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## Curry-Scented Grilled Beef Lettuce Wraps

**SERVES 4**

**TAKES ABOUT 45 MINUTES**

Making lettuce-and-herb wraps filled with well-seasoned grilled morsels is a quintessential Viet way to eat. It's fun and healthful too. This recipe was inspired by beef wrapped in wild betel leaf (*bò nướng lá lốt*), a favorite. Plentiful in Vietnam but rare outside of Little Saigon markets in America, the heart-shaped, edible leaves magically release a peppery, incense-like aroma during cooking. I conjure up the leaf by seasoning the meat with curry powder, fish sauce, oyster sauce, and lots of black pepper.

Good ground beef, the kind you'd make excellent burgers with, is perfect. Peanuts lend texture, and the water hydrates to prevent a dry finish. With the rice noodles, you have a one-dish meal; but skip them for a low-carb dish. To make a beef rice bowl, see the Notes.

**Brimming ½ cup unsalted roasted peanuts or cashews, finely chopped**  
**3 medium green onions, white and green parts, finely chopped**  
**1 tablespoon Madras-style curry powder (preferably Sun brand)**  
**¾ teaspoon recently ground black pepper**  
**3 tablespoons water**  
**Brimming 1 tablespoon oyster sauce**  
**1 tablespoon fish sauce**  
**1½ pounds ground beef (about 85% lean)**  
**6 ounces small dried round rice noodles (maifun), or 8 ounces dried rice capellini or thin spaghetti**  
**1 cup Nuoc Cham Dipping Sauce (recipe follows)**  
**Leaves from 1 large head of soft-leaf lettuce (such as butter, Boston, or red or green leaf)**  
**6 to 8 bushy sprigs fresh mint or basil**  
**10 to 12 sprigs fresh cilantro**

In a medium bowl, combine the peanuts, green onions, curry powder, pepper, water, oyster sauce, and fish sauce. Add the beef and mix with your fingers. (If not cooking right away, cover and refrigerate for up to 24 hours.) Form into twenty-four patties, each a good 2 inches wide and ½ inch thick. Set aside.

In large pot of unsalted water, boil the noodles, then drain, rinse with water, drain, and let cool for 5 minutes. Since the noodles are unwieldy, arrange them as 2-inch nests on a plate or in a shallow bowl. Set at the table with the dipping sauce, lettuce, and fresh herbs.

Lightly oil a cast-iron stove-top grill (or lightly film a heavy skillet with oil) and set over medium-high heat. In batches, add the beef and cook for 4 to 5 minutes, turning midway, until medium to medium-well done. (These are usually not eaten medium-rare, but you can cook for less time, if you like.) Transfer to a platter and let cool for a few minutes.



Have diners build lettuce wraps with herbs, noodles, and beef (for easier eating, you can break or cut each patty into two or three bite-size pieces). Dunk in the sauce and eat.

#### **NOTES**

To speed up prep, chop the peanuts and green onions in a small food processor.

Boil the noodles and ready the lettuce, herbs, and sauce in advance and refrigerate separately. To refresh the noodles, sprinkle with water and microwave on high for 60 to 90 seconds.

For extra color and texture, cut a 2-inch section of carrot into fine matchsticks (or coarsely grate it), then add to the dipping sauce. The beef is great in rice noodle salad bowls too.

For curry-scented grilled beef rice bowls, cut the lettuce into ribbons, coarsely chop the herbs, and put them in soup bowls. Add room temperature or slightly warm cooked rice (about  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup per bowl) and the cooked beef, then drizzle with the sauce. Eat with a fork and spoon.

#### **BE SKEPTICAL ABOUT THE COOKING INSTRUCTIONS ON YOUR NOODLE PACKAGE**

Japanese and a handful of Chinese noodle companies have spot-on cooking directions, but most producers don't. Plus, the noodles are crafted for multiple uses. Go rogue and judge the timing and doneness yourself. You'll be a better cook.

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### **Nuoc Cham Dipping Sauce**

**MAKES ABOUT 1 CUP**

**TAKES 10 MINUTES**

I've been making Vietnam's ubiquitous *nước chấm* for decades but still prepare it in stages to dial in the flavor. Much like making a vinaigrette, taste, taste, taste. Follow this recipe, then create your own formula. With the optional additions, choose chile for heat, garlic for pungency, and/or carrot for texture.

**2 to 2½ tablespoons sugar, or 3 to 4 tablespoons maple syrup**

**3 to 4 tablespoons fresh lime juice**

**½ cup warm water, or as needed**

**2 teaspoons unseasoned Japanese rice vinegar (optional)**

**3 to 4 tablespoons fish sauce**



### **OPTIONAL ADD-INS**

1 or 2 Thai or serrano chiles, thinly sliced (keep seeds intact); or 2 to 3 teaspoons chile garlic sauce or sambal oelek

1 large garlic clove, minced

½ small carrot, cut into thin matchsticks or coarsely grated

In a small bowl, combine 2 tablespoons of the sugar (or 3 tablespoons of the maple syrup), 3 tablespoons of the lime juice, and the water. Taste the limeade and, if needed, add the remaining 1½ teaspoons sugar (or 1 tablespoon maple syrup) and/or 1 tablespoon lime juice; dilute with water if you go too far. If there's an unpleasant tart-bitter edge, add the vinegar to fix the flavor.

Add the fish sauce to the bowl; how much you use depends on the brand and your own taste. Aim for a bold, forward finish that's a little gutsy. (Keep in mind that this sauce typically dresses dishes that include unsalted ingredients such as lettuce and herbs, which will need an extra flavor lift.) If desired, add the chiles, garlic, and/or carrot. (Offer the chiles on the side if diners are sensitive to their heat.) The sauce can sit at room temperature for up to 8 hours until serving.

Set the sauce at the table so diners may help themselves, or portion it out in small bowls in advance of serving.

### **NOTES**

Lime juice dulls and can turn the sauce slightly bitter when left overnight. For a make-ahead *nước chấm*, combine the sugar, water, and fish sauce to create a base, then refrigerate for up to 2 weeks. (Prep a double batch if you use it a lot.) To finish, add the lime juice, vinegar (if using), and any desired add-ins.

For a vegetarian *nước chấm*, stir together a rounded ½ teaspoon fine sea salt, 3 tablespoons packed light brown sugar (or 4 to 5 tablespoons maple syrup), and 3 tablespoons lime juice. Taste and add sweetener or up to 1 teaspoon unseasoned Japanese rice vinegar to round out. Add ⅔ cup lukewarm water and 1½ teaspoons soy sauce and finish with any add-ins before serving.



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