

Malaysian Kapitan Chicken Curry



My mom's kitchen is tiny, but not small enough to keep her still. She's jumpy. Her feet are always moving, shifting her from wok to sink to refrigerator to cutting board. The only time I see her feet relax is when she's kneeling on the floor, pounding fresh chilies with a mortar and pestle. Her hands are even more excited, which can be unnerving when she wields a butcher knife. She always has her hands in everything, washing fish and chicken and leafy veggies, and slicing, always slicing some ingredient.

Then she'll rotate, and lift a gallon of oil from the floor and pour a bit into a wok. She'll crank the fire, and grab her heavy-duty metal spatula and the bowls of chopped ingredients. One after another, the meats and veggies and spices falling in as steam sizzles and rises. She'll vanish for a moment in the cloud, but I know she's in there, still moving.

Malaysians can't sit still, especially in the kitchen. Whatever dishes find their way in, will inevitably be tinkered with; improved on. When chicken curry arrived many centuries ago, right into the fiddling hands of aunties like my mom, there could only be one outcome – **Kapitan Chicken Curry** 甲必丹咖喱鸡.



Kapitan chicken curry is a richer, drier, thicker version of the standard chicken curry, and is immediately recognizable by its distinct Southeast Asian flavor from local spices & herbs such as galangal, candlenuts, lemongrass, and **kaffir lime leaves**. Belacan – a popular local fermented shrimp paste – is also added to give the dish more depth.

These are the core ingredients of most kapitan chicken curry recipes, but each household has their own family recipe with a variety of additional ingredients, as well as their own marinating and cooking process. For example, some choose to marinate the chicken with **turmeric** overnight, while others marinate it with lime juice, salt, and grated coconut that has been toasted brown.

My mom's classic kapitan chicken curry recipe is less time consuming since she skips the marination and just cooks the dish up in the morning. To ensure that same deep flavor for the curry, she is generous with the spice blend, adding in a little extra belacan, fresh and dried **chili peppers**, and **kaffir lime leaves**. Once she pounds all the spices into a paste, she fries it in oil until the spicy aroma fills the kitchen and attracts the attention of curious, hungry neighbors. She then tosses the chicken into the wok, and cooks it slowly to absorb all the flavor. And finally, swirls in two spoonfuls of sweet and rich coconut milk.



What is the origin of Kapitan Chicken Curry?

Kapitan chicken curry is considered a **Peranakan Nyonya dish** (Nyonya is a culture that arose from the fusion of Chinese and Malay cultures in areas of what is now Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia). But the early beginnings of the dish would have been found in the Malay kitchen, where they surely cooked chicken with local spices & herbs long before Chinese traders immigrated to the region.

The main clue to the origin of the dish we know today is in the name – *Kapitan*. The term Kapitan, a corruption of the word Captain, was introduced by the Portuguese when they conquered Melaka in the early 16th century. They designated a representative from each ethnic group to act as his community leader; so for example, the leader of the Chinese in Melaka was given the title, *Kapitan Cina*. This practice continued

when the Dutch took over in the 17th century, and later under British rule with the establishment of the Straits Settlements – Penang, Melaka, and Singapore.

One would assume with the origins of Nyonya culture in Melaka at the same time as the first Kapitan Cina, that the dish would have been created and named in Melaka. However, today the dish is much more common in the kitchens of Penang where Nyonya culture had thrived for a century during British colonialism, and under many Kapitans.

The only way to determine the true origin of **Kapitan Curry Chicken** is to find the connection between Kapitan and the dish. But that's a mystery. Was the dish a favorite of one of the famous Kapitan Cina in Melaka or Penang? Or was it named because of its prominence at the Nyonya dinner table? That it was the best dish; the leader; the Kapitan; placed at the center of the table for all to see. Or was it simply named to distinguish the dish from non-Nyonya chicken curries? An elaborate name for the elaborate households of Peranakan Nyonyas.

We may never know the true origin, but at least we know the recipes!



Kapitan Chicken Curry by Season with Spice

(Mom's recipe)

Ingredients:

- 1 whole chicken - cut into about 10-12 pieces
- 4 tbsp peanut oil or vegetable oil
- 4 **kaffir lime leaves** (one leaf = both segments) - torn into quarters
- 2 cups water
- Squeeze of lime juice

Spice Paste:

- 15 shallots - peeled
- 4 cloves of garlic – peeled and lightly crushed

3 stalks of lemongrass (use the bottom white part only)

5 fresh **red chili peppers**

10 dried red chilis - soaked in hot water for 10 minutes

1 1/2 inch of fresh galangal

1/2 inch of **fresh turmeric**

1/2 inch of **fresh ginger**

3 candlenuts or macadamia nuts

1/4 tbsp belacan (fermented shrimp paste)

Seasoning:

1/4 tsp salt or to taste

1/2 tbsp light palm sugar or brown sugar

2 tbsp coconut milk

Method:

1. Add all the spice paste ingredients into a food processor and blend to a fine paste.
2. In a wok, heat up the oil. Then add in the blended spice paste and sauté for about 30 seconds. Then add in half of the quartered kaffir lime leaves, and sauté the spice paste for another 2-3 minutes until aromatic.
3. Add in the chicken pieces and stir-fry for one minute, ensuring each chicken piece is well coated with the spice paste. Pour water in and bring it up to a boil. Then add in the rest of the quartered kaffir lime leaves, and lower the heat to medium-low. Stir and continue cooking the chicken for about 20-25 minutes until the chicken is tender and gravy thickens. If the gravy gets too dry while cooking, you can add in a bit more water.
4. Season with salt and sugar, and swirl in the coconut milk. Turn fire off when well combined.
5. Dish out and garnish with whole kaffir lime leaves or shredded lime leaves (the shredded kaffir lime leaves can be eaten). Squeeze in some lime juice and serve hot with steamed rice, roti canai (Malaysian flatbread), roti jala (Malaysian net bread), or a baguette.

Notes:

- If you prefer more gravy in your kapitan chicken curry, feel free to add in more water and coconut milk.
- The leftovers will taste even better a day after. And if you like, you can use the leftovers to make homemade **Kapitan Chicken Curry Puffs** like they now serve at Starbucks in Malaysia. Yep, even Starbucks is in on the Nyonya trend.

- Reese