Sauces / Malaysia

Laksa Paste

The aromatic engine of laksa — dried shrimp, galangal, lemongrass, turmeric, and candlenuts pounded to a vivid orange-gold paste, frying in oil until the raw harshness has cooked off and only deep, complex fragrance remains.

Time 45 min **Servings** 4

What you'll need.

- ☐ 40 g Dried shrimp (hae bi)
- ☐ 15 g Dried red chiles, soaked in warm water 15 min
- ☐ 120 g Shallots, roughly chopped
- ☐ 5 cloves Garlic cloves
- ☐ 3 stalks Lemongrass stalks, white and pale-green parts only, thinly sliced
- ☐ 30 g Fresh galangal, peeled and roughly sliced
- ☐ 20 g Fresh turmeric root, peeled, or ground turmeric
- ☐ 40 g Candlenuts or macadamia nuts
- ☐ 15 g Shrimp paste (belacan), toasted
- ☐ 1 tsp Coriander seeds
- ☐ 0.5 tsp Cumin seeds
- ☐ 100 ml Neutral vegetable oil (canola or sunflower)

Let's make it.

01 Place the coriander seeds and cumin seeds in a small, dry skillet over medium heat. Toast, shaking the pan constantly, for 2-3 minutes until the seeds are a shade or two darker, begin to pop, and release a warm, nutty fragrance. Immediately transfer to a mortar, spice grinder, or small plate to cool — they continue cooking from residual heat in a hot pan. Do not toast together with the candlenuts or any other ingredient; each element requires its own timing.

02 Place the dried red chiles in a small bowl and pour over enough warm water (50-60°C) to submerge them completely. Soak for 15 minutes, until the chiles are fully rehydrated, plump, and pliable. Drain well, reserving 2 tablespoons of the soaking water for use if needed during blending. Remove the stems; deseed if you want a milder paste. The soaking water is dark red and intensely aromatic — it can be added to the paste blend in small amounts to help with blending.

03 Grind the cooled toasted spices to a powder in a spice grinder. Add the dried shrimp and grind together briefly to combine. Transfer to a food processor or large mortar. Add the lemongrass (toughest and most fibrous ingredient — process first) and blend for 30 seconds. Add the galangal and turmeric and process another 30 seconds. Add the soaked chiles, shallots, garlic, belacan, and candlenuts. Blend to a coarse, uniform paste, adding reserved chile soaking water one tablespoon at a time if needed. If using a mortar: pound in the same order — toughest ingredients first, working toward softest — with deep, rhythmic vertical strokes, not circular grinding.

04 Heat the oil in a wide, heavy-bottomed wok or skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add all of the raw paste at once. Fry, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon or wok spatula, for 15–20 minutes. This is the most critical step: the paste must be fried long enough for the raw harshness of the lemongrass, shrimp paste, and garlic to cook off, and for the volatile aromatics to fully develop in the oil. Adjust heat to maintain a consistent, active fry — vigorous sizzling, not a gentle simmer.

05 Remove the finished paste from heat. Transfer to a clean bowl or storage container and allow to cool completely at room temperature — at least 30 minutes. As it cools, the oil will rise and form a protective layer over the top of the paste. This oil layer is the preservation mechanism: press a piece of plastic wrap directly onto the paste surface to prevent oxidation if storing, or leave the oil cap in place and refrigerate in a sealed jar. The finished paste keeps refrigerated for 3 weeks, or frozen for 3 months. To use, fry the paste in fresh oil again briefly before adding coconut milk and stock.

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