Main dishes / India

Butter Chicken (Murgh Makhani)

Tandoor-charred chicken thighs nestled into a velvety, blush-orange tomato-cream sauce scented with kasuri methi and cardamom — invented in 1950s Delhi and still the dish that introduces a million people a year to Indian cooking.

Time 300 min **Servings** 4

What you'll need.

- ☐ 800 g Boneless chicken thighs, skinless
- ☐ 150 g Full-fat plain yogurt
- ☐ 30 g Ginger-garlic paste (equal parts, fine-ground)
- ☐ 10 g Kashmiri chili powder (or mild chili for colour)
- ☐ 8 g Garam masala
- ☐ 400 g Tomato passata (strained tomatoes)
- ☐ 120 ml Heavy cream (35%+ fat)
- ☐ 60 g Unsalted butter
- ☐ 5 g Kasuri methi (dried fenugreek leaves), crushed between palms
- ☐ 4 pods Green cardamom pods, lightly crushed
- ☐ 150 g White onion, thinly sliced
- ☐ 5 g Sugar (white or jaggery)
- ☐ 8 g Fine sea salt

Let's make it.

01 In a large bowl, combine the yogurt, ginger-garlic paste, Kashmiri chili powder, half the garam masala, and salt. Mix well. Score the chicken thighs with three shallow diagonal cuts on each side — this allows the marinade to penetrate and creates more surface for charring. Add the chicken and turn until every piece is evenly coated in the deep orange-red marinade. Cover and refrigerate for a minimum of 4 hours, and ideally overnight. The yogurt's lactic acid tenderises the protein fibres; the chili colours the crust; the ginger-garlic penetrates deep.

02 Set the oven rack at the highest position and preheat the broiler to its maximum setting. Line a heavy baking sheet with foil and place the marinated chicken pieces in a single layer, shaking off any excess marinade. Broil for 8–10 minutes, turning once halfway, until the chicken is cooked through and the marinade has charred in dark brown-black spots across the surface. These char marks are non-negotiable — they are not just visual, they are an intrinsic flavour element of makhani (the char that occurs in a tandoor at 450°C). Remove and rest 5 minutes, then cut into large chunks.

03 In a wide, heavy pot, melt the butter over medium heat. Add the crushed cardamom pods and cook for 30 seconds until fragrant — the butter will foam and the cardamom will sizzle. Add the sliced onion and cook, stirring regularly, for 15–18 minutes until deeply golden-brown (not just translucent) — this is the single most time-critical step. The Maillard reaction in the onion provides sweetness and body to the sauce. Add the passata, Kashmiri chili powder, and remaining garam masala. Cook over medium-high heat for 15–20 minutes, stirring frequently, until the butter visibly separates from the tomato mass — this is 'bhunoing', and signals the sauce is cooked rather than raw.

04 Remove the cardamom pods. Allow the sauce to cool for 5 minutes, then blend until completely smooth using an immersion blender or by transferring to a stand blender in batches. A properly blended makhani sauce is silky and coat-thick, with no visible onion or tomato fibres. If using a stand blender, hold the lid with a folded tea towel and start on the lowest speed — hot liquids expand in sealed blenders. Pass through a fine-mesh strainer for an ultra-smooth finish if desired (restaurants do; home cooks need not).

05 Return the smooth sauce to the pot over medium-low heat. Add the charred chicken pieces and stir to coat. Simmer gently for 10 minutes — the chicken finishes cooking and the char flavour permeates the sauce. Pour in the heavy cream and stir. Add the remaining butter in small cubes, stirring until it melts into the sauce in a glossy emulsion. Crush the kasuri methi between your palms directly over the pot — it releases a distinctive bittersweet, mapley aroma that is the hallmark of makhani. Add sugar to balance acidity. Taste: the sauce should be creamy, mildly spiced, faintly smoky, and perfectly balanced between sweet and acid.

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Servings are an estimate; check quantities in the source recipe.
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