

Madhur's chicken tikka masala

Serves 4-6

Probably created in Britain, chicken tikka masala – or CTM as it is often called – is easily the most popular Indian curry in the UK today. Marks & Spencer claim to sell 18 tonnes of it every week; an estimated 23 million portions are sold in Indian restaurants each year; while 10 tonnes a day are produced by Noon products, to be sold in supermarkets.

And yet nobody is quite clear about its origins. It is possible that a chef in Birmingham, with too many tandoor-roasted chicken pieces ('tikkas') left over, decided to reheat them in a quick stir-fried curry sauce. However it originated, it is here to stay.

The tikkas need to marinate for six to eight hours, so bear that in mind when you come to make the dish. Serve CTM with Indian breads or rice. A black dal would go well with such a meal. I prefer chicken thighs but you may use breasts if you wish.

For the chicken tikka

675g (1lb 7oz) boneless, skinless chicken thighs or breasts, cut into 2½ centimetre (1 inch) chunks
1¼ teaspoons salt
3 tablespoons lemon juice
1 tablespoon peeled, finely grated root ginger
2 garlic cloves, finely grated or crushed
1 teaspoon ground cumin
1 teaspoon paprika
½–¾ teaspoon chilli powder
6 tablespoons whipping cream
½ teaspoon garam masala
3 tablespoons olive or sunflower oil

For the masala

4 tablespoons olive or sunflower oil
140g (5oz) onions, halved and finely sliced
1 tablespoon peeled, finely grated root ginger
5-6 garlic cloves, crushed
1 tablespoon ground coriander
½ teaspoon turmeric
¾ teaspoon chilli powder
2 teaspoons paprika
4 tablespoons yogurt
2 medium tomatoes, peeled and very finely chopped
350ml (12fl oz) chicken stock
¼ teaspoon salt, or to taste
¼ teaspoon garam masala
4 tablespoons chopped coriander leaves

Start by marinating the chicken tikka. Put the chicken in a non-reactive bowl and rub in the salt and lemon juice. Prod the chicken pieces lightly with the tip of a knife and rub the seasonings in again, then set aside for 20 minutes. Add the ginger, garlic, cumin, paprika, chilli powder, cream and garam masala. Mix well, cover, and refrigerate for six to eight hours (longer will not hurt).

When you're ready to cook, make the masala: pour the 4 tablespoons of oil into a large, preferably non-stick, lidded pan and set it over a medium-high heat. When the oil is hot, put in the onions. Stir and fry until they brown, six or seven minutes. Add the ginger and garlic and continue to fry, stirring, for a minute. Add the ground coriander, turmeric, chilli powder and paprika. Stir for 10 seconds, then add a tablespoon of the yogurt. Stir and fry until it is absorbed. Add the remaining yogurt in this way, a tablespoon at a time.

Now put in the tomatoes. Fry them for three or four minutes, or until they turn pulpy. Add the stock and salt, and bring to a simmer. Cover, reduce the heat to low, and simmer gently for 15-20 minutes. The sauce should turn thick. Stir in the garam masala and coriander leaves, taste for balance of seasonings and add more salt if you need it.

Shortly before you eat, preheat the grill to its highest setting. Thread the chicken on to two to four skewers (the flat, sword-like ones are best). Brush with the 3 tablespoons of oil and balance the skewers on the rim of a shallow baking tray, so that the meat is suspended and does not touch the tray. Place about 13 centimetres (5 inches) from the source of heat and grill for six minutes on each side, or until lightly browned, cooked through and charred in places. (Cut a large piece of chicken to the centre to check there is no trace of pink.)

When the tikkas are cooked, reheat the sauce and fold in the chicken.