

Kaffir lime leaf and peel

(Bai Ma-gkood, PewMa-gkrood)



Both the exceptionally fragrant fruits and leaves of the Kaffir lime tree play important roles in Thai cooking, imparting unique flavors that have become identified with the cuisine. Any Thai cookbook that alludes to the use of citrus leaves really means Kaffir lime leaves, the only citrus leaves used with regularity in a wide array of favorite Thai dishes. The luscious perfume and striking flavor of the leaves cannot be easily substituted with other kinds of citrus leaves. They are worth seeking, as their special attributes are irreplaceable.

The Kaffir lime fruit approximates the size of a Western lime. The fruit is dark green in color and has a bumpy surface. Through the juice is seldom used in cooking, the peel of the fruit, with its high concentration of aromatic oils, is indispensable in many curry pastes and is one reason why Thai curries taste refreshingly unique. The zest also imparts a wonderful piquant flavor to such delectable favorites as fried fish cakes, and it blends in powerfully with such spicy, chili-laden stews as "jungle soup" (gkaeng bpah). Because its strong flavor can over power the more subtle ones in a dish, the rind should be used sparingly, grated or chopped finely and reduced in a mortar with other paste ingredients until indistinguishable.

The leaves of the Kaffir lime tree are a dark green color with a glossy sheen. They come in two parts: the top leaflet is lightly pointed at its tip and is attached to another leaflet beneath that is broader on its upper edge. The size of the leaves can vary quite a bit, from less than an inch to several inches long. The larger leaves are usually darker in color. In recipes that call for them, estimate the number to use according to their size, with the average single leaflet (detached from its double) of about two inches long and an inch wide equaling one leaf. Add more or fewer leaves according to the sizes in the batch you purchased.

Kaffir lime leaves are precious to many Thai dishes, from soups and salads to curries and stir-fried dishes. They are the ingredient that blends marvelously with lemon grass and lime juice in dtom yam to give the soup its wholesome lemony essence. In soupy dishes, add the leaves whole or torn into smaller pieces, using them as one would bay leaves to flavor broth or stew. For dishes in which they are a component to be eaten, such as salads, stir-fries and dry or custard like curries, cut them in very fine needlelike slivers, so that their strong bouquet can be more evenly distributed. The slivers also provide a pleasing texture and appearance.

To sliver Kaffir lime leaves finely, stack three to four leaves of similar size together and slice them very thinly with a sharp knife. It is faster to cut

diagonally , which gives the hands better leverage, or roll a few leaves at a time into a tight roll before slicing. If at first this task seems onerous, practice until you develop a sense of how to work the leaves. It is a good contemplative exercise and a way to become present with a wonderfully aromatic member of our universe. You can also try cutting the leaves with a pair of scissors, but I find this can be a slower process because you usually must cut one leaf at a time in order to get fine slivers. You may be tempted to mince or chop the leaves instead, but these methods add the Kaffir lime leaf flavor differently and can overwhelm the more delicate flavors in a dish. Large slivers can be equally overpowering. So, it is best to use fine slivers about an inch long, as Thai chefs have done for generations, to add Kaffir lime leaves in the most pleasing balance of flavor, texture and presentation.

About the Kaffir lime tree and other uses

In tropical Thailand, almost every home in the countryside has one in its yard. Besides supplying great flavor ingredients to enhance food, Kaffir lime is also used as a indisputably effective cleanser, natural deodorizer and add a sparkling scent, like sweet bouquet of citrus blossoms, and each scratch of the zest releases another installment of refreshing perfume...

Kaffir lime shampoo leaves the hair squeaky clean and invigorates the scalp. It is believed to freshen one's mental outlook and ward off evil spirits. Kaffir lime has also been used for ages as a natural bleach to remove tough stains. When I was growing up, mother did the wash entirely by hand, and nothing worked better on stubborn stains than a few drops of Kaffir lime juice, mixed with a sprinkling of detergent. Not only does it clean effectively, it is inexpensive, natural and sweet-smelling. For rural villagers, a single Kaffir lime tree supplies enough limes to keep the whole house and family clean.

In folk medicine, the juice of Kaffir lime is said to promote gum health and is recommended for use in brushing teeth and gums. The essential oils in the fruit are incorporated into various ointments, and the rind is an ingredient in medical tonics believed to be good for the blood. Like lemon grass and galanga, the rind is also known to have beneficial properties for the digestive system.

Varieties of lime include Tahitian & West Indian The Kaffir lime leaves - a very popular spice in Thailand; their characteristic flavour appears in nearly every Thai soup, stir-fry or curry. In Thai cuisine, Kaffir lime is frequently combined with garlic, galanga, ginger and fingerroot, together with liberal amount of chiles.

RECIPE

Vietnamese-Style Chicken Curry Soup

Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 (3 pound) whole chicken, skin removed and cut into pieces
- 1 onion, cut into chunks
- 2 shallots, thinly sliced
- 2 cloves garlic, chopped
- 1/8 cup thinly sliced fresh ginger root
- 1 lemon grass, cut into 2 inch pieces
- 4 tablespoons curry powder
- 1 green bell pepper, cut into 1 inch pieces
- 2 carrots, sliced diagonally
- 1 quart chicken broth
- 1 quart water
- 2 tablespoons fish sauce
- 2 Kaffir lime leaves
- 1 bay leaf
- 2 teaspoons red pepper flakes
- 8 small potatoes, quartered
- 1 (14 ounce) can coconut milk
- 1 bunch fresh cilantro

Directions

- 1** Heat oil in a large stock pot over medium heat. Cook chicken and onions in oil until onions are soft and translucent; remove onions and chicken from pot and set aside.
- 2** Saute shallots in pot for about 1 minute, then stir in garlic, ginger, lemon grass and curry powder. Continue to cook for about 5 minutes, then stir in bell pepper and carrots. Return chicken and onion to pot and stir in chicken broth, water and fish sauce. Season with lime leaves, bay leaf and red pepper flakes.
- 3** Bring to a boil and introduce potatoes. Return to a boil and pour in coconut milk. Reduce heat and simmer 40 to 60 minutes, until potatoes and chicken are tender. Garnish each dish with a sprig of fresh cilantro.