



How to cook the perfect ...

How to cook the perfect jambalaya

This creole/cajun classic is a hearty one-pot that hits the spot like nothing else. And, ingredients-wise, almost anything goes - just don't stint on the sausage ...



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Jambalaya - one of those dishes that's almost as satisfying to say as to eat. Almost, but not quite, because this cajun/creole favourite is from the school of hearty one-pots that hits the spot like nothing else, whether you're sweltering in the heat of a Louisiana August, or sheltering in Auchtermuchty in October.

Like its cousin the [gumbo](#), [jambalaya's origins](#) are the subject of hot dispute - though several communities claim it as their own, it's a veritable melting pot with its roots in the early Spanish settlement of the region (the dish bears more than a passing resemblance to paella). It is, though, heavily seasoned with African and French influences, and no doubt many others too.

Certainly, there are more ways to make a jambalaya than there are crawfish in the bayou, though, at its heart, this is a thrifty recipe designed to stretch out leftovers.

But there are some constants, whatever else you chuck in there ... and one of them is that, like [Jamie Oliver and his paella](#) (or indeed his jollof rice, whatever I do), it won't be how your momma made it. For which I can only apologise in advance.

Broadly speaking, there are two principal styles of jambalaya: creole, originating from New Orleans and its vicinity, and the simpler cajun version from the rural bayou. They reflect differences in the two culinary traditions as a whole; creole food is often described as richer and more sophisticated, thanks to the greater wealth of urban Louisiana, and the variety of ingredients available there, including tinned tomatoes, which are said to have been popularised in New Orleans by Sicilian immigrants. Creole “red jambalayas” include tomatoes, cajun “brown” versions do not (the latter also tend to be dryer and less soupy, so the rice browns on the bottom, giving the whole dish a toasty tint).

The creole version proves more popular in recipes from outside the region, with [Jamie Oliver](#), [Cook's Illustrated magazine](#) (a Massachusetts-based operation) and Mississippi-born chef [Brad McDonald](#) all using tinned or fresh tomatoes - indeed, McDonald credits New Orleans' legendary Brennan's restaurant for the foundations of his dish.

McDonald's version is creole jambalaya at its best; rich and generously seasoned, with a bright, fresh flavour that comes of fresh tomatoes and a relatively brief simmering time; the other two taste a little jammy in comparison. But, to my slight surprise, when pressed, my testers come down on the side of the cajun alternatives “because you can taste the spices better”. If, however, you're feeling more sophisticated, I'd highly recommend McDonald's recipe from his book *Deep South*; it takes a while, but it's worth it.



📷 Jambalaya by Jamie Oliver. Photograph: Felicity Cloake/The Guardian

The meat

You can stick just about anything in a jambalaya, from muskrat to mussels, but the one constant in the recipes I try is sausage; specifically andouille, a spicy, smoked-pork variety that's all but impossible to get hold of in the UK, but which gives the dish its characteristic smoky depth of flavour.

Oliver suggests using chorizo as a substitute, which isn't bad, though I find the Polish sausages recommended by Cook's Illustrated closer to the real thing - though neither can touch McDonald's homemade andouille for flavour. Seasoned with generous quantities of garlic and cayenne pepper, and hot smoked, they're delicious, though, unless you have a smoker at home, I'd suggest searching out the best quality smoked sausage you can find in your vicinity instead.

I've also used chicken, on the bone for maximum flavour (I prefer to strip it off before serving, as Cook's Illustrated suggest, so it's more evenly distributed throughout the pot) and, though the mixture of meat and seafood might raise a few cajun eyebrows, prawns too. But rabbit, pork or game birds would also work here, and legendary Opelousas-born chef [Paul Prudhomme](#) uses tasso, a smoked ham, in his Poor Man's Jambalaya, which suggests this might also be a good home for leftover smoked gammon or bacon. Basically, as long as you start with the sausage, you can't go far wrong.



📷 Jambalaya by Paul Prudhomme. Photograph: Felicity Cloake/The Guardian

The rice

Jambalaya is traditionally made with the long-grain rice grown in Louisiana - more glutinous short-grain varieties would turn to mush in the pan. Delia Smith, and others, recommend basmati, but I find the slim grains too delicate, and the aromatic flavour gets lost. Ordinary long grain can take a bit more in the way of cooking, and has the benefit of being cheaper too (avoid the “easy cook” kind, whatever Prudhomme favours - it doesn’t taste as good).



📷 Jambalaya by Brad McDonald. Photograph: Felicity Cloake/The Guardian

The base

The holy trinity of cajun and creole cookery is onion, celery and green pepper: only Cook's Illustrated is daring enough to meddle with it, on the basis that "after sampling bitter-acting green peppers ... side by side with sweet red peppers, we unabashedly chose the red" - but, for our testers, there's no contest. Red peppers just taste wrong here.

McDonald and Matthew "Dee" Gautreau of Gonzales Louisiana, [winner of the 1978 World Chicken Jambalaya championship](#) (history does not record how many other countries competed) both use spring onions as well, whose greener, more herbaceous flavour complements the green pepper perfectly - I particularly like McDonald's use of the green tops as garnish, adding colour to what otherwise can be a rather beige dish.

Cook's Illustrated, McDonald and Prudhomme also add garlic. As garlic powder is a popular ingredient in cajun seasoning mixes, and one of my least favourite flavourings for its slightly sweaty lingering perfume, I'm going to use the fresh kind instead.

If you're feeling very lazy you can, as Cook's Illustrated advises, whizz the vegetables up in a good processor so they "sauté more quickly in the pan", but, no matter how careful you are, I find they're still a little bit mushy - so I wouldn't recommend it.



📷 Jambalaya by Cooks Illustrated. Photograph: Felicity Cloake/The Guardian

Spices

McDonald and Prudhomme make their own elaborate seasoning mixes, while Cook's Illustrated, Gautreau and Oliver stick to black and cayenne peppers, and bay leaves. These are, it seems, the backbone of most cajun-spice mixes, along with thyme (which Oliver uses fresh) and paprika, which gives dishes colour and a mellow heat. McDonald also adds tomato powder, ground from dehydrated fruit, onion powder, oregano and celery seeds, while Prudhomme goes for cumin, mustard and file powder, a ground root often used to thicken gumbo (always gratifying to get some use out of my tub after lugging it across the Atlantic). All fine and dandy, but I'm loathe to overcomplicate things for a basic jambalaya.

Both McDonald and Gautreau stir hot sauce into their dishes, which seems an excellent idea, however; it adds both heat and a clean acidity that cuts through the richness of the rice.

The fat

Prudhomme recommends starting the jambalaya with margarine, and McDonald butter, but a neutral oil feels like the most authentic bayou choice - topped up with sausage and chicken fat, naturally.

The liquid

Gautreau cooks his rice in water, but the chicken or pork stock used in every other recipe is a more flavourful choice, augmented by the juices from the slow-simmered chicken pieces. Tomatoes, obviously, bring their own liquid, and Cook's Illustrated also pops in some clam juice on the basis that it "brings out the sweetness of the shrimp", but testers aren't convinced, claiming it makes their jambalaya taste a bit "fake ... like a stock cube". In any case, clam juice is ridiculously hard to find here - I end up having to decant the liquid from a jar of clams - so if you do yearn for a more savoury flavour, a shake of fish sauce or a tiny amount of anchovy paste will have a similar effect.

The method

A cajun jambalaya, I'm reliably informed, should be somewhat dry, even slightly browned on the bottom, which rules out the soupier, wetter texture of those creole versions using tomatoes (Oliver advises cooks to aim for a "porridgey" consistency).

The fluffiest, plumpest rice comes from Gautreau, who parboils the rice before steaming it in a tightly sealed pan, and then letting it sit for 10 minutes before serving, a method I'm inclined to copy wholesale. Be careful not to stir the rice too frequently during cooking, or it will begin to break down into mush: as the Gumbo

Pages website has it, “turn rather than stir after the rice has been added” and “only two or three times” at most.

Serve with a cold beer.

Perfect jambalaya

(Serves 4-6)

½ tsp white peppercorns

½ tsp black peppercorns

1 tsp paprika

1 tsp cayenne (or more if using a very mild sausage)

1 tsp dried thyme

2 bay leaves

½ tsp salt

2 tbsp neutral oil

2 smoked pork sausages, ideally andouille, but fresh Polish smoked sausages, smoked chorizo or Toulouse would also do, cut into thick slices

4 bone-in chicken thighs

1 onion, finely chopped

1 green pepper, finely chopped

1 celery stick, finely chopped

4 spring onions, chopped, green and white parts separated

3 garlic cloves, crushed

800ml chicken or pork stock

1 tsp Tabasco or other hot sauce, plus extra to serve

300g long grain rice

300g large raw prawns

Toast the peppercorns, paprika and cayenne in a small dry pan over a high heat until they smell toasty, then tip into a pestle and mortar and grind until smooth. Stir in the thyme, bay and salt and set aside.

Heat the oil in a wide, lidded pan over a medium-high heat. Add the sausage and cook until the fat begins to render, then lift out on to a paper-lined plate and add the chicken. Cook on both sides until golden brown, then put on to a fresh plate.

Add the onion, green pepper, whites of the spring onions and garlic to the pan and cook, stirring regularly, until softened and translucent. Stir in the spice mix and cook for another couple of minutes, then add the chicken back into the pot and pour in the stock and Tabasco.

Turn down the heat and simmer gently until the chicken is tender (about 15 minutes). Stir in the rice and simmer for 10 minutes, then turn the rice once, cover with a tight lid, turn down the heat and steam gently for 15 minutes. Remove the chicken and add the prawns and sausage, turn the rice once, then replace the lid and leave to sit for 10 minutes.

Meanwhile, shred the chicken. Fold into the rested jambalaya, taste and season with salt and more hot sauce if necessary. Scatter with the chopped green spring onion before serving.

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