Sauces / Thailand

Massaman Curry Paste

A dark, intoxicatingly complex paste from Thailand's Muslim south — dried chilies, roasted galangal, and lemongrass pounded into a fragrant base warmed with cardamom, cinnamon, and clove. Its Malay-Persian lineage makes it unlike any other Thai paste: sweeter, more aromatic, and haunted by spice-trade history.

Time 45 min **Servings** 4

What you'll need.

- ☐ 4 parts Dried guajillo or dried red Thai chilies, seeded and soaked 20 min
- ☐ 1 parts Galangal, fresh or frozen, peeled and rough-chopped
- ☐ 1.5 parts Garlic cloves, dry-roasted in shell until soft
- ☐ 0.5 parts Cumin seeds, toasted
- ☐ 1 parts Shrimp paste (kapi), toasted in foil
- ☐ 2 parts Lemongrass stalks, white part only, thin-sliced
- ☐ 2 parts Shallots, halved and dry-roasted in a pan until charred outside
- ☐ 1 parts Coriander seeds, toasted
- ☐ 0.5 parts Warm spice blend: cardamom pods (seeds only), cinnamon, cloves
- ☐ 0.5 parts Fine sea salt

Let's make it.

01 Place a dry skillet over medium heat. Add coriander seeds and toast, shaking frequently, for 2–3 minutes until they begin to pop and smell of warm citrus and earth. Add cumin seeds for the last 60 seconds — they toast faster and burn easily. In the final 30 seconds, add the cardamom seeds, a piece of cinnamon, and 2 cloves. Tip everything onto a cold plate immediately and let cool completely before grinding. A mortar and pestle or spice grinder will work; grind to a fine powder.

02 Place shallots (halved, skin on) and whole unpeeled garlic cloves in a dry skillet or directly over a gas flame. Cook over medium-high heat, turning occasionally, until the outsides are blackened in patches and the flesh inside is soft and caramelized — 8–12 minutes. Peel and discard the charred skins; the flesh underneath should be jammy and sweet with bitter edges. This char is essential: it builds the smoky depth characteristic of Thai curry pastes made by street vendors who hold aromatics over an open flame.

03 Drain the soaked chilies and squeeze out excess water. Tear into pieces and place in the mortar with the sliced lemongrass, galangal, and salt. Begin pounding with a rhythmic downward motion — not stirring, pounding. Rotate the pestle to ensure even pulverization. This will take 10–15 minutes of committed work. Add the fibrous materials first: the salt acts as an abrasive, the lemongrass and galangal must be completely broken down to fiber-free smoothness before anything else goes in. If using a food processor, pulse in bursts, scraping down frequently.

04 Add the peeled roasted shallots and garlic to the mortar and pound them into the paste until fully incorporated. Add the toasted shrimp paste and ground warm spices. Continue pounding until everything is unified — the paste will deepen from brick-red to a dark reddish-brown, almost mahogany, as the shrimp paste and spices integrate. Taste and adjust: it should be complex, fragrant, slightly sweet, earthy, with gentle heat that builds slowly. Store in a jar under a thin layer of oil in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks, or freeze in tablespoon portions.

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