



## Whole Spices Make It Nice

Steeping cumin seeds, crushed cardamom pods, cloves, and a cinnamon stick in the rice as it cooks (and removing the spices before serving) perfumes the grains with a warm, savory fragrance without muddying their color.

### INDIAN-STYLE BASMATI RICE

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 50 MINUTES

For basmati rice with a bright yellow color, add  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon of ground turmeric and a pinch of saffron threads with the water in step 3.

- 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  cups basmati rice
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 teaspoon cumin seeds
- 3 green cardamom pods, lightly crushed
- 3 whole cloves
- 2  $\frac{1}{4}$  cups water
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 teaspoon table salt

1. Place rice in fine-mesh strainer and rinse under cold running water until water runs clear. Place strainer over bowl and set aside.

2. Melt butter in medium saucepan over medium heat. Add cumin, cardamom, and cloves, and cook, stirring constantly, until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add rice and cook, stirring constantly, until fragrant, about 1 minute.

3. Add water, cinnamon stick, bay leaf, and salt and bring to boil. Reduce heat to low, cover, and simmer until all water is absorbed, about 17 minutes. Let stand, covered, off heat for at least 10 minutes. Discard cardamom, cloves, cinnamon stick, and bay leaf. Fluff rice with fork and serve.

## Yogurt Isn't for Marinating—It's for Browning

Coating the chicken in Greek yogurt is a crucial step in our recipe for butter chicken, but not for the reason you might think. We don't use it as a marinade (as called for in traditional Indian recipes) because it doesn't flavor meat beyond its surface. In addition, it turns the surface mushy because its acidity breaks down proteins on the meat's exterior if the meat is left to marinate for too long.

We do, however, coat the chicken in yogurt just before cooking. Both the chicken and the yogurt are packed with protein, but yogurt is also a rich source of sugars, which participate in Maillard browning reactions: When yogurt is exposed to the broiler's high heat, its water quickly evaporates, leaving a high-protein, high-sugar mixture that encourages the meat to brown more quickly and deeply than it would on its own, which helps us mimic the charring effects of a superhot tandoor oven.



WITH YOGURT



WITHOUT YOGURT

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup—and water, taking advantage of the paste's superconcentrated, punchy flavor and vibrant color, which gave the sauce an attractive rust-red tint. I also added a little heat (a minced serrano chile and some black pepper) and sweetness (sugar) and buzzed the mixture with an immersion blender until the sauce was thick and silky-smooth (a regular blender would also work).

At that point, all I had to do was cut the chicken into chunks; stir it into the creamy, bright-tasting sauce; and sprinkle on some chopped cilantro. All told, the dish came together in about 30 minutes—faster than a takeout order from my favorite Indian restaurant—and could be made in half the time if I made the sauce in advance. Some nights, that might just leave me enough time to whip up our Indian Flatbread (Naan) (May/June 2012) for dipping.

### INDIAN BUTTER CHICKEN (MURGH MAKHANI)

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 1  $\frac{1}{4}$  HOURS

Traditionally, butter chicken is mildly spiced. If you prefer a spicier dish, reserve, mince, and add the ribs and seeds from the chile. See page 29 for our recipe for garam masala. Serve with basmati rice and/or warm naan. Our recipe for Indian Butter Chicken (Murgh Makhani) for Two is available for free for four months at [CookIllustrated.com/jun19](http://CookIllustrated.com/jun19).

- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 4 pieces and chilled, divided
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 5 garlic cloves, minced
- 4 teaspoons grated fresh ginger
- 1 serrano chile, stemmed, seeded, and minced
- 1 tablespoon garam masala
- 1 teaspoon ground coriander
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon ground cumin
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon pepper
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cups water
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup tomato paste

- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 2 teaspoons table salt, divided
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs, trimmed
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup plain Greek yogurt
- 3 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro, divided

1. Melt 2 tablespoons butter in large saucepan over medium heat. Add onion, garlic, ginger, and serrano and cook, stirring frequently, until mixture is softened and onion begins to brown, 8 to 10 minutes. Add garam masala, coriander, cumin, and pepper and cook, stirring frequently, until fragrant, about 3 minutes. Add water and tomato paste and whisk until no lumps of tomato paste remain. Add sugar and 1 teaspoon salt and bring to boil. Off heat, stir in cream. Using immersion blender or blender, process until smooth, 30 to 60 seconds. Return sauce to simmer over medium heat and whisk in remaining 2 tablespoons butter. Remove saucepan from heat and cover to keep warm. (Sauce can be refrigerated for up to 4 days; gently reheat sauce before adding hot chicken.)

2. Adjust oven rack 6 inches from broiler element and heat broiler. Combine chicken, yogurt, and remaining 1 teaspoon salt in bowl and toss well to coat. Using tongs, transfer chicken to wire rack set in aluminum foil-lined rimmed baking sheet. Broil until chicken is evenly charred on both sides and registers 175 degrees, 16 to 20 minutes, flipping chicken halfway through broiling.

3. Let chicken rest for 5 minutes. While chicken rests, warm sauce over medium-low heat. Cut chicken into  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch chunks and stir into sauce. Stir in 2 tablespoons cilantro and season with salt to taste. Transfer to serving dish, sprinkle with remaining 1 tablespoon cilantro, and serve.



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into tiny fat droplets suspended in the liquid by casein proteins. Melting the butter before whisking it in lets the fat and protein separate, so it breaks into large droplets that don't incorporate evenly.

But while the extra solid butter made it more luxurious, the sauce lacked its trademark creaminess. And yet, when I approached the richness that's characteristic of the dish, the sauce broke. That's because the emulsion can hold only so much fat. This made me realize why many recipes call for cream, too (see "About That 'Butter Sauce'"). After a few tests, I'd worked in 1 cup of cream (a common amount for this recipe), though with every extra tablespoon the tomatoes' brightness dulled. Adding more chopped tomatoes wasn't the answer, since their juice would only thin the sauce's creamy body. Instead, I switched to a combination of tomato paste—a whopping



# Indian Butter Chicken

Of course it should be rich and creamy. But to make a vibrant, complex version of this restaurant classic, there's more to consider than the namesake ingredient.

➤ BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN ⇐

**M**urgh makhani, also known by its English name, “butter chicken,” is a wildly popular dish that has reached royal status in northern Indian cuisine. But according to most sources, the dish was originally intended to solve the rather pedestrian problem of preventing leftover meat from tandoor-roasted chickens from drying out. The solution turned out to be magnificent: The charred meat was bathed in a lush tomato-based gravy that was enriched with butter (and often cream) and scented with ginger, garlic, and spices such as garam masala, coriander, and cumin. Butter chicken has since helped spawn a major restaurant franchise and become one of the most well-known Indian dishes in the world.

It's also a popular dish to make at home, as the sauce is a snap to prepare: Soften some onion, garlic, and fresh ginger in melted butter; add the spices to bloom their flavors; stir in chopped tomatoes (either fresh or canned); enrich the mixture with cream and possibly some more butter; and finish it with chopped cilantro for brightness and a pop of color.

The chicken poses a challenge because the most important element—the charred exterior that provides an essential point of contrast to the rich sauce—is difficult to achieve without the intense heat of a tandoor oven, the traditional beehive-shaped vessel that can heat up to 900 degrees.

Some recipes skip the charring altogether and call for simply braising chicken pieces in the sauce, but the meat lacks the charred flavor that makes this dish not just rich but also complex. Other recipes approximate the tandoor's effect by marinating the chicken (usually boneless, skinless breasts or thighs for easier eating) in yogurt and then roasting or broiling it. This seemed like a more promising method.

## Take a Dip

Lean white meat would require careful monitoring in a hot oven to prevent it from drying out, so I started with thighs, which contain more fat and collagen and would thus be more forgiving.

Marinating the chicken in yogurt for several hours is a traditional first step when making tandoori



You'll want to soak up every bit of this lush, vibrant sauce, so be sure to serve the chicken with rice, naan, or both.

chicken, the claim being that the acidic dairy tenderizes and flavors the meat. But we've found that acids such as those in yogurt aren't good tenderizers; they simply make the meat's surface mushy.

Instead, we prefer to coat chicken in yogurt just before cooking it. The yogurt imparts tangy flavor to the exterior of the meat and, more important, its proteins and lactose brown faster than the chicken itself, making it easier to imitate the desirable char flavor of tandoor-roasted birds.

## About That “Butter Sauce”

Butter is more prominent in the name of this dish than in the sauce itself. While most recipes call for at least a few tablespoons of butter, the sauce owes its lush consistency to a generous amount of heavy cream. Emulsions such as cream are naturally thick and luxurious because their water and fat droplets move slowly around one another, which impedes the mixture's flow so that it becomes viscous. Cream also effectively stabilizes the sauce; its high proportion of casein proteins surrounds the butterfat droplets so they don't separate from the water.

To be sure it was worth the extra step, I cooked two batches of thighs, one plain and one coated in yogurt (the Greek kind, since it's a more concentrated source of milk proteins than regular yogurt), and the difference was clear: After about 15 minutes under the broiler (its intense heat would be the best approximation of the tandoor), the plain chicken was only spottily browned, while the yogurt-coated batch boasted fuller, more flavorful browning. (For more information, see “Yogurt Isn't for Marinating—It's for Browning.”) Dunking in yogurt was the way to go, and to make the most of it, I stirred in a little salt to help season the chicken.

## Butter Up

As for the sauce, it should be similar to the sauce for chicken tikka masala (a close relative of butter chicken) but richer and more concentrated—think of it as a tomatoey cream sauce rather than a creamy tomato sauce. The trick to making it well is adding enough richness so that it's lush but not so much that it tastes cloying and the tomato's vibrancy is obscured. Achieving that balance took some work.

The first consideration was how to incorporate the butter into the sauce. Melting a couple of tablespoons to soften the aromatics and bloom the spices was a fine way to start, but by the time I stirred in a can of juicy tomatoes, the sauce was neither rich nor creamy. Two additional tablespoons made the sauce richer, but only when half the butter was left solid and whisked in at the end of cooking did the sauce turn silky. Why? For the same reason we often finish pan sauces by thoroughly whisking in cold butter: Doing so allows it to emulsify as it melts, breaking



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