

Vietnamese Caramel Chicken

By Bianca Borges

The classic Vietnamese technique of simmering meat or fish in dark, bittersweet caramel mixed with fish sauce and a few aromatics yields rich, wonderfully complex savory-sweet flavors. And the technique could hardly be simpler. Instead of a traditional clay pot, we use a 12-inch skillet to make our version of gà kho, or caramel-simmered chicken, and we cook the chicken until the sauce forms a glaze, as we were taught in Vietnam. Bruising the lemon grass releases its flavor and fragrance but since the stalk is still whole, it is easy to remove and discard before serving; the simplest way to bruise it is with the blunt side of the blade of a chef's knife or the butt end of the handle. Serve the chicken with steamed jasmine rice.

4-6 Servings

40 Minutes

Ingredients

1/4 cup white sugar
4 tablespoons coconut water or water, divided
3 tablespoons fish sauce
2 Fresno or serrano chilies, stemmed and sliced into thin rings
1 stalk lemon grass, trimmed to the lower 5 or 6 inches, bruised
2 teaspoons finely chopped fresh ginger
1 teaspoon ground black pepper
2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs, trimmed and cut into 1½-inch pieces
1 tablespoon lime juice
2 scallions, thinly sliced on the diagonal

1.5 inch pieces

Directions

- In a 12-inch skillet, combine the sugar and 2 tablespoons of the coconut water. Cook over medium-high, occasionally swirling the pan to help the sugar dissolve and to encourage even browning, until the caramel is mahogany in color and smokes lightly, 4 to 6 minutes.
- Remove the pan from the heat and add the fish sauce along with the remaining 2 tablespoons coconut water; the mixture will bubble vigorously and the caramel will harden in spots. Bring to a simmer over medium and cook, stirring, until the hardened bits have dissolved.
- Add the chilies, lemon grass, ginger and pepper, then cook, stirring, until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Increase to medium-high and stir in the chicken. Bring to a simmer and cook, stirring occasionally, until the sauce reduces and clings to the chicken, 10 to 14 minutes.
- Remove from the heat, then discard the lemongrass. Stir in the lime juice. Transfer to a serving dish and sprinkle with the scallions.

Tip: Don't be shy when cooking the caramel. Allow it to darken deeply - a smoky, bitter caramel is what gives this dish depth of flavor. It should reach a mahogany hue and will smoke lightly when ready.

RG note – I only used one serrano pepper, which was just enough spice for Cynthia.

Web page: <https://www.177milkstreet.com/recipes/vietnamese-caramel-chicken>

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Variations

Vietnamese Caramel Pork Tenderloin

- Cut two 1¼-pound pork tenderloins (trimmed of silver skin) in half lengthwise, then crosswise into ½-inch-thick pieces.
- Follow the recipe to make the caramel and cook the chilies, lemon grass, ginger and pepper.
- Add the pork and cook, stirring often, until just cooked through, 2 to 3 minutes.
- Using a slotted spoon, transfer the pork to a medium bowl, then continue to cook the caramel mixture, stirring occasionally, until thickened to the consistency of honey, about 2 minutes.
- Off heat, return the pork to the skillet and stir to coat. Discard the lemongrass, then stir in the lime juice. Transfer to a serving dish and sprinkle with the scallions.

Vietnamese Caramel Salmon

- Cut 2 pounds 1-inch-thick skinless salmon fillets into 1½-inch cubes.
- Follow the recipe to make the caramel and cook the chilies, lemon grass, ginger and pepper.
- Add the salmon and cook, stirring often, until the salmon is just opaque throughout, 5 to 6 minutes.
- Remove and discard the lemongrass, then stir in the lime juice. Transfer to a serving dish and sprinkle with the scallions.