

Chicken Tikka Masala Soup

Serves 6

I grew up in a place where lineage was treated like currency.

In Virginia, people will tell you exactly where they came from, and if their family arrived early enough, they will shorten it to four letters as if everyone should already understand. FFOV. First Family of Virginia. It was never said with arrogance outright. It didn't need to be. It lived in the way the words settled into a sentence, quiet and permanent, like something inherited rather than achieved.

My last name is Sutherland, which sounds like it should come with answers. It sounds like it belongs to stone and wind and a place older than memory. Scottish. Northern. Definite.

But names can be misleading.

The truth is, I am not one thing. I am not traceable to a single origin or preserved in a straight line. I am a collection of departures and arrivals. People who left places they knew for places they didn't. People who crossed oceans or county lines or simply decided to begin again. Some had plans. Others had none. Some left with intention. Others left because staying had stopped being an option.

I am what happens when enough stories overlap.

For a long time, I thought identity was something you were supposed to simplify. That clarity meant choosing one version of yourself and committing to it fully. But the older I get, the more I understand that identity was never meant to be singular. It was meant to be cumulative.

You carry forward what stays. You release what doesn't. You become something that could not have existed any other way.

There is a particular kind of freedom in realizing you do not owe your belonging to a single place or a single past. That you are allowed to be shaped by movement. That you are allowed to gather influence and experience and still remain entirely yourself.

I am not a First Family of Virginia. I am something far less tidy and far more honest. I am proof that you do not have to come from one place to know exactly who you are.

Shorter Headnote

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Chicken tikka masala feels a little like that to me. Indian spices layered with cream and tomatoes, flavors traveling far from where they began and becoming something entirely new along the way.

This soup follows the same idea. Warm, vibrant, and gathered from many influences into one generous bowl. I am something far less tidy and far more honest. I am proof that you do not have to come from one place to know exactly who you are.

INGREDIENTS

Chicken

2½ pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs
¾ cup plain whole-milk yogurt
1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
1 teaspoon lemon zest
4 garlic cloves, finely grated
1 tablespoon fresh ginger, finely grated
2 teaspoons garam masala
1 teaspoon kosher salt
½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Soup

2 tablespoons ghee, butter, or neutral oil
1 large yellow onion, finely diced
4 garlic cloves, minced
1 tablespoon fresh ginger, minced
2 tablespoons tomato paste
1 tablespoon garam masala
2 teaspoons curry powder, or 1 teaspoon curry powder plus 1 teaspoon spicy curry powder for more heat
1 teaspoon ground cumin
1 teaspoon smoked paprika
½ teaspoon turmeric
¼ to ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
1 bay leaf
1 (28-ounce) can crushed tomatoes
2 cups chicken broth
1 (13.5-ounce) can full-fat coconut milk
½ cup heavy cream
2 teaspoons honey
2 teaspoons kosher salt, plus more to taste
½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
Up to 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice, optional, to taste
Cooked basmati rice, fresh cilantro, and yogurt, for serving

1. In a large bowl, combine yogurt, lemon juice, lemon zest, garlic, ginger, garam masala, salt, and pepper. Add chicken and toss to coat evenly. Cover and refrigerate at least 1 hour, preferably 4 to 8 hours.

2. Preheat grill to medium-high heat. Grill chicken until lightly charred and just cooked through, about 5 to 6 minutes per side. Transfer to a cutting board and cut into bite-size pieces. Set aside.
 3. Heat ghee, butter, or oil in a large Dutch oven over medium heat. Add onion and cook slowly, stirring occasionally, until deeply softened and golden, about 10 to 12 minutes. This step builds essential sweetness and balance.
 4. Add garlic and ginger and cook 1 minute more. Stir in tomato paste and cook 2 minutes, allowing it to darken slightly and concentrate.
 5. Add garam masala, curry powder, cumin, paprika, turmeric, and cayenne. Cook 1 minute, stirring constantly, until fragrant.
 6. Pour in crushed tomatoes and chicken broth. Add bay leaf. Bring to a simmer and cook uncovered for 20 to 25 minutes, stirring occasionally, until mixture reduces slightly and deepens in color. Masala should look concentrated, not watery.
 7. Stir in coconut milk, heavy cream, honey, 2 teaspoons salt, and black pepper. Simmer 5 minutes more to fully integrate flavors. Taste and add additional salt as needed. Depending on chicken broth and tomatoes used, soup may require more.
 8. Add grilled chicken and simmer gently for 5 minutes, just until heated through. Remove and discard bay leaf.
 9. Taste soup before adding lemon juice. If it needs a little brightness, add lemon juice gradually, a teaspoon or so at a time, tasting between additions. You may not need it at all.
 10. Serve hot over basmati rice, garnished with cilantro and a small dollop of yogurt, if desired. If using rice, plan on about $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ cup cooked rice per bowl and prepare enough accordingly. Microwaveable 90-second basmati rice works perfectly here.
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Storage

Refrigerate: Store in an airtight container up to 4 days.

Freeze: Freeze up to 3 months.

Reheat: Warm gently over medium-low heat, adding a splash of broth if needed to loosen consistency.