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Bonus section:  
**15** thanksgiving  
side dishes

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## how to roast a moist turkey

making a rich  
pan gravy

adding new  
flavor to four  
fall vegetables

baking an  
apple crumb  
pie or crisp

roasting  
chicken for  
a casual  
harvest menu

creating a  
quick thai soup



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# The Fastest Chicken Soup in the East

Coconut milk and tangy herbs make this simple Thai classic taste deceptively complex

BY NANCIE McDERMOTT

I fell in love with chicken coconut soup soon after I arrived in Thailand as a Peace Corps volunteer. Its flavors were unfamiliar yet inviting, as if all my early impressions of Thailand had been simmered up and ladled into a bowl.

Though I spent my time in Thailand eating Thai food rather than learning to cook it, when I returned home to North Carolina, I was able to make a delicious pot of *tome kha gai* (chicken coconut soup) on my very first try with ingredients I tracked down at a small Korean market. Nowadays, you can find Thai ingredients like coconut milk, fish sauce, fresh lemongrass, and jasmine rice at supermarkets; and Asian markets often carry fresh or frozen lime leaves and galangal; for sources, see p. 90.

The defining flavor of this soup is galangal, known in Thai as *kha*. For this recipe, you can use this

fibrous, intensely flavored rhizome in several different forms: fresh, frozen (whole or sliced), or sliced and dried into humble-looking woody chips. All three forms deliver galangal's intense, citrusy tang. Ground dried galangal, however, does not, so please don't use it in this soup. If you can't find galangal, use its cousin, fresh ginger. The flavor will be different, but still delicious. And if you can't find lemongrass or lime leaves, *my ben lai*—"Don't worry!" They add magic, but even without them, you'll still have a delicious soup. That's how I made it the first ten years after returning from Thailand, because fresh Thai herbs were difficult to find during that time.

**Making the soup is a snap.** There are no new techniques to master. It's a simple matter of prepping the ingredients, boiling, stirring, and simmering.

I usually serve the soup Thai style, leaving the lemongrass, galangal, and lime leaves floating in the



*Galangal, a relative of ginger, gives this soup a bright, citrusy flavor.*



## Chicken Coconut Soup (Tome Kha Gai)

Yields 4¾ to 5 cups; serves four as a starter or two as a light meal.

This soup is a treasure: a quintessentially Thai dish that you can make at home simply, quickly, and with great success.

- 2 stalks fresh lemongrass**
- 2 tablespoons fresh lime juice**
- 2 tablespoons fish sauce (nam pla)**
- 2 scallions (white and green parts), trimmed and very thinly sliced crosswise**
- 6 fresh or frozen wild lime leaves (also known as kaffir lime leaves; see p. 24), torn or cut into quarters**
- 10 to 12 thin slices galangal, fresh, frozen, or dried (or 10 to 12 thin slices fresh unpeeled ginger)**
- 8 to 10 fresh hot red and green Thai chiles, stemmed and lightly pressed with the side of a knife (or 3 or 4 serranos, thinly sliced) for garnish (optional)**
- 2 tablespoons coarsely chopped fresh cilantro**
- 1 boneless chicken breast half (about 6 ounces), cut into bite-size chunks or sliced across the grain into strips**
- ¼ pound white mushrooms, cleaned, stems trimmed, and thinly sliced to yield 1 cup**
- 14-ounce can unsweetened coconut milk (shake the can before opening it)**
- 14-ounce can low-salt chicken broth or 1¾ cups water**

To make the soup, follow the directions starting above right.

broth. But if you're having guests and don't want to ask them to eat around those items, you can remove them before serving the soup. Just scoop the solid ingredients into a large wire strainer held over the soup pot, fish out the galangal and lemongrass, and then return the chicken and mushrooms to the broth.

Many of my friends think that all Thai dishes are hot, but that isn't true. This soup, for example, isn't spicy-hot, though it would be served along with an array of spicier dishes and jasmine rice. To oblige my chilehead friends, I put a dish of tiny hot Thai chiles, stemmed and lightly pressed with the side of a knife, on the table. When added whole to the finished soup, they add a welcome burst of color and a blast of heat, too.



## Follow these 4 easy steps

**1** Trim away and discard the root end and the top 3 inches of each stalk of lemongrass, along with any brittle leaves. Pound each stalk lightly with the spine of a cleaver or an unopened can. Cut each stalk crosswise into 2-inch lengths and set aside.



**2** In a large serving bowl, combine the lime juice, fish sauce, scallions, and half of the wild lime leaves. Set the bowl by the stove, along with small dishes containing the galangal, lemongrass, and remaining lime leaves; the chiles (if using), the chopped cilantro; and the sliced chicken and mushrooms.

**3** In a medium saucepan, combine the coconut milk and broth. Bring to a gentle boil over medium-high heat. Stir in the galangal, lemongrass, and lime leaves. Add the chicken and mushrooms. Return to a gentle boil, reduce the heat, and simmer for 10 minutes to infuse the flavors and cook the chicken.

**4** Remove the pan from the heat, pour the hot soup over the seasonings in the serving bowl, and stir well. Sprinkle with the chopped cilantro and serve hot. Pass around the chiles for those who want them.

