

DEEPLY REGIONAL JAPAN®

‘KARĒ RAISU’: JAPANESE CURRY AND RICE

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‘Karē raisu’ using beef pre-stewed in black tea

‘Karē-raisu’, the Japanese curry and rice, has a thick gravy-like consistency and a mellow, multi-layered flavour that is more driven by the ingredients, rather than spices as in the Indian and Southeast Asian curries. It is one of Japan’s ‘comfort foods’, popular among adults and children alike, and one of the most popular dishes among international visitors to Japan.

This popularity is quite ironic in that, unlike many other Asian food cultures, the Japanese actually never had a curry tradition. The karē-raisu is one of the ‘Western-style’ Japanese dishes that developed with the modernisation of Japan during the late 19th to early 20th centuries. The recipe is based on the British stew-style curry that developed with the British colonisation of India. The British curry was first introduced to Japan probably via the United States in the mid-19th century. It appears in Japanese cookbooks during 1872, variably featuring ingredients such as beef, chicken and frog meat (!?), flavoured with imported curry powder (a luxury item at the time) and thickened with wheat flour.

The recipe soon developed a distinctly Japanese twist—e.g. the addition of apples, honey, soy sauce and katsuobushi (smoked bonito flakes). Compared to the lean, vegetable-based

traditional Japanese cuisine, the karē-raisu was regarded as energy food, and became included in the standard menu at military schools during the 1870s. In an era when Western culture and meat consumption was regarded as fashionable, the Japanese curry also quickly became popular among the public, becoming a standard item on restaurant menus by the beginning of the 20th century.

From its humble beginnings, the karē-raisu morphed into a culinary trend of sorts during the 20th century. In 1906, prototype of the curry roux—the solid, block-like instant curry mixture that is now sold in supermarkets and Asian grocery stores around the world—was invented and marketed in Tokyo, paving the way for the karē-raisu to become a home-style dish. All sorts of variations on the recipe began to evolve, as innovative chefs started experimenting: ‘karē-nanban’, the Japanese curry served over soba or udon noodles, in 1908; the ‘katsu-karē’, Japanese curry served over crumbed pork schnitzel and rice, in 1918; and the ‘karē-pan’, the Japanese curry bread (crumbed and fried bread filled with curry) in 1927.

After World War II, the curry roux became widely available and, with increasing affluence from the 1960s, the Japanese curry and its many variants became firmly established as Japan’s favourite dish. Regional areas around Japan started to develop their own curry recipes, showcasing their unique local specialties from heirloom vegetables to squid ink. From the 1990s, the karē-raisu hit new heights (literally!) with inclusion in the list of food items carried on Japanese space missions. In August 2020, the 150-year history of karē-raisu came full circle, as the major Japanese curry restaurant chain CoCo-Ichibanya opened their first store in India.

Many variations of the Japanese curry exist in terms of ingredients and flavour. In recent times, Japanese tastes have shifted toward more ‘authentic’ and spice-driven Indian and Southeast Asian flavours. However, the old-fashioned karē-raisu with its relatively mild flavour retains a strong following. To make the dish at home, most people opt for the commercially manufactured curry roux that are readily available. Although convenient and seemingly tasty, most of these products contain processed fats and food additives that are harmful to your health—as well as high levels of sodium. Making your own Japanese curry from scratch is not difficult, and you can adjust the flavour according to your liking.

The recipe presented here is my personal take on the recipe, featuring the classic ingredients of puréed apple and soy sauce which, in my view, make the curry ‘Japanese’. I have also used a pre-stewed block of beef for tenderness and depth of flavour, however, using fresh beef is also fine—just let it simmer longer. Apart from beef, pork and chicken also work well. For a vegetarian option, try fried firm tofu in place of meat, and vegetable stock in place of beef stock.

In traditional Eastern medicine, curry is considered a ‘cooling’ food, hence it is usually not recommended for the cooler months. The addition of ‘warming’ ingredients such as apple, ginger, onion, carrot and potato, however, turns the Japanese curry into a dish that you can enjoy all year around—in fact, many Japanese consider a piping hot plate of karē-raisu a classic winter warmer.

INGREDIENTS (serves 4 persons)

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| • Tea-stewed beef (see separate recipe) or raw beef suitable for stewing | c. 500 g (c. 600 g if using raw meat) |
| • Curry powder (mild or hot) | ½ level tablespoon |
| • Turmeric, ground | ½ level tablespoon |
| • Cinnamon, ground | ½ level tablespoon |
| • Coriander seed, ground | ½ level tablespoon |
| • Clove, ground | ½ level teaspoon |
| • Black pepper, ground | ½ level teaspoon |
| • Bay leaf | 2 or 3 medium-sized |
| • Salt | ½ level teaspoon |
| • Oil | 1 to 2 level tablespoons |
| • Japanese sake (or vodka, medium sherry, semi-sweet wine) | ¼ cup |
| • Ginger root, minced or very finely chopped | ½ level tablespoon |
| • Garlic, minced or very finely chopped | ½ level tablespoon |
| • Onion, finely chopped | c. 150 g (1 medium-sized) |
| • Apple, peeled and finely chopped or grated | c. 150 g (1 medium-sized) |
| • Unsalted butter or extra virgin coconut oil | ¼ cup (40 to 60 g) |
| • Soft wheat flour | ¼ cup (c. 30 g) |
| • Broth from stewing the beef (strained to remove solids) or beef stock liquid | c. 2 cups (adjust as required) |
| • Potato, cut into chunks c. 3 cm across | c. 500 g (4 or 5 small to medium-sized) |
| • Carrot, cut into chunks c. 3 cm across | c. 250 g (1 to 2 medium to large-sized) |
| • Capsicum (red or green), cut into pieces c. 3 cm across | c. 100 g (½ to 1 medium to large-sized) |
| • Tomato, finely diced or puréed | c. 400 g (2 to 3 medium to large-sized) |
| • Soy sauce or tamari | 2 level tablespoons or to taste |
| • Sugar | 1 level tablespoon or to taste |
| • OPTIONAL: Chilli, finely chopped | To taste |
| • Short-grained rice | 4 to 5 cups |

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Steam the rice according to instruction on packaging. Keep warm until serving (or reheat just before serving).
2. Combine the onion, apple, ginger root and garlic in a food processor. Blend until evenly puréed. Set aside.



3. Cut the meat into cubes c. 3 cm across. Set aside.
4. In a pan large enough to hold all ingredients, combine the curry powder, turmeric, cinnamon, coriander seed and clove. Place over low heat and dry roast until fragrant. [Take care not to burn the spices.]



5. Add the oil to the roasted spices and mix through. Increase to medium heat, then add the cubed meat, salt, black pepper and, optionally, chilli. Lightly fry the meat until all sides of the cubes are sealed.



6. Add the sake (or substitute) and stir-fry for 30 seconds or so, then add the puréed onion–apple mixture prepared at Step 2. Mix thoroughly, lower the heat, and cook until most of the liquid has evaporated.



7. Add the butter and flour. Mix thoroughly and cook until a thick paste, i.e. the roux, has formed.



8. Add the potato, carrot, beef broth/stock, and bay leaves. Mix thoroughly and bring to a gentle boil (increase the heat temporarily if required). Once boiling, lower the heat, cover with a lid, and simmer for c. 30 minutes. Skim off any froth or scum that floats to the surface during simmering.



9. Stir in the tomato, soy sauce/tamari and sugar (adjust the amount of soy sauce/tamari and sugar according to your taste). Cover with a lid again and simmer for another 15 minutes or so.



10. Add the capsicum and cook for another 3 minutes or so. Remove from the heat, and stand covered with a lid for at least 5 minutes.
11. Serve with steamed rice prepared at Step 1. A classic Japanese accompaniment to karē-raisu is ‘fukujin-zuke’—reddish or brownish-coloured tsukemono (Japanese pickles) of daikon radish, cucumber, lotus root and other vegetables. Other types of pickles, e.g. gherkins, onions, as well as chutneys and relishes also go very well with karē-raisu.
12. If not enjoying straight away, your karē-raisu will keep well for 3 to 5 days in the refrigerator. It can also be frozen as a handy ‘instant’ meal.



‘Karē raisu’ with beetroot and red cabbage braised in vinegar