CHICKEN TIKKA MASALA

Serves 4 to 6.
By Dennis W. Viau; modified from several recipes.

When I learned chicken tikka masala is one of the ten most popular foods in the world, I decided it was worth trying. Unlike classic tiramisu, there doesn’t seem to be much consensus on the procedure for making this dish; so I came up with my own. This is a complex recipe, but the result is worth the effort.

Ingredients:

For the Garam Masala Spice Mix (from a recipe by Alton Brown):
2 tablespoons cardamom seeds
2 tablespoons coriander seeds
1 tablespoon cumin seeds
1 tablespoon brown mustard seeds
2 tablespoons black peppercorns
20 whole cloves
1 dried arbol chile, stemmed, seeded, and crumbled
1 2½-inch (6.4cm) cinnamon stick, broken in half
1 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
(For many of the spices above I had the ground spice, not the whole seeds, so I substituted)

For the Marinade:
1 cup (237ml/240g) good plain yogurt (the kind with live active cultures)
2 tablespoons lemon juice
2 teaspoons ground cumin
2 teaspoons red pepper
2 teaspoons black pepper
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon fresh minced ginger

For the Sauce:
1½ pounds (600g) boneless, skinless chicken, either light meat, dark, or both
2 tablespoons unsalted or clarified butter (or other high-temperature oil for frying, such a peanut oil)
1 medium onion (8 to 9 ounces/225 to 255g); diced
2 cloves garlic; minced
2 teaspoons freshly grated ginger
1 28-ounce (794g) can plum tomatoes; partially puréed
1 tablespoon tomato paste
1 teaspoon ground coriander
½ teaspoon ground cumin
1 teaspoon paprika
½ teaspoon turmeric
1 teaspoon garam masala (more if you like a stronger spice flavor)
Optional: ½ to 1 teaspoon cayenne
Optional: 1 to 2 dried árbol chiles (or jalapeño, serrano, etc.—as hot as you like them)
1 cup (237ml) heavy (whipping) cream
½ teaspoon salt
¼ cup fresh cilantro; chopped
Juice of ½ lemon
**Directions:**
Heat a small (8-inch/20 cm) skillet over medium-high flame and add the spice seeds, chili, and the cinnamon stick. Stir constantly to toast, about 3 to 4 minutes, and then transfer to a heat-safe bowl to cool. If substituting ground spices, toast any whole seeds first, as directed above. Place the ground spices in the skillet and heat for only a few seconds (they’ll toast quickly), then transfer to a bowl to cool. When everything is cool, place the spices in a clean spice grinder or coffee mill and grind until reduced to a fine powder, about 1 minute. Can be stored in an air-tight jar for up to one month.

Combine all the marinade ingredients in a medium-large bowl. Add the chicken pieces, pressing them down into the marinade. Cover and let marinate 3 to 6 hours, preferably overnight, in the refrigerator.

To make the sauce: Heat the butter (or oil) in a large, heavy pot, such as a cast iron dutch oven, over medium heat and sauté the onions until the color changes to a medium golden, about 10 minutes. To prevent dark browning, reduce the heat as the onions cook. In the last stage the flame will be at its lowest setting.

Add the garlic and fresh ginger. Cook an additional minute or two.

While the onions are cooking, lightly purée the plum tomatoes in a blender. Small chunks of tomato will add texture. Add to the pan when the onions and garlic are done, stirring in the tomato paste as well. Blend. Add the spices (coriander, cumin, paprika, turmeric, and masala). If you prefer a hotter sauce, you can add cayenne.

Adjust the heat to medium-low and bring the sauce to a light boil. Cover, reduce the heat to low, and simmer 15 to 20 minutes, stirring occasionally, especially toward the end when the sauce is thicker.

Add the heavy cream, blend, and remove the sauce from the heat. Taste and adjust for salt. Leave covered and set aside. It will be warmed again in a later step.

Remove the chicken from the marinade, scraping the marinade from the surface. Discard the marinade. Cook the chicken on an outdoor grill, a stove top cast iron grill, in a skillet, or under the broiler, until thoroughly cooked or an internal temperature of 160°F (71°C). Total cooking time depends on the chicken pieces used and the type of cooking utensil. When cooked, transfer to a plate to cool.

Cut the chicken into 1-inch (2.5cm) pieces and stir into the sauce. Add the lemon juice, return the pan to the flame, and heat until it begins to bubble. Serve over rice or with naan bread.

For the rice, I chose to boil ¾ cup (142g) each of brown rice and wild rice in 4 cups of chicken stock for 30 minutes in a covered pan over low heat. Then I added ¾ cup white rice to the pan, covered, and simmered for an additional 15 minutes. Check for moisture toward the end of the cooking time. If the pan appears to be going dry before the rice is tender, add a little water, about ¼ cup (60ml) and continue cooking. Finish with a couple tablespoons of butter and fluff with a fork.

The step-by-step photos were removed. See the video for the preparation.

**Note**
Although some sources claim chicken tikka masala originates from India, most sources say the dish was first created in a curry house in London, England. It is so popular in England, it is considered one of the country’s national dishes.