

Introducing Thai-Style Grilled Chicken

Gai yang is popular Thai street food. Could we capture its complex flavors and adapt this dish for the American kitchen?

BY KERI FISHER

Thai grilled chicken, or *gai yang*, is classic street fare. This herb- and spice-rubbed chicken is served in small pieces and eaten as finger food, along with a sweet and spicy dipping sauce. Thai flavors are wonderfully aromatic and complex, a refreshing change of pace from the typical barbecue. But is it possible to bring the flavors of Thailand into the American kitchen (or backyard) without using an ingredient list as long as your arm and making several trips to Asian specialty stores?

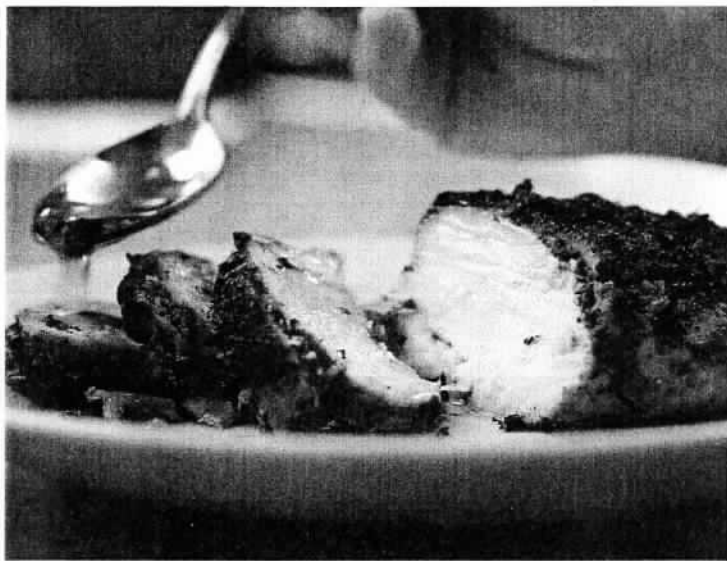
An initial sampling of recipes made me wonder if this dish ought to remain as indigenous street food. Among the hard-to-find ingredients were cilantro root and lemon grass, and there was a profusion of odd mixtures, including an unlikely marriage of peanut butter and brown sugar. In the end, the simplest version won out: a rub made only with cilantro leaves, black pepper, lime juice, and garlic. I would use this as my working recipe.

Because tasters preferred white meat, I decided to go with bone-in breasts. Brined chicken was vastly preferred to unbrined, and tasters liked the addition of sugar along with salt, which complemented the sweetness of the sauce. I settled on ½ cup of each in 2 quarts of water.

Rubbing In Flavor

Tasters liked my working rub recipe, but they wanted more complexity of flavor. My first step was to reduce the amount of cilantro, as it had been overpowering the other ingredients. Curry powder made the chicken taste too much like Indian food, and coconut milk turned the chicken milky and soggy, with flabby skin. The earthy flavor of coriander was welcome, and fresh ginger worked well in balance with the garlic. Tasters raised this blend as more complex and flavorful but still lacking bite, so I added more garlic.

The skin on the chicken was now crisp and flavorful, but not much rub was getting through to the meat. Coworkers offered suggestions ranging from slicing pockets in the meat and stuffing



At the table, spoon an intensely flavored sauce (made in minutes with supermarket ingredients) over the herb- and spice-rubbed grilled chicken.

them with the rub to butterflying the breast and placing the rub inside. In the end, the best alternative proved to be the easiest: I took some of the rub and placed it in a thick layer under the skin as well as on top of it. Now it was not only the

It's All about the Sauce

The true Thai flavors of this dish come through in the sauce, a classic combination of sweet and spicy. Most recipes suffered from the extremes. In my working recipe, I had tried to create a balance

crisp skin that was flavorful but the moist flesh beneath as well.

Most recipes call for grilling the chicken over a single-level fire, but this resulted in a charred exterior and an uncooked interior. I tried a modified two-level fire (one side of the grill holds all of the coals; the other side is empty) and, voilà, partial success! I first browned the chicken directly over the coals and then moved it to the cool side of the grill to finish cooking. This was a big improvement, but the chicken still wasn't cooking through to the middle. Covering the grill to make it more like an oven was an obvious solution, but better yet was using a disposable foil pan, which creates a mini oven. (Charcoal grill covers are home to deposits of smoke, ash, and debris that can lend off flavors to foods.)

TASTING: Fish Sauce

It is impossible to imagine Southeast Asian cooking without the salty, pungent punch of fish sauce. The intensely dense, concentrated flavor is as basic a seasoning as salt is in Western cooking. Its concentrated flavor lends foods a salty complexity that is difficult to replicate using any combination of other ingredients available at the supermarket.

Fish sauce is prepared by packing small anchovy-like fish tightly into barrels with a great deal of salt. The barrels are then weighted down and left to age for up to one year. The barrels are occasionally uncovered and exposed to fresh air and hot sun. The resulting fermented "broth" is eventually decanted, boiled, and filtered before bottling.

There are dozens of brands of fish sauce on the market, and after tasting six brands—one from Vietnam (known as *nuoc nam*), one from the Philippines (*patis*), and the rest from Thailand (*nam pla*)—we found them all acceptable. Each lent the characteristic complexity to the simple dipping sauce in which we tasted it. Our most interesting finding was that color correlated with flavor—the lighter the sauce, the lighter the flavor.

If you are a fan of fish sauce and use it often, you might want to make a special trip to an Asian market to buy a rich, dark sauce that is suitably pungent. But for most applications, we found that the differences were negligible. Thai Kitchen, an Americanized brand you're likely to find at the supermarket, is perfectly acceptable. —Keri Fisher



This is brand Thai Kitchen.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY