

Creamy Thai Tomato Soup

The Thai reference in the recipe name is actually culinary license on my part, but this is a great soup; rich and vivid, yet with the comforting quality of creamy tomato soups. This can be made from scratch quickly and uses ingredients I always have on hand.

(Serves 6)

¼ cup virgin coconut or extra-virgin olive oil
½ teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes
1 medium-large onion in ¼-inch dice (3 cups)
1 tablespoon freshly crushed garlic
1 can (28 ounces) crushed tomatoes
1½ cups tomato juice (or a 12-ounce can)
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon minced fresh ginger (see note)
2 teaspoons fish sauce (see note)
1½ tablespoons honey
1 can (14 ounces) coconut milk (see note)

Optional: 2 tablespoons fresh basil leaves, thinly sliced

1. Heat the oil over medium-high heat in a heavy 5-quart soup pot. Add pepper flakes and onion. Sauté 15 minutes, or until onions are very soft. Add garlic and sauté another minute.
2. Add crushed tomatoes, tomato juice, salt, ginger, fish sauce, and honey. Bring to a simmer, then reduce heat and simmer for about 20 – 30 minutes, stirring now and then. Remove from heat, add coconut milk, and blend thoroughly with whisk or purée. (See note below.) Add fresh basil just before serving.

Note:

► I like the smooth-textured version of this soup. If you have an immersion blender, purée soup directly in pot. If you use a food processor, purée cooled soup in 2 batches. Return soup to pot and bring to a simmer again. The fresh basil is a grand addition, but the soup is bright enough in color and flavor to stand alone.

► **Thai fish sauce** is potentially fishy – don't let the smell put you off. It is available in most supermarkets and probably has a shelf life of a hundred years or so. However, I have successfully substituted a tablespoon of mashed anchovies – about 3 anchovies. I dice them finely first, then mash them with the side of the knife blade until they're a smooth paste. (See box on page 214 for more anchovy talk.)

► **Fresh ginger** is an easy item to keep on hand. Buy a firm, smooth-skinned knob of ginger and cut it into one-inch chunks. Store the chunks submerged in white wine or *mirin* (a sweet rice wine used in Japanese cooking) in a glass jar in the refrigerator. The ginger will last a few months this way, although it loses some of its fresh bite over time. Peeling ginger is optional, but it's easy to peel or scrape off the thin skin. (Some people find that ginger relieves nausea; you can make your own ginger tea by steeping sliced ginger in boiling water with honey to taste.)

► **Canned coconut milk** is available almost anywhere for a wide range of prices. Don't buy "lite" versions, and before you decide on a brand, read the ingredient list; added xanthan gum and soy lecithin are fine – they are natural emulsifiers. If the contents have separated into a solid white layer on top and the liquid below, don't worry. Just scrape the firm creamy part into the soup (it will melt in quickly) and pour in the liquid.