Soups / Thailand

Tom Kha Gai

A silken, ivory broth of coconut milk infused with the floral heat of galangal and the citrus perfume of lemongrass — rich enough to coat a spoon, yet bright with lime and fish sauce. Torn mushrooms and tender chicken poach gently in the heat, absorbing the broth's layered warmth.

Time 45 min **Servings** 4

What you'll need.

- ☐ 400 ml Coconut milk, full-fat, unsweetened
- ☐ 300 ml Chicken stock, light (or water)
- ☐ 250 g Chicken thigh, boneless, skinless, sliced 5mm
- ☐ 30 g Galangal, fresh, sliced 3mm (not ginger)
- ☐ 2 stalks Lemongrass stalks, bruised and cut into 5cm pieces
- ☐ 6 leaves Kaffir lime leaves (makrut lime), torn
- ☐ 30 ml Fish sauce (Tiparos or Megachef)
- ☐ 30 ml Lime juice, freshly squeezed
- ☐ 100 g Oyster mushrooms (or straw mushrooms), torn
- ☐ 3 whole Fresh Thai bird chilies, lightly bruised (do not split)
- ☐ 10 g Fresh cilantro (coriander), leaves and fine stems
- ☐ 10 g Palm sugar (or light brown sugar)

Let's make it.

01 Pour the coconut milk and chicken stock into a medium saucepan. Add the sliced galangal, bruised lemongrass pieces, torn kaffir lime leaves, and the lightly bruised (but whole) bird chilies. Bring to a gentle simmer over medium heat — never a rolling boil, which will break the coconut milk and make it grainy and oily. Simmer for 10 minutes, pressing the aromatics down occasionally with a spoon. The broth should carry a complex floral fragrance: the soap-citrus of kaffir lime, the hot-gingery punch of galangal, the lemon-grass green of the stalks. Do not remove the aromatics yet — they will steep through the entire cooking process and are removed before serving, not before. The chilies are left whole so they release mild background heat without the piercing intensity of split or chopped chili.

02 Add the torn oyster mushrooms to the simmering broth and stir gently. After 1 minute, slide in the sliced chicken thigh pieces, spreading them through the broth so they cook evenly. Maintain a gentle simmer — barely trembling at the surface. Cook the chicken for 5 to 7 minutes, stirring once or twice, until the slices are opaque all the way through with no pink remaining. Chicken thigh at this thickness finishes in the time it takes the broth to return to temperature after the cold protein goes in. The mushrooms will soften and absorb the coconut broth. Do not increase the heat to rush this step — aggressive heat toughens the chicken and breaks the coconut base.

03 Add the fish sauce, palm sugar, and lime juice off heat or over the lowest flame. Stir to dissolve the sugar. Taste and adjust — tom kha gai should be simultaneously rich (coconut), sour (lime), salty (fish sauce), with background sweetness (palm sugar) and slow heat (galangal and chili). Start with the listed quantities and adjust in small increments. The lime goes in last and must not boil after adding — boiling destroys its bright top note and turns it bitter. The correct flavor is silky-rich on the palate immediately, then sour and bright mid-palate, then a long trailing warmth from the galangal. If it tastes flat, it needs more lime; if it tastes harsh, it needs more palm sugar.

04 Ladle the soup into deep bowls, ensuring each bowl gets equal portions of chicken, mushrooms, and broth. The aromatics — galangal, lemongrass, kaffir lime leaves, and bird chilies — remain in the bowl for visual beauty and ongoing aroma but are pushed to the side and not eaten. Scatter fresh cilantro leaves over the top of each bowl. Serve immediately while the broth is steaming. Provide a small spoon for the broth and chopsticks or a fork for the solids. At the table, diners may squeeze additional lime over their bowl. The soup does not improve on standing — the lime becomes bitter, the coconut milk may separate, and the chicken turns rubbery.

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