Sauces / Jamaica

Jerk Marinade

Jamaica's defining marinade — scotch bonnet peppers, allspice, thyme, and ginger pounded with scallion and soy sauce into a fiery, aromatic paste that penetrates deeply into chicken or pork before it hits the grill or pit.

Time 20 min **Servings** 4

What you'll need.

- ☐ 2 parts Scotch bonnet peppers (stemmed; seeds in for full heat, seeds removed for medium)
- ☐ 3 parts Scallions (spring onions), roughly chopped
- ☐ 1 parts Whole allspice berries, freshly ground (or ground allspice)
- ☐ 0.5 parts Fresh thyme, leaves picked (or 1 tsp dried)
- ☐ 0.5 parts Fresh ginger, peeled and roughly sliced
- ☐ 0.5 parts Garlic cloves
- ☐ 1 parts Soy sauce
- ☐ 0.5 parts Neutral vegetable oil
- ☐ 0.5 parts Fresh lime juice
- ☐ 0.3 parts Dark brown sugar
- ☐ 0.2 parts Ground cinnamon
- ☐ 0.3 parts Fine sea salt
- ☐ 0.2 parts Black pepper, freshly ground

Let's make it.

01 Put on gloves — this is not optional with scotch bonnets. Stem each pepper. If you want the full, traditional heat, leave the seeds and white membrane intact; if you want a hot-but-tolerable marinade, halve each pepper and scrape out the seeds and membrane with a small spoon. Either way, the scotch bonnet's unique quality is not simply heat — it carries a distinctive tropical-floral fruitiness (mango, apricot, a hint of tamarind) that no other chili provides. Habaneros are the closest substitute but lack the specific floral depth. Roughly chop the prepped peppers. Do not touch your face.

02 Add all prepared ingredients to a blender or food processor: the chopped scotch bonnets, scallions, freshly ground allspice, thyme, ginger, garlic, soy sauce, oil, lime juice, brown sugar, cinnamon, salt, and black pepper. Blend in 30-second bursts, scraping down the sides between bursts, until the mixture forms a cohesive paste — rough and slightly chunky is traditional and preferable to fully smooth, as the texture helps the paste cling to meat. If the blender is struggling, add a tablespoon of water to help it move. If you want an authentic Maroon-style jerk, pound everything in a large mortar instead — the mortar shears the cells rather than chopping them, releasing more volatile oils from the allspice and ginger and creating a more complex, deeper paste.

03 Taste the paste carefully — use a very small amount on a plain cracker or a piece of bread to buffer the heat and allow you to taste beneath the fire. The paste should be extremely hot, deeply savory from the soy sauce, fragrant with allspice (the soul of jerk), and carry the specific tropical-fruity dimension of the scotch bonnet underneath the heat. It should not taste one-dimensionally fiery. Adjust: if it needs more allspice depth, add more ground allspice; if the soy is too dominant, add more lime; if the heat is overwhelming to the point of being unpleasant even for the intended audience, add more scallion and a second drizzle of oil to dilute it; if it tastes flat, more salt. The balancing principle of jerk is that allspice and scotch bonnet are co-equal leads — neither should be entirely absent.

04 Transfer the finished jerk marinade to a jar or a lidded container. To use: rub the marinade generously over chicken pieces (cuts on the bone are traditional — leg quarters and thighs hold up best), pork shoulder pieces, or whole fish. Work the paste under the skin of chicken and into any cuts or slits made in the meat. For best results, marinate chicken for at least 4 hours and ideally overnight; pork for 8–12 hours minimum. The soy and salt will season the protein all the way through, the acid will tighten and condition the surface, and the allspice volatiles will penetrate deeply into the fat. Cook over charcoal with pimento (allspice) wood if available for authenticity, or any charcoal. The marinade keeps refrigerated for two weeks.

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Servings are an estimate; check quantities in the source recipe.
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