

Recipe 5: Traditional Jollof Rice (West African Classic)

Ingredients:

- 2 cups long-grain parboiled rice
- 1/4 cup vegetable oil
- 1 medium onion, finely chopped
- 4 large tomatoes, blended
- 3 red bell peppers, blended
- 2 Scotch bonnet peppers (adjust for spice), blended
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tablespoon fresh ginger, minced
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1 teaspoon curry powder
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 teaspoon white pepper
- 4 cups chicken or vegetable broth
- Salt to taste
- 1 Maggi or bouillon cube (optional)
- 1/2 cup sliced onions (for garnish)
- Optional: cooked chicken, beef, or fried plantains on the side

Preparation:

1. Prepare the Tomato Base: Blend tomatoes, bell peppers, Scotch bonnets, ginger, and garlic into a smooth puree.
2. Cook the Sauce: Heat vegetable oil in a large pot over medium heat. Saute chopped onions until translucent. Add tomato paste and cook for 2 minutes, stirring constantly. Pour in the blended tomato-pepper mixture. Cook for 15-20 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the mixture thickens and reduces.
3. Season the Sauce: Add thyme, curry powder, paprika, bay leaves, white pepper, and salt. Stir well and cook for another 5 minutes for the flavors to meld.
4. Add Broth & Rice: Pour in the broth and bring to a boil. Adjust seasoning with a bouillon cube if needed. Rinse the rice until the water runs clear, then add to the pot. Stir well.
5. Cook the Rice: Cover the pot with foil or a tight-fitting lid to trap the steam. Reduce heat to low and cook for

25-30 minutes, checking occasionally and stirring gently to prevent burning.

6. Final Touches: When the rice is tender and has absorbed the liquid, remove from heat and allow it to rest, covered, for 10 minutes. Garnish with sliced onions before serving.

7. Serve with your choice of protein or fried plantains.

History & How It Reached the Region:

Jollof Rice is a beloved dish across West Africa, with its origins tracing back to the Senegambian region during the era of the Wolof (or Jolof) Empire in the 14th century.

From Senegal, it spread to other parts of West Africa, evolving into different versions such as Nigerian Jollof, Ghanaian Jollof, and Liberian Jollof-each with its own twist on spices and technique.

It is often at the center of the famous 'Jollof Wars'-friendly rivalries between nations over whose Jollof reigns supreme. Beyond competition, Jollof Rice is a symbol of unity, celebration, and togetherness across West African cultures.

Personal Significance Story:

For me, Jollof Rice is inseparable from celebrations and family gatherings. I remember weddings and birthdays where the unmistakable aroma of Jollof would fill the air long before guests arrived.

My aunt had a signature version-spicy, smoky, and rich-always cooked over firewood, giving it a unique charred bottom layer called 'party rice,' which everyone secretly hoped to get a piece of.

Her secret? Letting the rice steam slowly without stirring too much, allowing the flavors to deepen and the edges to crisp slightly.

Even today, every time I cook Jollof, it brings me right back to those lively gatherings-where food, music, and laughter danced together in the air.