



Fish Head Curry

Fish head curry is a classic Singaporean and Malaysian dish. It's said to have originated in Singapore in the 1950s, though it seems likely that thrifty housewives were finding ways to make fish heads tasty long before then, after all the meat in the cheeks and wings is delicious and plentiful in many species! I like to use kingfish as, being farmed, it's reliably available in the right size, but snapper and other large white-fleshed fish work just as well. Ask your fishmonger to split the head lengthways for you. If you can't face cooking a fish head, poach some meaty white fish fillets or prawns in the same sauce for just a few minutes. The flavourings in a traditional Singaporean fish head curry are very similar to those in a Nyonya curry, though curry leaves are a must and mustard and fenugreek seeds are often added. Eggplant and okra are also frequently included, so take this recipe as a starting point and work with what you have on hand.

Serves 3–4

INGREDIENTS

- 750g kingfish head, split in half
- Salt flakes, to taste
- 1½ tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 red onion, cut into slivers
- ½ teaspoon brown mustard seeds (optional)
- About 135g Nyonya Curry Paste (½ recipe quantity)
- ½ teaspoon ground cumin
- 2 sprigs curry leaves, leaves picked
- 270ml coconut milk (shake the can)
- ⅓ cup water
- 6 grape tomatoes, halved
- 2 tablespoons tamarind liquid, or more to taste
- 1 teaspoon castor sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt flakes
- Steamed jasmine rice, for serving



METHOD

Rinse fish head in cold water, rub all over with 1 tablespoon of salt and set aside in a cool place for about 30 minutes. Rinse to remove salt.

1. Heat a wok over medium–high heat.
2. Add oil then onion and stir for about 2 minutes, until well coloured.
3. Add mustard seeds (if using) and stir for a few seconds until they start to pop.
4. Stir in Nonya Curry Paste, cumin and half the curry leaves.
5. Reduce heat to low–medium and cook, stirring often, for about 4 minutes, until oil starts to separate.
6. Stir in coconut milk and water and stir well to remove any bits stuck to the base of the wok, increase heat and bring to the boil.
7. Add fish head pieces and spoon sauce over them.
8. Reduce heat to low, cover and simmer for about 12 minutes, turning every 3–4 minutes and spooning the sauce over them, until flesh is cooked through in the thick part near the wing.
9. Transfer fish to a warmed serving platter.
10. Stir tamarind liquid, sugar and salt into the sauce then stir in tomato.
11. Taste and add more tamarind, sugar or salt if needed.
12. Stir in remaining curry leaves, spoon over fish and serve with steamed rice.