

## HOT AND SPICY

Have you ever noticed that the closer you get to the equator the hotter the food seems to be? Food from southern Mexico is hotter than food from the north, and food from southern India tends to be hotter than food from northern India. And by the time you get to Thailand or Indonesia, the food can get downright incendiary.

I spent the summer between college and law school traveling around Southeast Asia, and I remember my first meal in Indonesia—it was so hot I couldn't finish it and had to go up and lie down. It felt like my lips were on fire. Six weeks later I was eating the stuff without turning a hair. Then I got to Thailand, and had a dish of little shrimp, fresh lemon, cilantro and little tiny green Thai birdseye chilies, in about equal proportions. I thought I was going to die.

Here are a couple of my favorite—but slightly less lethal—5-alarm specials. The first is a chipotle shrimp from Veracruz, along the Gulf of Mexico. All of the ingredients can be found at your local supermarket. You'll need a 16-ounce can of diced tomatoes in juice, preferably the fire-roasted tomatoes, 3 cloves of garlic, peeled and finely chopped or put through a garlic press, a small can of chipote peppers in adobo which you can find in the Mexican food section, a pound or a little more of peeled medium-size shrimp, about 1 to 1 ½ cups of chicken broth or water or even bottled clam juice—I use the juice from the tomatoes in mine--and about a quarter cup of roughly chopped cilantro.

Open and drain the tomatoes, saving the juice in a measuring cup. Dump the tomatoes into a blender. Add three chipotle peppers and a tablespoon of the accompanying adobo sauce. Blend for 10 or 15 seconds until moderately smooth—I like to leave a bit of texture.

In a large frying pan, 12 inches or so, heat a couple of tablespoons of olive or cooking oil over medium heat until very hot but not smoking. Add the chopped or pressed garlic and stir for about 30 seconds until fragrant and golden. Don't let the garlic get darker than light golden. Add the contents of the blender and cook, stirring frequently, for about 5 minutes. Add enough broth or water until you have a thin tomato sauce consistency. I start with the juice from the tomatoes, and add water or broth as needed. Season highly with salt, anywhere from a half teaspoon to a teaspoon, and taste.

Add the shrimp and cook, stirring constantly, until the shrimp are done, about 4 minutes. Sprinkle the chopped cilantro over the top and serve in shallow bowls with piping hot tortillas or over steamed white rice. You can make this more of a one-dish meal by sautéing some sliced zucchini for a couple of minutes in the oil (you'll need to add an extra tablespoon) before adding the garlic.

And here's a quick Thai curry. In the oriental section of the supermarket, you can find little jars of Thai green curry paste—Thai Kitchen is one brand. In a medium saucepan, combine a tablespoon of the Thai green curry paste with a can of coconut milk, also available in the oriental foods section. Add half an onion, sliced, a sliced zucchini, 1/3 cup chicken stock, 2 tablespoons of brown sugar, and ¼ cup of sliced bamboo shoots and 3 tablespoons of fish sauce, both of which are also available in the oriental foods section. Simmer for about 10 minutes, and then stir in about a pound of medium-size cooked shrimp and cook for another couple of minutes, just until the shrimp are heated through. Sometimes I'll also add about a quarter of a pound of bay scallops a couple of minutes before I add the shrimp. You can substitute cooked chicken for the seafood if you prefer. Serve this over steamed white rice.

What do you do if you've been a little to optimistic on your ability to tolerate hot and spicy foods? The worst thing you can do is to drink liquids, like water or beer. While it may feel good for a moment, a few seconds later you are worse off than before. The heat is caused by the capsaicum oil left stuck to your tastebuds, and all that the water or beer does is wash away the other food in your mouth, leaving the oil behind. You need something to blot it up, like plain white rice, tortillas, or bread—and move this around your mouth as you chew. It will blot up the hot oil, calming down the fireworks. At least until your next bite! This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.