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Transform Your Dinner Experience With Marinades

By Chef Joe Palcsak

It's easy to fall into a rut when planning the family dinner menu. How many times a week do you end up cooking chicken breasts and how many times do you end up doing it the same way? "Chicken again? Aargh!" But what else can you do? Good beef and seafood are a luxury anymore.

Take heart. I'm going to show you how you can bring a world of variety to the same cut of meat and transform your dinner experience from everyday ho-hum to every way oh-boy. With a basic template to go by and a little bit of creativity, you can spend the week taking chicken breasts (or whatever cut of meat you wish) around the world, putting an entirely different and exciting dish on the table every night. Marinades add flavor, variety, moisture and tenderness to almost anything you cook and starting your meal with a marinade is a very quick and easy step to take.

The science behind marinades is pretty straightforward and entirely compatible with the philosophy of flavor. Mix some oil with some acidity. Add some seasoning and whenever you can, throw in a little bit of fruit juice. This gives you a combination of effects that tenderize and flavor your meat while locking in moisture. If this basic template sounds a lot like salad dressing, you are not far off. In fact, if you want a great universal marinade, Italian dressing fits the bill nicely. But don't stop there by any means. There are no rules and no limits to the imagination that you bring into the kitchen. In fact, marinades can be completely dry, as in dry spice rubs. The key with dry spice rubs is to start with whole seeds, toast them and grind them for fresh use. The flavor explosion that results will blow you away and reward you richly for the effort. I have a separate coffee grinder that I use solely as a dedicated spice grinder.

These are the nuts and bolts of marinades. As you experiment, you will find that some marinades work better for you on some types of meat than others. Bold and assertive flavors tend to work better with red meats, a fruitier accent is wonderful with pork and chicken, and a more subtle combo will work nicely on seafoods. These are not hard and fast rules, rather let them serve as a very basic guide. You may love an assertive marinade on a piece of fish; heartier seafood steak cuts such as tuna and swordfish can hold up well to such marinades. Find what dances best on your palate and go with it. Do keep one thing in mind: thicker, denser pieces of meat will hold up to longer marinades and more delicate and smaller cuts will not do well if they marinate for too long. The acidity in a marinade will break down the fibers and proteins in the meat. This could turn a smaller and more delicate cut into a piece of mush after more than a couple hours while a heartier cut can easily marinate overnight. Don't lose heart if you forget to put your thick top sirloin cut in the marinade; a little bit of time with a marinade is better than none. In fact, here are a few tips for wonderful marinade success if you do find yourself short on time:

1. Score the surface of the meat by making shallow diagonal cuts 1" apart. This will increase the surface area of the meat.
2. If it won't compromise the recipe, slice the meat. This will allow the marinade to accelerate its penetration.
3. Add a fruit juice. This helps break down the fibers of the meat.

Now you have the basic template, the philosophy, the motivation and a little know-how. All that remains is for you to get in the kitchen and get busy. The following are some of my favorite marinades to get your creative juices flowing.

Jerk Chicken Marinade

One whole chicken, cut into 8 pieces
 Juice of 3 or 4 limes
 1 small onion, chopped
 1 bunch green onions, chopped
 6 cloves of garlic, chopped
 2-3 jalapeños, chopped
 Dash of allspice
 ½ tsp. fresh ground nutmeg
 ¼ cup brown sugar
 1 tsp. ground ginger
 ¼ cup soy sauce
 ¼ cup vegetable oil
 Salt and pepper to taste

Pulse all ingredients (except chicken) in food processor until just blended but still coarse. Place the marinade and chicken into a ziplock bag and marinate in the refrigerator for 4-8 hours. Grill the chicken, of course.

Chef Joe's Favorite Red Meat Marinade

One part soy sauce
 Two parts good red wine (do not cook with anything you wouldn't be delighted to drink)
 Three parts extra virgin olive oil
 Sprig of fresh rosemary
 A few garlic cloves, crushed
 Salt and pepper to taste

Season meat liberally with salt and pepper. Combine soy sauce and red wine. Wisk in oil slowly. Add the rosemary and garlic. Marinate meat overnight if possible, up to 24 hours, turning two or three times. By the way, you can reserve the marinade. While the meat cooks, strain the marinade and reduce it on the stovetop by about half. It will be wonderful spooned on top of the meat, or even your potatoes.

Chef Joe's Favorite Seafood Marinade

Fresh cracked black pepper
 Soy sauce...
 that's it!

About 30 minutes will do just fine.

Chef Joe's Steak Rub

1 part fresh ground coffee
 2 parts garlic powder
 2 parts ground mustard (preferably freshly ground from toasted seeds)
 4 parts ground coriander (preferably freshly ground from toasted seeds)
 6 parts fresh cracked black pepper
 Kosher salt to taste

Combine all ingredients. Store in a freezer-safe vessel in the freezer until ready for use. It will stay fresh much longer than you will keep it!



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