSTHOF Gourmet 12" Fish Spatula
 MODEL: 4433
 PRICE: \$49.95

COMMENTS: This thin spatula supported foods of all shapes and sizes. The head's pronounced curve provided extra leverage for prying up food.



RECOMMENDED
MIU FRANCE Flexible Fish Turner-Slotted
 MODEL: 9001 |

PRICE: \$16.57
COMMENTS: This spatula was nearly identical to our winner. However, its head couldn't command quite the same leverage.



I realized that I could add even more sweet-spicy fragrance and texture to the dish by adding slivers of ginger to the hot oil, where they would turn aromatic, golden, and crisp. Paired with the sauce, this would make a fragrant dressing for the steamed rice I planned to serve on the side. Scattering cilantro sprigs over the top made my quick, new-school interpretation of steamed fish feel as elegant as it was efficient.

OVEN-STEAMED FISH WITH SCALLIONS AND GINGER
 SERVES 2

Haddock, red snapper, halibut, and sea bass can be substituted for the cod as long as the fillets are about 1 inch thick. If the fillets are uneven, fold the thinner ends under when placing the fillets in the pan. If using a glass baking dish, add 5 minutes to the cooking time. To ensure that the fish doesn't overcook, remove it from the oven when it registers 125 to 130 degrees; it will continue to cook as it is plated. We prefer Kikkoman Soy Sauce. Serve with Simple White Rice and vegetables.

- 4 scallions, trimmed, divided
- 1 (1½-inch) piece ginger, peeled, divided
- 2 small garlic cloves, sliced thin
- 2 (6-ounce) skinless cod fillets, about 1 inch thick
- 1½ tablespoons soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon Shaoxing wine or dry sherry
- ¾ teaspoon toasted sesame oil
- ¾ teaspoon sugar
- ½ teaspoon table salt

- ½ teaspoon white pepper
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 3 tablespoons fresh cilantro leaves and thin stems

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 450 degrees. Chop 3 scallions coarse and spread evenly in 8-inch square baking pan. Slice remaining scallion thin on bias and set aside. Quarter ginger lengthwise. Chop three-quarters of ginger coarse and spread in pan with chopped scallions. Slice remaining ginger into matchsticks and set aside. Sprinkle garlic over scallions and ginger in pan.
2. Fold 12 by 12-inch piece of aluminum foil lengthwise to create 12 by 6-inch sling and spray lightly with vegetable oil spray. Place sling in pan lengthwise, with extra foil hanging over ends of pan. Arrange cod on sling.
3. Whisk soy sauce, Shaoxing wine, sesame oil, sugar, salt, and white pepper in small bowl until combined. Pour around cod. Cover pan tightly with foil and bake until fish registers 125 to 130 degrees, 12 to 14 minutes.
4. Grasping sling at both ends, carefully transfer sling and cod to deep platter. Place spatula at 1 end of fillets to hold in place and carefully slide out sling from under cod. Strain cooking liquid through fine-mesh strainer set over bowl, pressing on solids to extract liquid; discard solids. Pour strained liquid over cod. Sprinkle reserved scallion over cod. Heat vegetable oil in small skillet over high heat until shimmering. Reduce heat to low, add reserved ginger, and cook, stirring, until ginger begins to brown and crisp, 20 to 30 seconds. Drizzle oil and ginger over cod (oil will crackle). Top with cilantro and serve.

Parmesan-Crusted Asparagus

A borrowed technique and two surprising ingredients yield a supercrunchy coating.

BY NICK IVERSON

The sweet, intensely concentrated flavor of roasted asparagus is irresistible, as is the bread-crumbs-and-Parmesan crunch of asparagus gratin. I had the idea to marry the two preparations for that amped-up asparagus taste that comes from roasting combined with a hypercrispy, cheesy coating.

I thought it would be a simple matter of tossing raw spears with olive oil, seasonings, and a cheese and bread-crumbs mixture. But when I tried this, I found that as the asparagus roasted, it released moisture. That's no problem when the spears roast on their own—the moisture simply evaporates. But now that I'd coated them with crumbs and cheese, the moisture turned the topping soggy, and it fell off the spears in large, mucky crumbs.

Clearly I had to get rid of some of the asparagus's moisture before adding the crumb topping. For my next test, I tried roasting the stalks in a 450-degree oven until the moisture evaporated, about 10 minutes, and then topping them with the cheese-crumbs mixture. I gave everything a few more minutes to crisp in the oven. The finished asparagus spears were dehydrated and leathery, and the coating didn't adhere. I tried parcooking the asparagus in the microwave, but this time around the spears were limp by the time the moisture was gone.

What about salt? We often salt vegetables such as tomatoes, eggplant, and cucumbers to draw out their moisture. I sprinkled ½ teaspoon of salt over the raw asparagus and let it sit on paper towels to drain. Thirty minutes later, the towels were sodden



These crispy, sweet, tender spears make a formidable side dish.

with exuded liquid. I tossed the asparagus with oil, sprinkled on the bread-crumbs topping, and then let it roast for 20 minutes. This asparagus was markedly better. It improved further when I poked the spears with a fork before salting to facilitate the release of moisture.

But the cheese-crumbs mixture still refused to stick. So I decided that, rather than tossing the crumbs on the spears, I'd "glue" them on. I moistened each spear in lightly beaten egg and pressed them in the cheese-crumbs mixture before roasting. This "topping" was too heavy for the delicate vegetable. To lighten it, I switched to using only the egg whites. To ensure that the cheese-crumbs combo would stay put, I mixed the whites with the stickiest thing I could think of: honey. Tasters liked its subtle sweetness, and I liked its adhesive properties.

For the coating, I pitted ordinary bread crumbs against extra-crunchy panko crumbs. We preferred the latter. Through testing, I determined that ¾ cup of crumbs to 1½ cups of Parmesan was the best ratio. I also found that if I set aside ½ cup of the cheese to sprinkle over the coated asparagus partway through roasting, I got the crispiest coating and the best cheese flavor. With each test, the asparagus was improving, yet tasters continued to

ask for more crunch. Wait a minute... if I whipped the egg whites before coating the asparagus, might they form peaks and valleys to grip the most possible bits of crunchy coating? Yes. Each spear was now a slim flavor-texture bomb of crunch, cheese, salt, and roasty asparagus sweetness.

PARMESAN-CRUSTED ASPARAGUS

SERVES 4 TO 6

Avoid pencil-thin asparagus for this recipe. Work quickly when tossing the asparagus with the egg whites, as the salt will rapidly begin to deflate the whites.

- 2 pounds (½-inch-thick) asparagus, trimmed
- ¾ teaspoon table salt, divided
- 3 ounces Parmesan cheese, grated (1½ cups), divided
- ¾ cup panko bread crumbs
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter, melted and cooled
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- Pinch cayenne pepper
- 2 large egg whites
- 1 teaspoon honey

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 450 degrees. Line rimmed baking sheet with aluminum foil and spray with vegetable oil spray. Using fork, poke holes up and down stalks of asparagus. Toss asparagus with ½ teaspoon salt and let stand for 30 minutes on paper towel-lined baking sheet.

2. Meanwhile, combine 1 cup Parmesan, panko, melted butter, pepper, cayenne, and remaining ¼ teaspoon salt in bowl. Transfer half of panko mixture to shallow dish and reserve remaining mixture. Using stand mixer fitted with whisk attachment, whip egg whites and honey on medium-low speed until foamy, about 1 minute. Increase speed to medium-high and whip until soft peaks form, 2 to 3 minutes. Transfer to 13 by 9-inch baking dish and toss asparagus in mixture. Working with 1 spear at a time, dredge half of asparagus in panko mixture and transfer to baking sheet. Refill shallow dish with reserved panko mixture and repeat with remaining asparagus.

3. Bake asparagus until just beginning to brown, 6 to 8 minutes. Sprinkle with remaining ½ cup Parmesan and continue to bake until cheese is melted and panko is golden brown, 6 to 8 minutes. Transfer to platter. Serve.

TASTING Parmesan Cheese

Which Parmesan reigns supreme? To find out, we gathered seven nationally available supermarket products—five domestic Parmesans and two certified *Parmigiano-Reggiano* from Italy—and asked tasters to evaluate them plain at room temperature and cooked in polenta.

RECOMMENDED

BOAR'S HEAD *Parmigiano-Reggiano*

PRICE: \$19.99 per lb

COMMENTS: This *Parmigiano-Reggiano* was the longest aged in our lineup.

It earned raves from tasters, who pronounced it "robust," "intensely flavorful," "strong," "piquant," and "nutty."

