

FUDI PEOPLE

A FREE GUIDE FROM FUDI PEOPLE

Spice Mixes of Africa

Eight classic blends from five regions, with the cooking tips that make them work in your own kitchen.



From Makola Market, Accra — to a farm in Sidcup, London

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A NOTE FROM KOFI

One continent, a hundred kitchens

When I was a boy, my mum would stop at one stall in Makola Market before anything else. She would pick up a handful of small reddish-brown seeds, crack one between her fingers and let me smell it: sharp, peppery, warm. That smell is where my love of spice, farming and cooking began.

Africa is not one cuisine. A Senegalese marinade, an Ethiopian spiced butter and a Durban curry masala have almost nothing in common except one thing: someone, somewhere, ground a few spices together and made a meal worth gathering around.

This guide walks through eight of those blends, region by region, with what goes in them, how to use them and the small cooking tips I wish someone had told me sooner. Start with one, make it your own and tell me how it turned out.

— Kofi

Founder, Fudi People

How to use this guide. Some blends below come with exact quantities and some only list the ingredients, because that is how they are traditionally made. Where there is no fixed ratio, start small, taste and adjust. None of the ingredient lists here is exhaustive: add your own extra spices and play with the proportions until the blend tastes like yours.

FIVE REGIONS, EIGHT BLENDS

Where each blend comes from

Find your region, pick a blend, then turn to its page for the ingredients and the dish it was made for.

REGION	BLEND	TASTES LIKE	PAGE
West Africa Ghana, Nigeria	Yaji	Nutty, peppery, smoky and hot. The suya and chinchinga rub.	4
West Africa Senegal	Yassa marinade	Sharp, mustardy and sour, with sweet onions.	5
West Africa Sierra Leone, Liberia	Pepper soup spice	Fiery, gingery and slightly bitter.	5
North Africa Maghreb	Harissa	Smoky chilli paste with cumin, caraway and lemon.	6
East Africa Zanzibar and coast	Pilau masala	Warm and fragrant: cumin, clove, cardamom, cinnamon.	7
East Africa Ethiopia	Niter kibbeh	Rich spiced butter, savoury with a hint of sweetness.	7
Central Africa Cameroon	Mbongo mix	Dark, smoky, deep and a little numbing.	8
Southern Africa Durban	Curry masala	Citrusy coriander, warm spice and a chilli kick.	8

Not sure where to begin? Make the Yaji (page 4) if you like grilling, the Pilau masala (page 7) if you like one-pot rice, or the Harissa (page 6) if you want something that goes on everything.

Allergens at a glance. Yaji contains peanuts. Yassa contains mustard. Niter kibbeh is made with butter (milk). Mbongo mix can contain peanuts. Always check every ingredient label, and tell anyone you cook for what is in the dish.

GHANA AND NIGERIA

Yaji: the suya and chinchinga rub

One spice mix, two countries, two names. Ghana calls the skewers chinchinga, Nigeria calls them suya.

Yaji

DRY RUB · FOR GRILLED MEAT

The ingredients are a starting point, not a complete list. Add your own spices and change the proportions to suit your taste.

WHAT GOES IN

- Grains of paradise (warm and peppery)
- Grains of selim (musky and smoky)
- Dried chillies, smoked if you can
- Crushed kuli-kuli (peanut puffs)
- Ginger powder
- A crumbled stock cube
- Salt and black pepper

A STARTING BATCH (ADJUST TO TASTE)

- 4 tbsp crushed kuli-kuli
- 1 tsp ground grains of paradise
- 1 tsp ground grains of selim
- 1–2 tsp dried chilli flakes
- 1 tsp ginger powder
- 1 crumbled stock cube
- ½ tsp salt, ½ tsp black pepper

There is no fixed traditional ratio, so treat these amounts as a starting point. Make a small batch first. Adjust the chilli for heat, then the grains of paradise and grains of selim for how peppery or musky you want it, and add salt last because the stock cube is already salty.

Cook it: Soak wooden skewers first so they do not burn. Season the meat lightly, then grill. If the cut is tough, spray with water or beer as it cooks to keep it tender. When it is nearly done, take it off, rub the yaji in properly, then put it back on the fire to finish.

Also try yaji on

Kilishi (dried spiced beef), roasted plantain, roasted corn and boiled eggs. In the markets it is as much a seasoning as a marinade.

Tip: Grains of selim is the musky, smoky backbone of this blend, so start with less than you think because it is potent. Grains of paradise is gentler than black pepper, so you can use two to three times as much. Grind both just before you mix.

SENEGAL · SIERRA LEONE AND LIBERIA

Two more West African classics

Yassa marinade

SENEGAL · WET MARINADE · POULET YASSA

The ingredients are a starting point, not a complete list. Add your own spices and change the proportions to suit your taste.

What goes in: mustard paste, plenty of sliced onions, garlic, and a real hit of sourness from lemon juice or vinegar.

The idea: sour and mustard-forward, where much of Anglophone West Africa leans smoky and fermented instead. No fixed quantities, so taste the marinade before the chicken goes in. It should make you wince a little.

Cook it: Marinate chicken in it, then grill or braise it down with the onions until they caramelise. The same marinade works on fish (poisson yassa, some say the original) and lamb.

Contains mustard.

Pepper soup spice

SIERRA LEONE AND LIBERIA · AROMATIC BROTH BASE

The ingredients are a starting point, not a complete list. Add your own spices and change the proportions to suit your taste.

What goes in: Scotch bonnet peppers, garlic, ginger and country onion (a small, intensely flavoured wild onion), and often uda (grains of selim) and calabash nutmeg, simmered with goat, fish or chicken.

The idea: fiery, gingery and a little bitter from the calabash nutmeg. It is a broth you sip, not a stew you scoop.

Cook it: In Liberia it is served with dumboy, cassava boiled and pounded until smooth and stretchy, eaten communally from one bowl. The same Scotch bonnet and ginger base also flavours cassava leaf stew and groundnut soup.

Quantities vary by cook and household, so build the heat gradually. Scotch bonnets are very hot: wear gloves if you are chopping them.

THE MAGHREB

Harissa: the chilli paste that finishes everything

Harissa

CHILLI PASTE · MAKES ONE SMALL JAR

The ingredients are a starting point, not a complete list. Add your own spices and change the proportions to suit your taste.

YOU WILL NEED

- 100 g dried red chillies (Baklouti if you can find them)
- 3–4 garlic cloves
- Salt
- Lemon juice
- Ground cumin, coriander and caraway, to taste
- Olive oil

METHOD

- Soak the chillies in hot water for 30 minutes.
- Drain, then blend with the garlic, salt, lemon juice and ground spices.
- Add olive oil as the blender runs until you have a smooth paste.
- Taste and adjust.

The chilli and garlic amounts are exact. The ground spices are to taste. Start with about ½ tsp of each and build up. Store in a clean jar in the fridge under a thin layer of olive oil.

Cook it: Stir it into couscous broth, spoon it into shakshuka, rub it on merguez before grilling, or stir it through a tagine of fruit and meat built on cumin and cinnamon. Harissa does not need its own dish. It finishes everything else.

Tip: Toast whole cumin and caraway seeds in a dry pan before grinding. Bruise them first and you get roasted notes you will not get from the raw seed.

ZANZIBAR AND THE COAST · ETHIOPIA

Pilau masala and niter kibbeh

Pilau masala

DRY BLEND · TOAST AND GRIND

The ingredients are a starting point, not a complete list. Add your own spices and change the proportions to suit your taste.

What goes in: whole cumin seeds, black peppercorns, cloves, cardamom seeds and cinnamon. Toast them in a dry pan until fragrant, then grind.

Ratio: no fixed traditional ratio. A fair place to start is cumin as the largest part, with cloves and cardamom used lightly, then adjust to taste.

Cook it: Stir the masala straight into the pan when you fry onions down for pilau rice, then cook the rice in it so every grain carries the spice. The same warm profile builds Zanzibar biryani and kuku paka (coconut chicken curry).

Niter kibbeh

ETHIOPIA · SPICED CLARIFIED BUTTER

The ingredients are a starting point, not a complete list. Add your own spices and change the proportions to suit your taste.

Method: melt 500 g unsalted butter with chopped onion, garlic, grated ginger, fenugreek seeds, ground cumin, korarima (or cardamom) seeds, turmeric, dried oregano, basil and sage. Simmer for 20 minutes, then strain through muslin.

Cook it: It is the base under doro wat, Ethiopia's national chicken stew. Stir it through kitfo (minced beef) or misir wat (red lentil stew). Toast the fenugreek seeds first for a nutty, roasted flavour.

Contains milk. Keep refrigerated in a clean jar.

CAMEROON · DURBAN

Mbongo mix and Durban curry masala

Mbongo mix

CAMEROON · GROUND WITH FRESH GARLIC AND ONION

The ingredients are a starting point, not a complete list. Add your own spices and change the proportions to suit your taste.

What goes in: whole mbongo (or black cardamom), bobimbi (or wild garlic), njangsa seeds (or unsalted peanuts), calabash nutmeg (or grated regular nutmeg), grains of paradise, and garlic cloves with chopped onion. Grind it all together.

Cook it: This mix flavours mbongo tchobi, Cameroon's dark "black stew". Njangsa on its own is also what gives ndolé, the national dish, its bitter-greens depth.

Easy swaps if you cannot find the originals: black cardamom for mbongo, wild garlic or regular garlic for bobimbi, unsalted peanuts for njangsa, regular nutmeg for calabash nutmeg. Go easy on the nutmeg: a little goes a long way. Peanuts are an allergen. No fixed quantities.

Durban curry masala

SOUTHERN AFRICA · DRY BLEND · TOAST AND GRIND

The ingredients are a starting point, not a complete list. Add your own spices and change the proportions to suit your taste.

What goes in: coriander seeds, cumin seeds, cardamom seeds, fenugreek seeds, cloves, a cinnamon stick, mild chilli powder and cayenne, with ground ginger stirred through. Toast the whole spices, grind, then add the powders.

The idea: citrusy coriander leads, warm spice follows, and the cayenne sets the heat. No fixed quantities: begin with coriander as the main part and adjust.

Cook it: Build a Durban curry on it, with the protein of your choice. It is the same masala behind bunny chow (curry ladled into a hollowed-out loaf) and Durban-style samoosas.

SMALL THINGS THAT MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

Seven tips for cooking with African spice blends

1 Toast whole spices first

Cumin, fenugreek, coriander and caraway all taste nuttier and more roasted after a minute or two in a dry pan. Stop when you can smell them.

2 Grind just before you use it

Grains of selim keeps most of its smoky aroma in the pod. Grind it fresh for the full effect.

3 Grains of paradise is gentler than black pepper

Use two to three times as much to get the same punch. It builds slowly instead of hitting you all at once.

4 Dried ginger is hotter than fresh

Drying turns gingerol into shogaol, which carries about twice the heat. Use less of the powder than you would fresh ginger.

5 Salt last when there is a stock cube

Taste the blend with the cube in before you add any salt. Reduce the salt if the cube is salty.

6 Go easy on nutmeg

Nutmeg and calabash nutmeg are strong. A little adds depth, but too much is harmful, not just overpowering.

7 Start small, taste, write it down

None of these blends has one correct ratio. Make a small batch, change one thing at a time and note what you did so you can repeat the one you love.

WHAT TO COOK WITH WHAT

The pairing chart

Pin this page up next to the stove.

BLEND	COOK IT WITH	BEST TRICK
Yaji	Beef or chicken skewers, kilishi, plantain, corn, boiled eggs	Rub it on when the meat is nearly done, then return to the fire.
Yassa	Chicken, fish or lamb with onions	Let the onions caramelize right down.
Pepper soup spice	Goat, fish or chicken broth; dumboy on the side	Build the heat slowly.
Harissa	Couscous broth, shakshuka, merguez, tagine	Toast the seeds, store under oil.
Pilau masala	Pilau rice, biryani, kuku paka	Add it with the onions, not at the end.
Niter kibbeh	Doro wat, kitfo, misir wat	Toast the fenugreek before it goes in.
Mbongo mix	Mbongo tchobi (black stew)	Use nutmeg sparingly.
Durban masala	Durban curry, bunny chow, samoosas	Toast whole spices, then add the powders.

Love the heat? Fudi People chilli oils are made in small batches in three styles: Spices of Africa, East Asia and South Asia. Ask us about them on WhatsApp.

FUDI PEOPLE

NOW YOU HAVE THE BLENDS

Cook one this week and tell us how it went.

Share a photo, a question or your own twist. We read everything and we would love to see your kitchen.

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