



Jerk What?

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“The modern-day jerk seasoning that we know and love is an amalgamation of ingredients and cultures”



Figure 1: Walkerswood jerk seasoning

When one thinks of Caribbean food, one of the distinct flavors that comes to mind is jerk. Jerk seasoning is used in Caribbean cooking, especially in Jamaica, for a variety of meats including chicken, pork, goat, and fish. To me, jerk is a smell in the kitchen on a Sunday afternoon. But as I helped plan the first general meeting of the Caribbean Culture Club this semester and told people that we would be serving jerk chicken, I got a lot of confused looks and people asked me, “Jerk what?” So it’s time to shed some light... What is jerk anyway?

Jerk seasoning is made up of a broad variety of ingredients including allspice, scotch bonnet peppers, nutmeg, thyme, garlic, salt, cloves, and cinnamon. It can be homemade—which is always the best, of course—or bought in jars at different “heat levels”. The most traditional jerk seasoning is wet, and more like a thick marinade, while some jerk seasoning can be purchased as dry powder. In either case, the flavor is very distinct and is well-loved all throughout the Caribbean. Just as there are Coke families and Pepsi families in America, there are different brands of pre-made jerk seasoning that every Caribbean child sees their Ma use and to which they become loyal, but they are all essentially the same.

According to a variety of sources, including some of the wisest Aunties in my Caribbean family, jerk seasoning has



its roots in West Africa. It was brought by African slaves that were captured and taken to the Caribbean, mostly by the British, to work the sugar and rice plantations. However, jerk seasoning, like any other widespread element of Caribbean culture, underwent a transformation once it arrived in the islands. There were so many different cultures there including the natives, British, and later Indians, Chinese, Portuguese, and French. Just like America, the Caribbean was a melting pot, and different elements of separate cultures' foods all melted together over the years. Furthermore, there were some ingredients in original West African jerk seasoning that did not grow in the Caribbean, so there were additions and substitutions, including the famously scorching scotch-bonnet pepper. It is clear that the modern-day jerk seasoning that we know and love is an amalgamation of ingredients and cultures.

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But there must be something special about jerk to make it so timeless and so widely used, right? Well if you ask me, I would tell you because it's delicious. There are, of course, also a variety of “legitimate” reasons, though. For this answer, you have to consult the grandma of a Caribbean family. Jerk seasoning has one extremely important use—it is a preservative. Once you marinate meat



Figure 2: Marinating jerk pork

in jerk, it does not have to be kept in the fridge. It will not spoil as long as it is covered, and it gets better the longer it sits and seeps into the meat. People used it as an alternative to salting meat and drying it to preserve it. Salting fish, however, was and still is very common in the Caribbean, which is where we get another beloved Caribbean dish: salt fish (pronounced sal-fish). In any case, it is no wonder Ma's and Aunties used jerk seasoning throughout the years. It even It's West African name was translated to Quechua, and the original name has been lost. The name of jerk seasoning comes from *charqui*, the Quechua root word for “jerky”, meaning “dried meat”.

So the next time you hear jerk in the context of food, you will have a pocketful of facts about this smoky, spicy, and distinct ingredient that represents many facets of the Caribbean. Even if you did not grow up loving this vibrant flavor, when it's cooked right and eaten among friends, jerk chicken or any other meat is a delicious dish that is sure to raise eyebrows and spark some smiles. Now that you're all convinced, don't worry—I won't leave you hanging. Try out the following recipe with your friends and enjoy!