



Kaw Swep Yo (Coconut Chicken Soup)

Karen State, Burma

Cook - NAW HTOO

Naw Htoo ran a stand in the center of the Mae La refugee camp in Thailand, where she sold meals to other refugees and aid workers. With a small charcoal stove beneath a shaded booth, Naw Htoo cooked for dozens of people every day—and then went home to feed her family. “A lot of people really loved her food,” says her 21-year-old daughter, Cho Mai. Naw Htoo’s kaw swep yo was particularly popular.

Resettled to Oakland with her family in 2008, Naw Htoo doesn’t cook professionally anymore—but she still cooks for her family, as well as for celebrations at the Burmese Mission Baptist Church just a short walk from their apartment in West Oakland. Naw Htoo can find most of the things she needs for her dishes nearby. She frequents the shops in Oakland’s Chinatown, the Thai and Vietnamese stores on International Boulevard, and the Korean Plaza on Telegraph Avenue. But her favorite is the downtown Oakland farmer’s market on Fridays, where she—along with many other refugees from Burma—arrive early and scour the market for their favorite fresh goods: sprouted cilantro, mung beans, garlic.

Soon after her family was resettled to Oakland in 2008, Naw Htoo and her husband Lin Aung were matched with their tutor, Linda. “She helps us with so much,” they say of their Refugee Transitions volunteer tutor. “She helps us practice our English and improve a lot—she even taught us how to use an oven. We cooked a whole chicken!” Before they moved to their small, bright apartment on Martin Luther King Boulevard in Oakland, they’d never had an oven.

Linda is in awe of Naw Htoo’s skills in the kitchen. She explains that in Naw Htoo’s village, “she had no gas or electricity and so prepared this meal over charcoal, which they made themselves from wood. They even made the rice noodles by pounding rice flour with water

and forcing it through a sieve by hand. The recipe seems labor-intensive even with modern appliances, but imagine having to make your own charcoal and rice noodles, too!”

“This soup is Linda’s favorite,” says Naw Htoo as she sits atop a green woven floor mat and pours the broth over a twisted nest of noodles.

Naw Htoo explains that this dish “is prepared in the hills of Burma’s Karen State for weddings, birthdays, and other celebrations.” Her mother taught her how to make it, and now she passes the knowledge along to her daughters.

Naw Htoo and Lin Aung’s youngest daughter, Cho Mai, was a peer tutor at Refugee Transitions’ tutoring program at Oakland International High School, as well as a refugee youth leader. She helped dozens of younger, newly arrived refugees learn how to navigate life and school in Oakland. A high school graduate, she now attends Alameda College, where she hopes to study nursing. “We are very proud of her,” says Naw Htoo, who, in addition to studying at home with Linda, attended Refugee Transitions’ adult literacy class for two years. To Naw Htoo, education—for her, for her husband, for her children—is the key to their success and self-sufficiency in America. So no matter how hard it is to learn the language, she keeps on trying, meeting each week with Linda to share English lessons and, sometimes, Naw Htoo’s home-cooked meals.



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Ingredients

Sauce

- 4 **chicken breasts, cut into very small pieces**
- 2 **Tbsp. oil divided**
- ¼ **tsp. turmeric**
- ¼ **tsp. salt**
- ½ **Tbsp. powdered chicken broth plus 1-½ qt. water, or 1-½ qt. fresh chicken broth**
- 1 **14 oz. can coconut milk**
- 1 **14 oz. package dried yellow mung beans, rinsed 3 times in cold water**
- 1 **onion, cut into 8 pieces**
- ½ **tsp. paprika**
- 10 **garlic cloves**

Noodles

- 1 **14 oz. package of yellow Chinese noodles**
Spaghetti-like wheat noodles with turmeric added for color
- 4 **qt. water**

Toppings

- 2 **limes, cut into 8 pieces for squeezing**
- 1 **Tbsp. red pepper flakes**
- 1 **cup chopped cilantro leaves**
- 6 **eggs, hard-boiled, peeled, and left whole**
- 3 **small red onions, sliced into paper-thin slivers**
- 1 **3.5 oz. package of dried shahe rice noodles**
(can substitute with any wide rice noodle)
- 2-½ **cups vegetable oil**

Directions Serves 6

Sauce

- 1 Heat 1 Tbsp. oil, salt, and turmeric over medium-high heat.
- 2 Add chicken and stir-fry until cooked through.
- 3 In a separate pan, heat second Tbsp. of oil over medium heat, add onion and paprika, and fry until onion is soft and translucent.
- 4 In a large pot, combine chicken broth (or water mixed with chicken broth powder) with stir-fried chicken, coconut milk, mung beans, garlic, and stir-fried onions.

Bring to a boil over high heat.
- 5 Lower to medium heat and cook about 30 minutes or until mung beans are soft and begin to lose their shape.

Noodles

- 6 Bring water to boil in a different large pot. Cook the noodles in the water until al dente, then drain.

Toppings

- 7 Meanwhile, in a wok or deep pan, heat oil on high heat.
- 8 Drop in dried rice noodles by the handful. (Test first with sample noodle; noodle should spatter oil.)
- 9 Stir noodles constantly until crisp and beginning to brown. Remove with a slotted spoon and repeat until all have been fried. Drain on a paper towel. Place both types of noodles, sauce, limes, pepper flakes, cilantro, slivered onions, and whole eggs in separate serving bowls. Serve sauce over boiled noodles and add toppings according to personal preference. (Eggs go in whole.)