

Prep time: 15 minutes

Cook time: 20 minutes

Total time: 35 minutes

Difficulty / Intensity: Medium Low (Intermediate simmer)

Servings: 4

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Introduction

Thai Coconut Chicken Soup—known authentically as *Tom Kha Gai*—is one of the world's most harmoniously balanced dishes. Resting on a foundation of velvety coconut milk infused with

warm, woody aromatic herbs, this iconic soup expertly blends four cornerstone flavors of Thai cuisine: bright acidity, deep saltiness, gentle sweetness, and mild, comforting heat.

Unlike heavier cream-based soups, Tom Kha Gai manages to be rich and satisfying while remaining light, fresh, and remarkably uplifting. Tender poached chicken breast and earthy mushrooms absorb the fragrant broth, creating a dish that feels like a warm hug in a bowl. Whether you are seeking a soothing weeknight dinner, battling a cold, or looking to recreate restaurant-quality Thai food at home, this streamlined recipe brings authentic Southeast Asian flavor directly to your kitchen with straightforward techniques.

Intensity & Culinary Nuance

- Heat Intensity: Mild to Medium (easily customizable by adjusting the red chilies).
- Technique Complexity: Gentle simmer. The critical intensity rule here is temperature control: never bring coconut milk to a violent rolling boil, as high heat causes the coconut fat to separate and curdles the delicate emulsion. Keep the heat at a steady, medium-low simmer to preserve its luxurious, silken texture.

Ingredients

The Aromatic Broth Base

- 4 cups (1 liter) unsalted chicken stock (or bone broth)
- 1 can (13.5 fl oz / 400 ml) full-fat unsweetened coconut milk
- 1 piece (2-inch / 5 cm) fresh galangal or ginger, thinly sliced into coins

- 2 stalks fresh lemongrass, trimmed, outer leaves removed, bruised with a knife handle, and cut into 2-inch pieces
- 6 to 8 fresh kaffir lime leaves, torn in half to release essential oils
- 3 cloves garlic, smashed

The Soup Fillings

- 1.25 lbs (550 g) boneless, skinless chicken breasts (or thighs), sliced thinly across the grain into bite-sized strips
- 8 oz (225 g) fresh straw mushrooms, cremini, or shiitake mushrooms, sliced
- 1 small red bell pepper, thinly sliced (optional, for vibrant color)

The Seasoning & Fresh Finish

- 3 tbsp quality fish sauce (adjust to taste)
- 1 tbsp coconut sugar or brown sugar
- 3 to 4 tbsp freshly squeezed lime juice (added off heat)

- 1 to 2 Thai bird's eye chilies, lightly sliced or crushed (optional, for heat)
- 1/2 cup fresh cilantro leaves and stems, coarsely chopped
- 2 stalks green onions, thinly sliced

Step-by-Step Cooking Instructions

Step 1: Infuse the Aromatic Base

In a medium Dutch oven or soup pot, pour in the chicken stock. Add the sliced galangal (or ginger), bruised lemongrass stalks, smashed garlic cloves, and torn kaffir lime leaves. Bring the mixture to a gentle boil over medium-high heat.

Once boiling, reduce the heat to low, cover the pot with a lid, and let it simmer for 8 to 10 minutes. This allows the volatile aromatics to release their deep oils and perfume into the chicken stock.

Step 2: Incorporate the Coconut Milk

Uncover the pot and pour in the full-fat coconut milk. Stir gently until completely combined into a pale, creamy broth. Bring the mixture back to a gentle simmer over medium-low heat. Do not let it boil vigorously.

Step 3: Poach the Chicken and Mushrooms

Add the thinly sliced chicken strips and sliced mushrooms to the simmering broth. Stir gently to ensure the chicken slices separate and submerge completely.

Simmer uncovered over low to medium-low heat for 6 to 8 minutes, stirring occasionally, until

the chicken is tender and cooked through (reaching an internal temperature of 165°F / 74°C) and the mushrooms are soft.

Step 4: Balance the Seasoning

Stir in the fish sauce, coconut sugar, and sliced Thai bird's eye chilies (if using). Simmer for another 1 to 2 minutes to allow the flavors to blend.

Turn off the heat completely and remove the pot from the burner. Stir in the freshly squeezed lime juice.

Chef's Note: Always add fresh lime juice off the heat. Boiling lime juice destroys its bright, fresh notes and can turn the citrus juice bitter.

Step 5: Garnish and Serve

Taste the soup and adjust seasonings if necessary—add a dash more fish sauce for salt, an extra squeeze of lime juice for tartness, or a pinch of sugar for balance.

Ladle the hot soup into serving bowls. Top generously with chopped cilantro and sliced green onions. Serve hot as a standalone soup or alongside a bowl of hot steamed jasmine rice.

Tips for Success & Ingredient Substitutions

- **Galangal vs. Ginger:** Authentic Tom Kha relies on galangal, which offers a woody, citrusy, and slightly pine-like flavor. If galangal is unavailable at your local Asian market, young fresh ginger is an acceptable substitute, though it will yield a slightly spicier, pepperier flavor profile.
- **Kaffir Lime Leaves:** These leaves deliver a uniquely fragrant, punchy citrus aroma that

lime juice alone cannot replicate. If you cannot source fresh or frozen leaves, substitute with 1/2 teaspoon of freshly grated lime zest.

- Eating the Aromatics: Lemongrass stalks, galangal coins, and lime leaves are left in the soup during serving for continuous flavor extraction and traditional presentation, but they are tough and meant to be pushed aside, not eaten. You can strain them out before adding the chicken if preferred.

Nutrition Facts

Serving Size: Approximately 1.5 cups (1/4 of recipe)

Nutrient	Amount per Serving	% Daily Value*
Calories	380 kcal	—
Total Fat	22 g	28%
Saturated Fat	16 g	80%
Trans Fat	0 g	—
Cholesterol	85 mg	28%
Sodium	1,120 mg	49%
Total Carbohydrates	12 g	4%
Dietary Fiber	2 g	7%
Total Sugars	5 g	—
Protein	34 g	68%
Vitamin D	0.2 mcg	2%
Calcium	45 mg	4%
Iron	3.2 mg	18%
Potassium	680 mg	14%