

JERK

The Jamaican Original





*Jerk, the legendary flavor of Jamaica – spicy hot, mildly smoky, a little sweet – began in the 16th century as a way to protect the food supply. From the Spanish word *cabrui*, jerk actually means preserved or dried meat.*



Like all good inventions, necessity was the mother of jerk seasoning. Runaway slaves called Maroons lived high in the mountains of Portland to evade their would-be captors. They hunted far and wide for wild pigs, which sometimes spoiled before they got them home. So the hunters gathered local spices, dug holes in the earth, burned indigenous pimento wood, and smoked the pork as soon as they caught it.

A few hundred years later, jerk became popular street food. Maroons would bring it down from the hills to sell it in the towns.

Today jerk is a cuisine recognized around the world, adding a Jamaican kick to chicken, lamb, pork, fish, even vegetables.

SECRETS. Although hot, jerk seasoning is much more complex than mere pepper sauce. It fuses scallions, thyme, all-spice, cinnamon, nutmeg, and salt, all ignited by the infamous Scotch bonnet pepper. Some people use a variety of peppers, like the West Indies red, but “the Scotch bonnet flavor is entirely unique,” says Denyse Perkins of Walkerswood Caribbean Foods, the company that commercialized jerk in the 1970s.

“Jerk sauce should tingle and burn a bit, but not be painful,” says Tony Rerrie, the boss at Scotchies, reputed as the



Jamaican jerk pork smokes for hours under the pit's corrugated metal cover, at Scotchies in Mammee Bay, St. Ann. Photo by Jeff Borg.

best jerk center in Jamaica. When folks do lose their cool, they should not douse the flames with water or beer; but rather take some bread or milk. And don't touch any sensitive body parts!

Jerking cures, smokes, and steams meat all at once. Slice the pork at Scotchies and witness the smoke ring that penetrates deep into the tender white meat. Come around 10:30 a.m. for the best show — coals burning, smoke billowing, and aroma wafting.

First they take out the big bones and crack the ribs, which makes the pork lie flat and cook evenly in about three hours. Then it continues to sim-

mer and smoke all day. "Scotchies is famous for pork — tender, seasoned, smoky — everybody knows you have to stop at Scotchies," beams Michael Moverly, who manages the new jerk center at Mammee Bay, St. Ann.

Scotchies' septuagenarian sauce maker learned his art from the elders in Portland, where jerk originated. He still pounds the spices together with a huge mortar and pestle. "He is the secret ingredient," confides Rerrie, without releasing the old-timer's name.

Getting some. Roadside stands — often just metal barrels on wheels — dispense good jerk on the run. Wrapped

simply in foil or paper, the tender meat falls apart in one's fingers, exactly how it is meant to be eaten. For extra zing, ask for a final shot of sauce.

Fancier restaurants also jerk various foods. Margaritaville serves an interesting jerk chili. Spring Garden in Ocho Rios claims its jerk conch is an aphrodisiac. At the elegant Shaw Park Beach Hotel, the jerk turkey tastes mild enough, but beware of the skin.

Walkerswood began as a community employment project in tiny Walkers Wood, St. Ann. Led by Roddy Edwards, now chairman, co-op members made jerk sauce in the great house and sold it to local restaurants, then to Jamaican restaurants in London, then beyond. "People really wanted it. They wrote letters and enclosed money, begging for the sauce," recalls Perkins.

Today the employee-owned company has 145 workers. Bahama Breeze, Hops, and other North American restaurant chains use the sauces, and Albertsons, Publix, Pathmark, and countless smaller retailers carry them. The market even suffers a bit of a Scotch bonnet shortage — between hurricanes, expansion, and such. So Walkerswood encourages farmers to grow more and more peppers, even helping to reclaim land from former bauxite mines.

In fact, the company uses as much local product as it can, which explains its new line of jerk barbeque sauce. Based on ripe bananas, not tomatoes, the product supports local banana farmers. Besides its classic jerk sauce, the company makes 20-something other products, including escoveitch, rundown, guava jam, marmalade, and various chutnies — all good subjects for another story.

To get a taste for how jerk seasoning is made, Walkerswood now offers a tour of the gardens and plant, 917-2318/9. 🍌

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