

Curried one-potter a holiday timeout

Do you need a holiday timeout? When we are in the eye of the storm, aka the lull between Thanksgiving and December celebrations, it helps to step off the conveyor belt of planning, cooking, baking and entertaining. Take a break and fix something easy, healthy and



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decidedly not holiday-inspired. Make a fragrant warming curry and call it a culinary break.

I use the term “curry” loosely since this recipe is hardly authentic. An authentic curry consists of a mountain of whole spices and

aromatics, carefully and lovingly toasted, ground, sauteed and coaxed to create a potent paste that forms the base of a stew, which simmers for an ample amount of time to infuse its flavor.

This yellow curry rendition gets its name thanks to a generous short-cut dump of curry powder into the soup, which, in the category of quick meals, does the trick.

Curried Chicken Stew

- Active Time:** about 35 minutes
- Total Time:** about 35 minutes
- Yield:** Serves 4 to 6
- Ingredients**
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- 1 to 1 1/4 pounds chicken breast or thighs, cut into bite-size pieces
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1 large yellow onion, chopped
- 1 large carrot, sliced 1/4-inch thick
- 1 medium red bell pepper, seeded, chopped
- 1 poblano pepper, seeded and chopped
- 3 garlic cloves, minced or pressed
- 1 tablespoon finely grated peeled ginger
- 1 tablespoon curry powder
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon ground coriander
- 1 (28-ounce) can Italian plum tomatoes with juice
- 1 (15-ounce) can coconut milk (not light)
- 2 cups coarsely chopped curly green kale, Tuscan kale or spinach leaves (tough stems removed)
- 1/4 cup fresh cilantro leaves
- 1 red or green jalapeno pepper, thinly sliced



LYNDA BALSLEV/TASTEFOOD

Curried chicken stew offers a time out from holiday fare.

Steps

Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a wide pot or deep skillet. Season the chicken with salt and pepper and add to the pot in one layer without overcrowding. Cook over medium heat until the chicken colors on all sides, 3 to 4 minutes, turning as needed. Remove the chicken from the pot and set aside on a plate.

Add 1 tablespoon oil and the onion to the same pot. Saute over medium heat until the onion softens, about 2 minutes. Add the carrot and peppers and saute until the carrot brightens in color and the peppers begin to soften, about 3 minutes more. Add the garlic and ginger and saute until fragrant, 15 to 30 seconds. Add the curry powder, cumin and coriander, stirring to coat the vegetables and lightly toast the spices for about 15 seconds. Pour in the tomatoes, coconut milk, 1 teaspoon salt, and 1/2 teaspoon black pepper. Partially cover the pot and simmer over medium-low until the vegetables are tender, 15 to 20 minutes, stirring occasionally and breaking up the tomatoes.

Return the chicken to the pot and stir in the kale or spinach. Continue to simmer until the chicken is thoroughly cooked and the leaves wilt, about 5 minutes more. Stir in the 1/4 cup cilantro and taste for seasoning.

Ladle the curry into bowls. Garnish with additional cilantro and the jalapeno slices. Serve with basmati rice.

Lynda Balslev is an award-winning cookbook author; recipe developer; tester and editor. Taste Food is distributed by Andrews McMeel Syndication.

Muscle cramps? Try pickle juice

To stay healthy please wash your hands often, eat foods with vitamin C like oranges, grapefruits, kiwi, bell peppers, strawberries, tomatoes, cruciferous vegetables (broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower and collards) and white potatoes every day.



KATHY KOLASA

Q My trainer told me drinking pickle juice will help relieve my leg cramps. Is there any truth to that? KM, Greenville

A Merry Christmas. Morgan Fletcher is an ECU senior dietetic student who looked into the benefits of pickle juice (PJ). Coincidentally, the day I was editing this column a friend stopped in to enjoy our decorated Christmas tree. Pat and I dress our tree with lots of Santas, “toys” from our worldwide travels, and yes, some fruits and vegetables. My friend said she couldn’t find the green pickle. She read there was a German tradition of hiding one among the branches. I have seen pickle ornaments in stores but didn’t know the meaning so never added one to our collection. Before I went back to editing, I went to the website for Mt. Olive Pickles (here in eastern North Carolina). No mention of the Christmas pickle but they announced the details of their traditional New Year’s Pickle Drop that sounds like fun (mtolivepickles.com/new-events).

I grew up eating Vlasic pickles from Michigan but there was nothing on their website. I asked my German-American Michigan friends but none had a tradition to share except of grandmother’s yummy Christstollen — a yeast bread that is baked with dried fruits, candied citrus peel, nuts and spices. Back to the web where I learned there are different ideas of how the pickle ornament came to be. If you

are curious, use the search term “German Pickle Tradition.” You might adopt a new tradition for your small children. It’s always fun to celebrate the holidays with family food traditions. Here is what Morgan learned about PJ:

Muscle cramps are common among a wide range of people such as athletes, those who are overweight, those with cirrhosis and/or high blood pressure, pregnant women and older adults. Since so many people are struggling with muscle cramps there must be a solution, right? Well, the truth is the treatment options for muscle cramps are limited, but there is evidence that pickle juice may help improve muscle cramps.

People think that cramps are caused by dehydration and low levels of electrolytes such as sodium, potassium and magnesium. The two top nutrients in PJ are sodium and potassium. PJ also contains vinegar, small amounts of calcium, and magnesium. So, while PJ is beneficial for its high electrolyte concentration, the true hero for reducing cramps is the acetic acid in PJ, which may affect how the nervous system causes cramping.

Acetic acid works by triggering a chemical stimulation that decreases alpha motor neuron activity. Fatigued muscles during exercise will increase the activity of alpha motor neurons, which will signal the muscle to sustain contraction. Alpha motor neurons also are called lower motor neurons — their main function is to communicate with the muscles to tell them when it is time to contract. Since the acetic acid in PJ simulates a decrease in the

alpha motor neuron function, this allows for the contracting muscles to gradually relax, which alleviates the pain that comes from cramping.

The relief can happen within three to four minutes after the reflex is stimulated. It is important to note that hydration and electrolyte balance during exercise is still important for preventing muscle cramps. Our body is 60 percent water by weight, and muscle is approximately 76 percent water. Dehydration decreases the ability of the cardiovascular system to provide adequate blood flow to both the working muscle and skin for cooling. The right balance of electrolytes is important to keep the heart and muscles functioning properly during exercise and with everyday activity.

It is recommended that those who have hypertension avoid PJ because of its high sodium content. Different pickle manufacturers use different recipes, so the serving size and ingredients will vary. However, the average serving size of PJ (3.4 ounces) has roughly 500 mg of sodium. The DASH dietary approach to stop hypertension suggests a sodium intake be limited to 2,300 mg a day. Luckily, you don’t need to swallow the PJ. Gargling (without swallowing) triggers the reaction as well. However, if you would rather consume PJ, there is good news. The pickle industry produces DASH diet-friendly options. Brands like Mt. Olive, Vlasic and McClure’s provide options that either included no salt added or lightly salted. The lightly salted option has 25-50 percent less sodium.

Dr. Kate Dowlatsahi, an ECU Health Family Medicine resident physician, has published a paper on a study of PJ and cramping and contributed to this article.

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Farm meets table at Starlight Cafe and Farm Restaurant

BY CHRISTINA RUOTOLO
Hot Dish

There is something magical that happens at a restaurant at night about an hour after the doors open. As the sun sets, the empty room slowly comes to life. Tables fill up with couples, friends or family, bartenders prepare drinks in an orchestrated dance, warm candlelight glows as conversation fills the room. Utensils clink like tuning forks and years-old wooden floors creak in thanks. This is the music of dinnertime. This is how I would describe my initial experience at Starlight Cafe and Farm, located in the heart of downtown Greenville at 104 W. Fifth St. The restaurant has been owned and operated by the Boutilier family since 2000. Tobias Boutilier is the executive chef and his wife, Kelly, is the manager. Chef Tobias describes the menu as a farm-fresh nod to France with Southern elegance. The food is what you know and love, but with a more refined finish.

The menu features organic produce, meat and eggs from their farm and others in the area, so the dining is truly a farm-to-table experience. Appetizers include house-made soups and salads, carpaccio, a cheese plate, Belgium frites, and a tapas option that changes weekly. They also offer locally sourced oysters; raw, baked or fried. Favorites include the oyster Rockefeller, raw oyster platters or shooters,



CHRISTINA RUOTOLO/HOT DISH WRITER

The heritage pork shank is braised in local Uptown Brewing’s coffee porter beer.

paired with a cocktail shooter. The entree favorites include a 12-ounce New York strip with house-made frites, Charleston shrimp and grits, baked salmon and the weekly changing Chef’s burger, made with meat from Nooherooka Farms. The kitchen is happy to accommodate vegan, gluten-free or vegetarian dietary needs.

Starlight Farm and Gardens is a short drive from the restaurant. The farm is over 100 years old and features 22 acres. It produces a variety of produce and berries along with heritage livestock breeds and pecan trees. It is truly a family affair, from the first plantings to the artfully crafted dishes. “We love providing our loyal customers with the freshest produce, meat and eggs. Our family works

hard to make sure our farm is run ethically, sustainably and organically. All of our breeds are heritage breeds raised with love and care,” says owner Alan Boutilier.

I started with a cocktail. The bar menu is beautifully presented and offers handcrafted cocktails made with bourbon, vodka, gin, tequila, scotch, rum, bubbly or maybe authentic absinthe. I tried the in-season blackberry yuzu ginlet made with Beefeater gin, blackberry puree, smoked sugar, and smoked yuzu, topped with a wheel of sliced lemon. Below the velvety waves of purple-hued magic lie flavors of fizzy citrus from the yuzu — an Asian citrus fruit — to a warm spice of juniper to finish. It’s a lovely start to my winter-inspired tasting.



Next, I sampled the tapas trio. I love tapas, it’s small, shareable and affords you the opportunity to try a few things all at once. The current trio is Nooherooka beef stew; smoked salmon with grilled focaccia, cucumber and garlic; and roasted beets, whipped chevre (goat cheese), toasted almonds and a drizzle of local honey. The stew was rich and decadent and the meat melted in your mouth. You could taste the reduced red wine and the full-bodied feel warmed you to your toes. It had the hours-long simmered taste. The salmon was clean with a soft hit of salinity and the trinity garnish provided a fresh palate-cleansing coolness. And I love goat cheese with its creamy, yet punchy bite mixed with cool beets and sweet honey.

I also enjoyed their homemade French onion soup. The glossy homespun soup with bubbly, rich waves of cheese was dreamy. They roast their own bones for the stock, simmer the broth for 24 hours, cook the onions for four hours to release their soft juices and then add in tomatoes yielding a rich soup brimming with flavor and nostalgia.

Next, I moved on to the red

chili oysters. Start with fresh, locally sourced oysters, baked and topped with fresh shrimp and spicy chili aioli. Starlight knows oysters, and these holiday-colored beauties were perfectly done.

Taste the coastal seashore mixed with creamy heat of the red chili aioli and the sweet shrimp for a well-rounded fire-ice bite. It was a nod to the sea and its bounty.

To end my tasting, I tried the seasonal favorite, the Heritage Farms pork shank. Start with a local pork shank braised in local Uptown Brewing’s coffee porter beer. Then serve that with bacon-stewed North Carolina collard greens and baked macaroni and cheese. The moment this dish is served to the table, your mouth will water from the aroma. A postcard from the farms of eastern North Carolina, you can taste the earth, the land, the history of place and the hard work of farmers. The vinegar twang of bacon-infused collards are a southern rite of passage. The pork that falls off the bone with ease, is buttery fork-tender and glossed with a luxurious gravy rendered down with hints of game, spice and warmth. Every bite enveloped my taste buds.

It’s pretty safe to say I enjoyed my tasting at Starlight Cafe and Farm. They are open 5:30-9 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday and 5:30-10 p.m. Friday-Saturday. Visit starlightcafeandfarm.com to view their menu or make a reservation or call 707-9033.



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