



Jamaican-Style Barbecue

Making and using hot and spicy “jerk”

Jamaican jerk marinade is full of hot, spicy, and herbal ingredients, like Scotch bonnet peppers, scallions, ginger, garlic, thyme, bay, cinnamon, peppercorns, nutmeg, and allspice.

BY JAY B. MCCARTHY

Growing up in Jamaica, I learned to love the island food, especially the jerk—Jamaican barbecue—we ate at roadside stands.

Despite its name, Jamaican jerk has no similarities to dried meat jerky. The name comes from the way the meat was “jerked” (turned) regularly to ensure even cooking. And, like barbecue, the term *jerk* refers to the seasoning, the finished product, and the cooking method.

Jerked meat is cooked slowly over a fire of green

wood. In Jamaica, the wood—traditionally allspice (called pimento), but sometimes other woods—that’s used to make the barbecue frame imparts half the luscious depth of flavor to jerked meats. The other half comes from the jerk marinade itself, which is made of herbs, spices, and Scotch bonnet peppers.

When I began cooking in the United States, I explored ways to recreate the hot, spicy, herbal mixture that haunted my palate. Now, as a chef, I regularly incorporate jerk into my restaurant menu. The

Photo: Sloan Howard. All other photos: Ruth Lively

jerk mixture is easy to make, and it can be used on many kinds of meat, poultry, and fish. If the traditional method of roasting jerk over green wood doesn't suit you, you can use any kind of grill setup, a smoker, or your oven.

TRADITIONAL AND NOT-SO-TRADITIONAL JERK

In the past, pork was the only meat that was jerked. Freshly slaughtered pigs and wild boar were—and still are—chopped coarse, rubbed with the marinade, and then slowly roasted until well done with a crisp, crunchy outside. The meat is served hot with extra Scotch bonnet sauce or jerk marinade, and it's often accompanied by “festival,” a fried cornmeal dumpling that's like a hushpuppy, but longer and sweet.

Today, jerk stands in Jamaica offer both pork and chicken. They're the most affordable and readily available meats; beef is very scarce and expensive.

Recently, jerked fish and jerked lobster have made their way onto restaurant menus both in Jamaica and in the United States. Jerked fish is often referred to as “slash and burn,” from the slashing of the fish skin to help the flavors penetrate and the charring of the marinade as the fish is slowly roasted. Jerked lobster is boiled with jerk seasoning in the water, or split, rubbed with butter and jerk, and broiled. Due to the much shorter cooking times, the jerk doesn't permeate fish or lobster very deeply and is used more as a condiment.

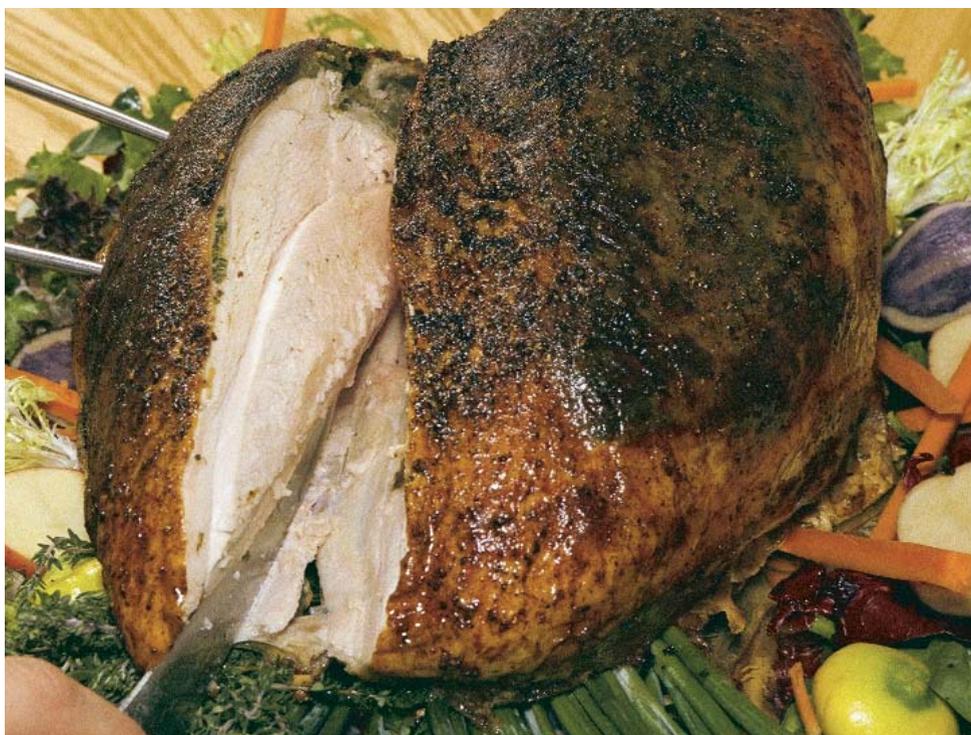
There are far more food items around the planet that lend themselves to be jerked than are available in Jamaica, however. I have made jerked rabbit, quail, pheasant, and squab. My most recent innovation is Jerky Turkey, as I like to call it (see the recipe on p. 45). Jerk is a fantastic marinade for fish steaks and grilled squash and eggplant. I've even made jerked breads to use as stuffing, and spread jerk on pizza crust.

JERK: THE SEASONING

Jerk is a thick paste, sometimes called jerk rub, which can be thinned with oil, vinegar, or a combination of the two to make a pourable, saucelike marinade. You can also use soy sauce to thin jerk rub, but it isn't traditional.

There are good commercial jerk seasonings available. Walkerswood is my favorite, though I always add a Scotch bonnet pepper or two for some extra heat. The best way, however, is to make the stuff yourself.

The core ingredients of jerk are scallions, thyme, allspice, Scotch bonnets, black pepper, nutmeg, and cinnamon. The scallions used in Jamaica are more like



baby red onions, but green scallions work fine. The thyme is a very small-leaved, intensely flavored English thyme. I prefer Jamaican allspice, which has more pungency than allspice from elsewhere. McCormick and Spice Islands both market Jamaican allspice.

Scotch bonnet peppers add a big flavor to jerk (see Sources below). They have what I think of as a “round” taste—intense heat with apricot or fruity overtones. The best substitute for a Scotch bonnet is a fresh habanero pepper, which is becoming increasingly available nationwide. (Frieda's Finest, a specialty produce distributor in California, sells a thousand pounds a day!) But to my taste, habaneros have all of the heat and none of the fruitiness of Scotch bonnets, so I always add a little honey or fruit jam or syrup when I use habaneros for jerk.

Most Jamaicans grind their dry ingredients by hand in a mortar and pestle. You'd never find a food processor at a jerk stand. The most advanced form of machine probably would be a hand-cranked meat grinder, followed closely by a machete. I think this hands-on approach gives Jamaican jerk that extra cup of love and caring that makes it taste so good, and it's why I prefer to hand-chop all the ingredients. If you're not so inclined, you can use a blender or food processor to process everything except the

Jerk rub is versatile.

The thick paste of herbs, spices, and peppers can be used to flavor many items, from pork to poultry to fish. In Jamaica, jerk pork is traditional, but McCarthy has found that stuffing jerk under the skin of a turkey breast produces delectable, moist, and pleasantly spicy results.

SOURCES FOR SCOTCH BONNETS AND HABANEROS

Dean & DeLuca, 560 Broadway, New York, NY 10012; 800/221-7714

Don Alfonso Foods, PO Box 201988, Austin, TX 78720-1988; 800/456-6100. They grow their own peppers; available in summer.

Melissa's, PO Box 21127, Los Angeles, CA 90021; 800/588-0151. Peppers are imported; available year-round.

Stonewall Chili Pepper Co., PO Box 241, Stonewall, TX 78671; 800/232-2995. They grow their own peppers; available in summer.



Chopping the ingredients by hand gives a better texture.

When chopping the individual ingredients by hand, aim for pieces of consistent size. If you make jerk in a blender or food processor, be careful not to overprocess. And if you do use a machine to make jerk, you should still chop the thyme and peppers by hand, or you'll end up with green mush.

Fresh-ground spices make a world of difference, so McCarthy grinds his own. He keeps a coffee mill dedicated to the purpose so he can make potent ground spices as needed.



thyme and Scotch bonnets, which you should mince by hand. This way you'll end up with jerk rub that has great texture instead of being just green mush.

I'm also a firm believer in grinding my own spices fresh as I need them. Whole spices keep their aromatic oils (and therefore their flavor) better than ground spices do. I simply pulverize whole spices in a coffee mill.

JERK: THE PROCESS

Jerking is a two-step process. First you marinate the meat for at least four hours; overnight is better. Then

you slow-cook it, preferably over hardwood coals, because the sweet hardwood smoke contributes half the flavor of the finished jerk. Here in Texas, I use pecan, apple, or my favorite, peach. Maple, walnut, almond, or hickory would be fine, too.

The traditional Jamaican way is to dig a pit about two feet deep and set stones or cinder blocks at each end to support the green sticks of the grill framework about eight inches above the coals. The fire is started and when the coals are ready, the sticks are set in place, and the meat is put on the barbecue. Banana leaves used to be placed on top to help trap the smoky heat; nowadays it's more likely to be a sheet of galvanized zinc. The meats are "jerked," or turned, every 15 to 20 minutes. Pork takes two to four hours and chicken 45 minutes to two hours, depending on the fire. The slower and longer the cooking process, the better the finished jerk.

To make jerk pork at home, I marinate the meat and refrigerate it overnight. I use a lot of jerk in proportion to the amount of meat, normally two to three cups of jerk rub for a 6-pound pork butt roast. I prepare the pork butt by removing the bone (you can have the butcher do this). Then I place it skin-side down on the cutting board and cut it at 1½-inch intervals straight down to, but not through, the bottom layer of fat next to the skin. I rotate the roast 90° and again cut at 1½-inch intervals. This makes a lot of stubby, square fingers of meat, all connected on one side by fat and skin. I rub the jerk deeply into these pieces of meat.

About an hour before I begin cooking the roast, I start a fire in my covered grill with mesquite. When the mesquite coals are ashen, I add peach or pecan wood (I do this because there's always more mesquite available than fruitwood). I put a drip pan directly under the meat to prevent scorching. I often pour half a bottle of Jamaican Red Stripe beer into the drip pan (I drink the other half). I set the pork on the grill rack 6 to 8 inches from the coals, cover it with a pot or lid, and "jerk" it every 15 to 20 minutes until the meat is tender, spicy, and succulent. By the time the pork is done, the pan's contents are a great dipping sauce.

You can also cook jerk in the oven. See the turkey recipe at right.

JERK RUB

You'll get a better texture if you chop the herbs and peppers by hand. A food processor or blender is a time-saver, but it tends to make an overly smooth purée. If you want to use a machine, be sure to pour in the half cup of oil first, and then add the herbs. The thyme and peppers should *always* be chopped by hand and added at the end. Be careful with the peppers, however. Their oils can really burn your eyes and skin, so be sure to wash your hands when you're finished chopping. And don't add the seeds unless you like a lot of heat.

If you grind the spices in a coffee mill or spice grinder, start with the nutmeg and cinnamon. Grind these until

coarse, then add the other spices, and grind them all together until fine. If you use preground spices, you might need to use more—up to double—depending on how long they've been sitting in your cupboard.

Jerk rub is best after a few hours, when its flavors have had a chance to meld. The rub keeps for up to three months in the refrigerator. I tend to jerk everything in sight for a week and then have to make more. *Makes 3 cups.*

30 scallions

5-in. piece fresh ginger, peeled

¼ cup fresh garlic cloves, peeled

6 bay leaves

6 to 8 Scotch bonnet peppers, seeded, chopped fine by hand (substitute habaneros if necessary)

2 tsp. freshly ground nutmeg, preferably Jamaican

2 tsp. freshly ground cinnamon (about 1 stick)

1 Tbs. freshly ground allspice, preferably Jamaican

2 Tbs. black peppercorns, ground fresh

2 Tbs. whole coriander seeds, ground fresh

1 Tbs. sea or kosher salt

1 cup fresh thyme leaves, chopped fine by hand

OPTIONAL:

½ cup oil (only if using a blender)

1 tsp. apricot jam or honey (only if using habaneros instead of Scotch bonnets)

Chop the scallions, ginger, garlic, bay leaves, and peppers separately until moderately fine. Combine these ingredients and chop until fine. Put in a bowl and add the ground spices. Stir in the chopped thyme and mix well.

JERKY TURKEY

I usually jerk turkey over peachwood or applewood coals, but here's a method for the oven that's easy and tastes great. Brining the turkey for several hours flavors the meat a little, and helps the smoke and marinade flavors penetrate the meat during cooking. The roasting process mellows the intense heat of the peppers, and renders the jerk pleasantly spicy and aromatic. The leftovers make delicious sandwiches or fantastic tacos.

If there's any fat in the turkey breast cavity, you can chop it up and mix it with the jerk rub. Alternatively, you can use a few tablespoons of softened butter. The fat or butter will make the jerk even more succulent.

Serves twelve.

11-lb. bone-in turkey breast

1½ to 2 cups jerk rub (see recipe above)

Salt and pepper

FOR THE BRINE:

1 cup dried hot chiles

2 cups brown sugar

1 cup sea or kosher salt

4-in. piece fresh ginger, peeled and chopped

2 Tbs. whole allspice

½ cup dried thyme

3 gal. cold water

Combine all the brine ingredients in a large, nonreactive container. Stir until the sugar and salt have dissolved. Submerge the turkey breast in the brine, refrigerate it, and let it soak at least two but not much more than eight hours.

Remove the turkey from the brine and carefully work your hand under the breast skin to separate it from the meat. Apply the jerk rub under the skin, massaging it evenly over the breast. Be sure you get it all the way to the other end of the breast. Set the turkey in a roasting pan and dust lightly with salt and pepper. Roast in a 350°F oven for about 3 hours. Baste every 30 min. or so with the pan drippings. When the turkey is firm to the touch, it's ready,



When the pork is cut into "fingers," the jerk rub penetrates better. McCarthy bones a pork butt roast, makes deep cuts in two directions, and then spreads jerk rub all over it. Smoked over a fruitwood fire or roasted in the oven to a crackling crispness, it's Jamaican-style barbecue at home.



McCarthy provides a pocket in the turkey for the jerk by carefully inserting his hand between the skin and meat. He then rubs the meat generously with the jerk, making sure it gets all the way to the other end of the breast.

though you could check the internal temperature with a meat thermometer; it should register 165°F. Let the turkey rest for about 10 min. before you cut the breast from the bone. I like to cut one breast side completely away from the bone, and then carve it crosswise, so every slice has a strip of crisp skin with a layer of jerk beneath.

In 1983, Jay B. McCarthy abandoned aerospace engineering for the kitchen. He is chef at Cascabel in San Antonio, Texas, where he practices a blend of Texan- and Jamaican-flavored cooking. He's currently working on a Jamaican cookbook that will be available from Crossing Press this year. ♦