

Coconut Milk

Have you ever wondered why Thai green curry tastes so smooth and creamy and Chicken Korma has a sweet taste?

Coconut milk and cream are wonderfully rich and exotic tasting and are common ingredients in many tropical cuisines, most notably that of Southeast Asia (especially Thai, Singaporean Malaysian, and Sri Lankan), West Indian, and Polynesian cuisines.

Coconuts have been referred to as “milk bottle on the door step of mankind” (Harries 1981). The coconut has definitely played a significant role in the diets of our human ancestors in the time before agriculture.

Coconut (*Cocos nucifera*) belongs to the Palm family and is found growing around the world in tropical and subtropical habitats along coastlines. Although the coconut is classed as a fruit, botanically it is a one-seed drupe, consisting of a hard shell that encloses the seed. Coconuts float extremely well due to their structure, which protects the seed from salt water. An unopened coconut will last up to four months in the pantry, while freezing it whole will extend its life up to nine months. Once opened though, it should be refrigerated and used within a week, or it will turn rancid (thanks to the substantial amount of oil it contains).

The coconut was also referred to as the “Nut of India” until the Portuguese called it ‘coco’, meaning clown or monkey.

Coconuts can be used in two different stages of ripeness. In certain countries the nuts are sold green and immature while the meat still has a jelly like texture and the liquid is clear. In the Western world the nuts are preferred fully ripened, the nuts then have brown skins and have solid white meat surrounded by milky liquid. Getting out all the bits of a ripe coconut is not easy and is a lengthy process.

Although coconuts are versatile and the different parts are used for different functions, it is coconut milk or cream and desiccated coconut that is best known in the UK. Don't mistake the liquid inside the nut for coconut milk, this is coconut water and has been used as an excellent thirst quencher. Coconut milk instead is the extract of freshly grated coconut flesh that has been soaked in hot water and then strained, consisting of one part coconut to one part liquid. Coconut milk can even be made at home. The milk is ideal for flavouring stews, sauces, creams, ice creams and drinks.

Coconut cream is basically the same as coconut milk apart from the fact that it consists of one part liquid to four parts coconuts. Both coconut cream and milk are available canned from most supermarkets.

In recent times, coconut cream and milk have received some bad press due to their high saturated fat content. Saturated fats are not good for the heart, and in Western diets that are already high in (saturated) animal fats, moderation in using coconut milk and cream is called for. A tablespoon of coconut milk has 38 calories and 4 g fat. Coconut milk is often used as an alternative to cows milk in cooking and some people report that it is easier to digest. 'Light' coconut milk and cream do contain less saturated fats, but the taste is watery. It is worth a try though

Desiccated or shredded coconut is the result of processing and drying the flesh of the coconut. It is available sweetened or unsweetened, shredded or flaked, dried or moist.