

Butternut Squash and Coconut Curry **BRAIN HEALTH KITCHEN** by Annie Fenn, M.D.

Butternut Squash and Coconut Curry



On cold nights when I don't have a lot of time to cook, I crave a steaming bowl of this veg-forward curry. When I created the Butternut Squash and Coconut Curry for my book, I was aiming to give you a substantial vegetarian main dish that comes together in under half an hour, all in one pot. Since then, I've made this dozens of times, and each version is slightly different depending on what I have on hand. (See variations after the recipe.)

Excerpted from [The Brain Health Kitchen Book: Preventing Alzheimer's Through Food](#); Artisan Books 2023. Photograph by Alexandra Grablewski.

Serves 4 to 6

Ingredients:

1 cup whole-grain red or brown rice, rinsed
One 13.5-ounce can unsweetened coconut milk
2 large red bell peppers (12 ounces total), diced (about 2 cups)
1 bunch scallions, white and light green parts thinly sliced
One 1-inch piece fresh ginger, grated (about 1 tablespoon)
2 large garlic cloves, minced (about 2 teaspoons)
2 to 4 tablespoons Thai red curry paste (more for a spicier curry)
4 cups vegetable stock, chicken stock, or water
1 small butternut squash (about 1 pound/, peeled, cut in half lengthwise, seeds removed, and cut into ½-inch half- moons)
2 cups thinly sliced kale leaves, fresh or frozen
2 tablespoons fish sauce
1 loosely packed cup fresh cilantro leaves and tender stems, chopped, plus more leaves for garnish
¼ cup fresh lime juice
Lime wedges

Instructions:

Bring a large pot of salted water to a rolling boil. Stir in the rice and let it boil, uncovered,

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until the grains are tender but still chewy, 25 to 35 minutes. Drain and return to the pot. Cover and set aside until the curry is done.

While the rice cooks, make the curry. Scoop 2 tablespoons of the coconut cream from the top of the can of coconut milk and melt it in a large pot over medium heat. Add the bell peppers, scallions, ginger, and garlic and cook, stirring often, until the vegetables are fragrant and soft, about 2 minutes. Add the curry paste and stir continuously until you have a smooth paste, about 1 minute. Slowly whisk in the remaining coconut milk and the stock. Increase the heat until the mixture is gently bubbling, then stir in the squash.

Reduce the heat to a gentle simmer, cover the pot, leaving the lid ajar, and cook, stirring often, until the squash is just tender, 22 to 30 minutes. Add the kale and cook until tender, about 5 minutes. Stir in the fish sauce and keep warm on the stove over low heat.

Just before serving, stir in the cilantro and lime juice. Scoop ½-cup servings of rice into shallow bowls, spoon the curry over top, and sprinkle with cilantro leaves to garnish. Serve with lime wedges on the side.

Template: Protein + Veg + Leafy Greens + Flavorful Curry Sauce + Grains

As you can see, a bowl of this curry includes many brain-healthy food groups. Here, I'm giving you ways to boost the protein content, swap in seasonal vegetables, and expand your repertoire of grains beyond rice.

Variation ideas:

Add protein: The easiest way to add protein is to slide 1 cup **silken tofu** (cut into cubes) into the pot in the last 5 minutes of cooking. If you prefer the contrast of crispy tofu with the creamy sauce (also very good), **use extra-firm tofu** you've pressed and pan-fried or baked in the oven until crispy; add just before serving.

Shrimp is another easy add-in. Choose 1/2 pound (about 15) large wild-caught shrimp (if you are in the U.S., choose domestic), cleaned and deveined. Add to the curry in the last 5 minutes of simmering or until the shrimp is opaque.

Swap in other vegetables: Instead of red peppers, swap in 2 cups of another vegetable that tends to cook quickly—broccoli and cauliflower florets, asparagus (cut into thirds), colorful carrots (cut into 2-inch pieces), sliced mushrooms, tiny potatoes.

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Change up the squash: Delicata squash is my favorite. Its edible soft skin requires no peeling, just slice into half moons and simmer until tender. If you can find red kuri squash, its vibrant red flesh makes a beautiful curry.

Leafy greens: Swap in fresh or frozen spinach, collard greens, or Swiss chard leaves, cut into slivers.

Grains: The recipe calls for red or brown rice but also think of forbidden (black) rice, which cooks in the same amount of time, or quinoa (which boils in 12 minutes). Bulgur wheat is a quick option—just pour boiling water over the grains and fluff after 20 minutes. If you are in the habit of cooking grains in bulk to have on hand for meals (highly recommend!), your grain options open up: farro, barley, wheatberry, freekeh.

Broth: If you don't have homemade or store bought broth or stock, swap in water instead. To reduce the amount of saturated fat, substitute unsweetened almond, cashew or soy milk for half the coconut milk.