Thai Cucumber Salad - Recipe

Ingredients

This recipe serves 4-6 as a side dish to accompany curry or for any dish that might benefit from a light crunchy salad.

For the Salad

- 2 large English cucumbers (or 3-4 Persian cucumbers, or 4-5 Thai cucumbers)
- 1 medium red onion or 3-4 shallots
- 2-3 Thai chilies (optional, adjust to taste) or 1 jalapeño
- ¼ cup fresh cilantro leaves and tender stems
- 2 tablespoons fresh mint leaves (optional but recommended)
- ¼ cup roasted peanuts, roughly chopped
- 2 tablespoons toasted sesame seeds (optional)

For the Dressing

- 3 tablespoons lime juice (from 2-3 limes)
- 2 tablespoons rice vinegar or white vinegar
- 2 tablespoons fish sauce (nam pla)
- 2 tablespoons sugar (palm sugar preferred, or white/brown sugar)
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- ½ teaspoon salt (adjust to taste)



Ingredient Notes:

- **Cucumbers:** English cucumbers have fewer seeds and thinner skins. Persian cucumbers are similar. If using regular cucumbers, peel them and scoop out seeds if they're large and watery. Thai cucumbers are ideal but harder to find outside Asia.
- **Fish Sauce:** Use quality fish sauce (brands like Red Boat, Three Crabs, or Squid brand). Fish sauce is essential for authentic flavor—soy sauce is not an adequate substitute, though vegetarians can use soy sauce plus a pinch of sea vegetable for umami.
- **Palm Sugar:** Traditional but not essential. Light brown sugar works well. Avoid using only white sugar as it lacks depth.
- **Chilies:** Thai bird's eye chilies are very hot. Adjust quantity based on heat tolerance, or omit entirely for a mild version.

Equipment

- Sharp knife
- Cutting board
- Mixing bowl (medium to large)
- Small bowl or jar for dressing
- Whisk or fork
- Serving platter or bowl

Instructions

Step 1: Prepare the Cucumbers (10 minutes before serving)

Wash the cucumbers thoroughly. The preparation method affects the final texture significantly.

- **Option 1 - Sliced (Most Common):**

Cut cucumbers into thin rounds, about 2-3mm (⅛ inch) thick. You can cut them straight or at a slight diagonal for a more elegant presentation.

- **Option 2 - Ribbons:**

Use a vegetable peeler to create long ribbons by peeling strips lengthwise along the cucumber. This creates a more delicate, elegant presentation.

- **Option 3 - Smashed (Traditional Style):**

Place whole cucumbers on a cutting board. Using the flat side of a knife or a mallet, gently smash them to create cracks and irregular pieces. Then cut into bite-sized chunks. This method creates more surface area for the dressing to penetrate and gives a rustic, authentic appearance.

- **Option 4 - Half-Moons:**

Cut cucumbers in half lengthwise, then slice into half-moon shapes.

Place prepared cucumbers in a colander and lightly salt them (about ½ teaspoon). Toss to distribute salt and let sit for 10-15 minutes. This draws out excess moisture, preventing a watery salad. Rinse briefly and pat dry with paper towels or a clean kitchen cloth.



Timing is Important: Don't dress the salad more than 10-15 minutes before serving. Cucumbers will release water when dressed, diluting the flavors and making the salad soggy. For best results, prepare all components separately and combine just before serving.

Step 2: Prepare the Aromatics

- **Red Onion/Shallots:**

Slice very thinly—paper-thin if possible. Shallots are more traditional and have a gentler flavor than red onion.

Optional: To reduce the harsh bite of raw onion, soak sliced onions in cold water for 10 minutes, then drain and pat dry. This removes some of the sulfuric compounds that cause sharpness.

Chilies: If using, slice Thai chilies thinly. For less heat, remove seeds and membranes. Adjust quantity based on your heat tolerance:

- Mild: 1 Thai chili or ½ jalapeño, seeds removed
- Medium: 2 Thai chilies or 1 jalapeño
- Hot: 3-4 Thai chilies with seeds

Herbs: Roughly chop cilantro and mint. For cilantro, use both leaves and tender stems—stems have concentrated flavor. Mint is optional but adds aromatic complexity.

Garlic: Mince finely or use a garlic press. One clove is sufficient; more can overpower the salad.

Step 3: Make the Dressing

In a small bowl or jar, combine:

- Lime juice
- Rice vinegar
- Fish sauce
- Sugar
- Minced garlic
- Salt

Whisk vigorously or shake in a sealed jar until sugar completely dissolves. This may take 30-60 seconds of whisking. The dressing should taste intensely flavored—quite salty, sour, and sweet. It will be diluted by the vegetables.

Taste and Adjust:

- Too sour? Add more sugar
- Too sweet? Add more lime juice or fish sauce
- Not salty enough? Add more fish sauce
- Too salty? Add more lime juice and sugar

The goal is balanced flavor with all elements present but none dominating. Traditional Thai cooks adjust by taste rather than strict measurements.[1)]



The Four Flavors: Thai cuisine emphasizes balancing four fundamental flavors:

- **Sweet** (sugar)

- **Sour** (lime juice, vinegar)
- **Salty** (fish sauce)
- **Spicy** (chilies)



Some add a fifth: **umami** (also from fish sauce). The interplay of these flavors creates complexity and satisfaction.

Step 4: Prepare Garnishes

Peanuts: Roughly chop roasted, unsalted peanuts. You want pieces, not a fine powder. Peanuts add crunch, richness, and protein. They're traditional in many Thai salads and echo the peanuts in massaman curry.

If starting with raw peanuts, toast them in a dry skillet over medium heat for 5-7 minutes, stirring frequently, until fragrant and lightly golden. Let cool before chopping.

Sesame Seeds (Optional): Toast sesame seeds in a dry skillet over medium heat for 2-3 minutes, stirring constantly, until fragrant and lightly golden. This step is optional but adds nutty flavor and visual appeal.

Step 5: Assemble the Salad (Just Before Serving)

This is the crucial step—timing matters!

In a large mixing bowl, combine:

- Prepared cucumbers (drained and dried)
- Sliced red onion or shallots
- Sliced chilies (if using)
- Most of the cilantro and mint (reserve some for garnish)

Pour the dressing over the vegetables. Using your hands or salad tongs, toss gently but thoroughly to coat everything evenly. Toss for about 30 seconds to ensure even distribution.

Transfer to a serving platter or bowl.

Garnish with:

- Chopped peanuts
- Toasted sesame seeds (if using)
- Reserved cilantro and mint leaves

Serve immediately.

Step 6: Serve

1)

Bhumichitr, Vatcharin. *The Taste of Thailand*. Pavilion Books, 1988.

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