



COOKED

Thai Food Ingredient Glossary



Basil

Chili peppers

Coconut milk

Fish sauce

Galangal root

Garlic

Kaffir

Lemon grass

Peppercorns

Sea salt

Shallot

Tamarind

Tumeric



Thai Ingredient Glossary

Thai cooking ingredients may seem exotic to Western cooks, but with experimentation you will soon become familiar with these foreign flavours.

Some of the more commonly called for ingredients in Thai recipes are listed here. Please send an e-mail to wynmaker@gmail.com if you need more information or have a recipe that calls for an unfamiliar ingredient.

Basil: European basil can be used as a substitute for all varieties if you cannot find the Thai varieties. But Thai varieties are unique if you can locate them. If not try our ready-made [basil chili pastes](#).



There are **several types of basil** used in Thai cuisine:

Holy basil (*bai grapow*) There are two types of holy basil: a pale green or white type, and a red type, with purple reddish tinged leaves. Holy basil has a clove-like taste. Store wrapped in a paper towel inside a ziplock bag. Use it soon after buying. Available more readily in summer months.

Italian basil (*bai rah*) has smoother leaves, is darker green with a purple stem and with a more pronounced licorice flavor.

Lemon basil (*bai menglah*) has a lemony flavour with tiny leaves and is usually sprinkled over salads or used in soups. Used much less frequently than sweet basil in Thai cooking.

Thai or anise basil (*bai horapha*) tastes rather like anise, looks like sweet basil, and is used in red and green curries.

Thai chili peppers (*prik*) (fresh and dried): Perhaps the most famous ingredient in Thai cuisine is the small fresh chili, known as *prik kee noo*, literally 'mouse dropping chili'. Actually it is not the spiciest chili pepper in the world, but if one is unaccustomed to eating spicy food, or is caught off guard, they can pack a mighty punch!



Fresh *prik kee noo* is most often used to make [nahm chuke](#), a spicy condiment or soups like [tom yum goong](#), a popular lemon-flavored hot and sour shrimp soup. If you like super hot Thai curry, add whole fresh chilies at the end of cooking.

Prik chee fah is a larger-sized chili pepper and not as spicy.

Southern [Thai curry](#) is typically made with whole small **dried red chilies**, stems removed, and seeds intact. If unavailable, try dried whole Mexican chilies, the hottest available, and soak in hot water to soften.

Even easier to use and just as delicious, though different in flavor, is powdered/**ground dried Thai red chilies**. Two level tablespoons are equivalent to 10-15 dried chilies. Do not substitute chili powder from your local grocery, as it is actually a combination of spices.

Cilantro (*pak chee*) & coriander seeds: The roots, stems, leaves, and seeds of this common popular herb are all used in Thai cooking.



Cilantro roots (*rahgk pak chee*) are indeed the tiny end of the plant, which is often removed before it arrives in the Western market. Pounded in a mortar and pestle, the roots enhance curry pastes and soups. A paste for grilled meats can be made with the pulverized root, white pepper, and garlic. Sometimes difficult to find, try visiting a farmers market or substitute the stems.

Cilantro leaves are used extensively in Thai cooking for most salads and to garnish soups. The stems and leaves are eaten raw, along with other raw vegetables like baby eggplant, and other herbs and served with [nam prik](#).

Coriander seeds (*mellet pak chee*) are the seeds of the cilantro plant. Thai coriander seeds are smaller than the seeds available in Western supermarkets and more strongly perfumed. Used extensively in various [curry pastes](#), sauces, and marinades, the best taste is achieved by [dry roasting](#) to bring out their perfume and flavors at the time of cooking.



Coconut milk (*nahm gah-tee*) (fresh and canned): The milk is made from fresh coconut by adding just enough water to cover the grated meat, squeezing, and straining. The coconut meat is discarded after all the juice is extracted. [Fresh coconut milk](#) is splendid indeed! The water inside of the coconut may be drunk as a beverage or thrown away (note this water is not the coconut milk!).

The use of [coconut milk](#) in cooking Thai cooking is a feature that the Thai have in common with other Southeast Asian and Pacific countries. Coconut milk has the quality of blending together and mellowing the flavors of the dishes in which it is used. Used as a liquid medium in meat and fish curries, it offsets the pungency of many of the stronger ingredients. A Westerner might consider coconut as the dairy substitute of Southeast Asia!

Coconut milk is also available canned. In the West it is difficult to find very fresh coconuts in the supermarket, therefore it is more practical to use canned.

When **using canned coconut milk**, follow the recipe directions whether to stir the contents or not. The heavier [cream](#) is on the top of the watery part.

Store unused coconut milk portions in a ziplock bag in the refrigerator or freezer. Use within a few days if you refrigerate it. To use frozen milk, break off a chunk and pop into your curry or soup, bring to a quick boil only to cook through the meats and vegetables. Be careful when boiling as the milk will tend to separate if you boil it too hard and long.



Curry paste (*kreung-geng*) (fresh and canned): Curry paste is made in a [mortar and pestle](#) (or blender) by pulverizing together chilies, peeled garlic, lemon grass, fresh turmeric, sea salt, and shrimp paste (*kapee*). This basic paste is the foundation of every Thai curry. Today in Thailand, most Thais prepare curry paste in a small electric blender. The [mortar and pestle](#), many will argue, produces a far superior paste.

Prepared curry paste is also conveniently available canned. Use approximately 3 tablespoons per cup of liquid to prepare curry.

Fish sauce (*nam pla*): The most *essential* cooking ingredient for Thai food is perhaps fish sauce. This is Thailand's equivalent to soy sauce or table salt. Uncooked it has an unpleasant smell, but it adds a subtle flavor, for which there is no substitute. Small anchovy fish are fermented and the resulting liquid is strained and bottled.

Add a bit more [fish sauce](#) at the end of cooking to adjust to taste and cook a minute longer. This is perhaps the most important ingredient in Thai cooking, so give it a chance by all means. The key to appreciating it is to buy only the best quality [fish sauce](#) available. Look for clear amber coloured liquid with no sediment.



Galangal root (*hea-uh kah*): Galangal or galanga root is similar to ginger root, but more delicate in flavor and texture. Preferably fresh, but also available [dried in slices](#) or ground, it adds a unique fresh flavor to soups and curries.

The most popular Thai dish using fresh galangal is *dthom tay gy*, [chicken cooked in coconut milk](#). Dried pieces of galangal can also be substituted in this dish. Galangal is known as "laos" in Indonesia and "lengkaus" in Malaysia.



Garlic (*gra-tium*): Fresh garlic is a key ingredient for many Thai dishes, including curry paste, which incorporates up to 30 small cloves in a paste. Also use in stir-fry, first smashing the clove with the side of a heavy knife, before adding to hot oil. Stir once and then add the remaining ingredients called for in your stir-fry recipe. Sliced very thin you can also add fresh garlic to [Thai beef salad](#).

Note that Thai garlic is less than half the size of American commercial type. That means you need to re-adjust the recipe if it was written in Thailand (see our [Thai cookbook department](#)). Also the outside skin is much thinner, so peeling is not as necessary as it is in the US.



Kaffir Lime (*ma-groot*): This distinctly Thai ingredient is essential to many dishes. Both the leaves and the fruit of the Kaffir Lime tree are used in Thai cuisine.

The leaf is a wonderful aromatic addition to soups like *tom yum*. Also added to stir fry, curry and salads, the results are fragrant and exotic. Buy [fresh kaffir lime leaves](#) in our grocery.

Kaffir limes: It is generally difficult to find the [fresh Kaffir lime fruit](#) in the South Africa. You can try growing your own kaffir lime tree in a container, but it most likely will not bear fruit. Visit [Four Winds Growers](#). Sometimes, you may be able to buy the [dried peel of the kaffir fruit](#) also in our grocery.

Dried kaffir leaves and rind: Dry and frozen kaffir lime leaves are also available. [Dried kaffir lime leaves](#) are very good in liquid dishes, like curry and soup.

Lemon Grass (*dtah-kry*): This aromatic citrus-flavored tropical grass is a must for homemade Thai curry paste and many Thai dishes.



To grow your own lemon grass: Plant 6 clipped rooted plants in a circle in a large pot, leaving the middle section empty. The plants will multiply and fill in the center as they flourish. In cooler climates, grow outdoors in warm months and indoors during colder months. Allow one year to mature, but you can steal a few pieces by cutting off just what is above ground now and then. You may buy [fresh lemon grass](#) in our grocery. If using **dried lemongrass** stalks, use 2-3 pieces more than the recipe calls for. Soak in hot water for an hour. [Powdered lemon grass](#) is also available (visit our online grocery). Two tablespoons powdered spice is approximately equivalent to one fresh stalk. Be careful though because dry lemongrass contains salt. Adjust seasoning accordingly. For soups, try substituting fresh lemon peel if you are in a pinch for fresh stalks.



Peppercorns (*prik thai*): White, black, and green peppercorns all come from the same tropical vine. Young green peppercorns are used in curries, stir fry, and '*nam prik*'. Unfortunately fresh peppercorns are generally difficult to find fresh in the West. Check the frozen section of your local Asian grocer or try our [pickled green peppercorns in brine](#). Mature **black peppercorns** or black pepper are not used much in Thai cooking, except certain regional dishes.

White Pepper is used the most commonly in Thai cooking. It is obtained by allowing the pepper berries to fully mature on the vine to bright red. The seeds are then allowed to ferment in a warm place for a few days. The red outside is rubbed off to reveal smooth, round **white peppercorns**. The resulting ground pepper is speckled black. Shop in our Thai grocery for Thai [white peppercorns](#).

Sea Salt (*gluah*): Used for all cooking (not just Thai-ask a French chef!), sea salt is far superior in taste to mined salt. It aides in the grinding of dry ingredients in the mortar and pestle when making curries. Look for it in better supermarkets, health food stores or [here](#) at the Temple of Thai!



Tamarind (*ma-kum*): This fruit grows as a pod on the tamarind tree. It is usually found dried, packaged as a paste with or without the seeds, for cooking.



To prepare **tamarind water**, pour warm water to cover 2-3 tbsp. tamarind paste and squeeze to extract the flavor. Discard the seeds and add only the liquid to the [sour curry](#). If you are pressed for time, the seeds may be left in the dish, but warn your diners. Simply add directly to the sour curry, breaking into small pieces.



Shallot (*hea-uh hom-deng*): The foundation of sour curry paste is the shallot or small red onion. Also it is often sliced thin to garnish salads like [beef salad](#). Like [Thai garlic](#), shallots are smaller in Thailand than their American counterparts, so if using a recipe written in Thailand, use half as much.



Tumeric or Cumin (*cu-min*): Tumeric root is used for brilliant yellow color and subtle flavor in Thai curry. It is available normally frozen or as a dried ground powder. Substitute one teaspoon dried turmeric powder for a half-inch fresh piece. It may be possible to grow at home, but generally it is difficult to find fresh