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Beef and Zucchini in Red Curry Sauce

neua paht peht

Thais cook beef, pork, and crisp-fried freshwater fish in this rustic style. Untamed by the velvet cushioning of coconut milk, curry paste reveals its wild side here – a fascinating and welcome presence, provided you offer abundant plain rice to maintain order. Red curry paste and holy basil are classic in paht peht, but you can use any Thai curry paste and any variety of fresh basil or mint. A flourish of fresh cilantro or a handful of chopped green onions will work as well. I love the cut of beef called “tri-tip” in stir-fried dishes like this one, but flank steak works well, and so does any nicely marbled steak, fat and all. Then there’s chicken, ground beef, or ground pork if you need to get supper into the pan really fast.

2 tablespoons vegetable oil
1 tablespoon coarsely chopped garlic
2 tablespoons red curry paste or another Thai curry paste
1/2 pound boneless beef, such as tri-tip or flank steak, thinly sliced crosswise into 2-inch strips
2 medium zucchini, halved lengthwise and cut crosswise into 1-inch pieces (about 1-1/2 cups)
1/2 cup water
2 tablespoons fish sauce
1 tablespoon palm sugar
About 1/2 cup fresh basil leaves or fresh mint leaves, plus sprig for garnish (optional)

In a large, deep skillet or a wok, heat the oil over medium heat. Add the garlic and when it is sizzling and fragrant, add the curry paste. Reduce heat to low and cook gently for about 2 minutes, mashing and stirring to melt the paste into the oil.

Add the beef and toss to coat it with curry paste. Stir in the zucchini, and then add the water, fish sauce, and palm sugar. Cook, stirring now and then, until the zucchini is tender and the sauce is smooth, 2 to 3 minutes. Stir in the basil leaves, transfer to a small serving platter, and garnish with basil sprigs, if using. Serve hot or warm.

Serves 4