

# #95 - Guide to Marinades

Hi there! You're listening to the Lazy Genius Podcast. I'm Kendra, and I'm here to help you be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. You're listening to episode 95 - The Lazy Genius Guide to Marinades. I'm pretty sure when I started this podcast almost three years ago, I didn't anticipate some of the topics we'd dive into for an entire episode... like marinades. It's pretty fantastic, and I'm here for it. But whenever I do any kind of InstaStory that involves a marinade of any kind, you guys ask all kinds of questions and understandably. Using them seems like this perfectly natural skill in cooking, but it also seems really random, especially if you haven't been taught how to use them. So that's what we're going to do today!

But before we jump into the ins and outs of marinades, I want to say thank you. Last week was a big week for me on Instagram. If you're not on Instagram, you can check my SorryWUT highlight to see exactly what happened, but essentially within a few hours of each other, an interview I did with The Kitchn was on their main site and Jenna Fischer, aka Pam from The Office, talked about this very podcast on her Instagram stories. You guys. It was quite a day, and I'm still recovering a little. But the coolest thing wasn't being on my favorite food website or being mentioned by one of my favorite celebrities. Sincerely, the best part of that whole thing was how excited you guys were. My DMs were literally flooded with all kinds of party emojis and congratulations and messages like "I know we don't know each other, but I feel like you're a friend and I'm so excited for you!" It was seriously the kindest thing, and it brought me to tears a couple of times. I'm just so grateful for you, for your personal investment in me and in your investment in each other to make as many Lazy Geniuses as possible. It was just the sweetest, kindest, most encouraging 24 hours, so thank you thank you thank you. And you know what happened after Jenna Fischer's post? Y'all, this podcast was in the top 200 of all podcasts on iTunes for four entire days. That's bonkers. I'm often ranked just in my category, but ranked in all the podcasts? Just stupid, y'all. But I saw DMs and Instagram Stories from so many folks sharing how they binged the show and wanted everyone to listen, so word was really spreading and it was so fun! So if you have any interest in keeping that energy going, will you hop over to iTunes and leave a review? You can do it in your Apple Podcast app or on your laptop, but you can give a star rating and quickly type out a review. The Apple people love reviews and put the show higher up in the ranks because of them, so if you haven't left a review and love this show, I'd be so grateful if you'd leave one now!

Well, maybe not exactly now because we need to talk about marinades! Let's start with a little context. There are three different places you use flavorful liquids in cooking. First, on meat or even vegetables before they're cooked to add flavor and make them tender. This is usually what people call a marinade and what we're talking about today. Second, you add liquid to food at the end of cooking to bring it all together, and this is what folks usually call a sauce. Tomato sauce in pasta is an easy example as is a bottle of teriyaki you pour on stir-fry at the end of cooking. And third, you add something to food after it's cooked, usually a dressing or a drizzle sauce. In this episode, we're talking about the first one only. I talk about dressings a little in The Lazy Genius Makes Salad episode, and we'll save drizzle sauces for the episode I'll do soon about food in a bowl. So for today, let's talk about marinades that go on meat before cooking.

So let's go through the why, what, when, and how. Who feels irrelevant here, so I'll skip trying to be clever. First, why. The purpose of a marinade is to inject a lot of flavor into the meat, and it

usually makes the meat more tender, too. Cooking meat can feel overwhelming because it's generally way more expensive than other foods we eat, and we don't want to mess it up. A way that you can have better success cooking meat is by using a marinade. The flavor is going to be better, but because the meat is made more tender, marinades make overcooking more forgiving. If you overcook pork chops with and without marinade, you'll notice a difference in how tasty and tender the overcooked chop still is, even if it's overcooked. So why use a marinade? Tasty, tender meat. Amen.

Next, what? What's generally in a marinade? You can buy bottles of marinade very easily, but for the sake of simplicity and not spending a lot of money on something you don't know tastes good, let's run down what can go in a handful of essential marinades to get you started. Here are the three things you always need: salt, fat, and acid. I promise this won't be another TED talk on how much I love the cookbook *Salt Fat Acid Heat* - you can listen to the episode about cooking without a recipe for that - but you do need those three things in some form to make your marinade do its best work. Salt is usually just salt on the meat, but it can also be in the form of soy sauce. If I'm making a marinade that has soy sauce, I'll barely season the actual meat with a little salt and let the soy do the rest. So you need salt. You also need fat. This is almost always a drizzle of oil, and it helps all the flavors in your marinade travel to the entire piece of meat. Fat is also flavor, and it makes the meat in a better position to be cooked on your skillet or on your grill because it's already a little greased up. And finally, acid. Acid is what will make your meat tender. It's also what will make your meat gently cook while it marinades, but don't let that freak you out yet. I'll explain that in a minute. But acid breaks down the molecules in your meat, making them more tender. It also gives a nice bite of flavor and keeps things interesting and also balanced. If you cooked a piece of chicken that sat in just salt and a little olive oil, it'd be delicious. But add a squeeze of lemon to that same marinade? Angels singing. Acid makes everything pop in flavor and become tender in texture. So lemon and lime juice, vinegar, stuff like that.

Now if you want to get crazy, add something that has flavor like herbs and spices. You can use fresh or dried herbs and any kind of spices you want. Obviously different herbs and spices make sense for different cuisines, but in general, that's how you bump up the flavor in your marinades. Always start with salt. It's essential. You'll get flavor from marinating the meat in fat, but you'll get even more by having a little acid. And your final step is any herbs and spices. I promise I'll give you some actual ingredient combo ideas before this episode is over.

So we know why to use a marinade, what should go in one, and now let's look at when you use one. Generally, the longer the marinade marinates, the better the flavor and texture of the meat. Fifteen minutes is better than zero minutes, but three or four hours is definitely better than fifteen minutes. And I don't mean better like your value as a person; I just mean better flavor. It's more bang for your marinating buck.

You can mix a marinade a day or two before you want to use it and just leave it in a little mason jar or plastic container in your fridge. That's one of my favorite answers to *The Magic Question* actually. *The Magic Question* is what can I do now to make dinner easier later? Make a marinade. Just mix it up and be ready to pour it over whatever meat strikes your fancy when you're at the store later. Now how long can meat marinate? The USDA says that if you have meat in a marinade in the fridge, chicken can go two days and reddish meat like pork, beef, and lamb can go as long as five days. Now if you buy meat that has that \$3 off this package sticker

because the sell by date is today, the marinade won't magically extend that meat's life. You still need to go by the sell-by date first to be safe and let the marinade timing go second.

But if you have a regular package of chicken breasts and put them in a Ziplock bag with a marinade that you plan on using tonight but end up being invited over for an impromptu dinner at a friend's house after soccer practice, you're fine to save the chicken for dinner the next night.

Next, let's look at how? How do you marinate meat? The biggest thing to remember is that you want the marinade to cover every bit of the meat. I find the best way to do this is in a Ziplock bag because you can massage the meat and move it around without using a spoon or getting your hands gross like you might in a bowl or container. Another great way though if you want to avoid using a lot of plastic waste is to use a container that's just barely bigger than the meat and marinade together. That way the meat can't escape the marinade's clutches. For example, if you get a wide, shallow Tupperware container and put your chicken in there and then pour your marinade over top, the liquid will pool around the edges of the large container, and the top of the chicken won't be covered. I realize that's the tiniest bit of obvious, but I think sometimes those seemingly obvious things are the ones we don't realize are tripping us up. So if I'm not using a gallon plastic bag, I'm usually a quart container like you would for soup. The liquid is all over that meat without any hope of escape. Every bit gets flavor which is what you want. So just make sure there isn't wasted liquid in too big or wide of a container.

If you're going to marinate your meat for no more than 30-45 minutes, I'd leave it at room temperature. It will work faster, and taking the chill off the meat will help the meat cook better since it's already closer to room temperature. Even if I've had meat in the fridge all day marinating, I'll still take the bag out half an hour before it's time to cook it to take that chill off. I can tell a decent difference when I do.

Now here's what you don't do. Ready? You've marinated your chicken, you've got your skillet nice and hot to get a good sear, you know already that you're not supposed to move your chicken around the pan so it'll get a nice brown color.. you are ready. And then you take the plastic bag of meat and marinade and dump the whole thing into your pan. Guess what happens? All that liquid will take sautéing right off the table. The chicken will just steam and bubble and not get the color you want. Now, you might be okay with that, but just know that dumping the whole thing out might not get you the results you're hoping for. Ask me how I know.

What you want to do instead is use some tongs and pull each piece out individually, letting the marinade drip off just a second before you put it in the pan. Don't crowd your pan so that the liquid that does come off the meat won't create too much steam, and you'll be all set.

Can you use the leftover marinade in the bag? Not unless you cook it to boiling for a couple of minutes to get all the raw meat grossness gone. I generally just discard the whole bag - again, no dirty dishes - but if it's a really flavorful Asian marinade with a lot of great ingredients, you can pour it into a small saucepan and let it boil for a couple of minutes to get food safe and also thicken to become a good sauce. But that's not true of every marinade. Like, you probably wouldn't want to do that with a marinade of olive oil and lemon juice because it would just get a weird and kind of fry and not be good for much of anything. So nine times out of ten, toss it.

Okay, so you know why marinading is so great, you get the main components of what makes a good marinade, you know the timing of how long a piece of meat can sit in a marinade, and you know the ways you can make the marinade and the meat friends throughout the process.

Now let's close up this episode with a couple of my favorite marinade formulas. A great basic - salt, olive oil, and lemon juice. Add in some black pepper or red pepper flake for a bit of heat, a handful of fresh parsley for a hit of brightness, a sprig of fresh rosemary for a hit of earthiness, a few smashed cloves of garlic to get a little garlic flavor, dried herbs like thyme or Italian seasoning, or all of the above. Start with the basics of olive oil, salt, and lemon, and then just build with whatever you have. You can't use too much or too little of anything, so don't stress. If you're feeling stressed though, I'll walk you through this one. I personally love this marinade for chicken since chicken needs more of that acid than, say, beef or pork which usually have way more fat to help them stay tender in the cooking. If I use it for red meat, I'll cut way back on the lemon juice or maybe even sub in an earthier vinegar like balsamic. But back to this marinade with chicken; let's walk through it. Open a package of chicken breasts, and season both sides well with salt, flipping with tongs if you want to keep your hands clean. Put the chicken in a gallon bag, pour in a plug or two of olive oil, and squeeze in the juice of a lemon. Don't worry about seeds because you can just pull them off the chicken when it's time to cook. Mash it all around and call it done. Or add the smashed garlic, the sprig of rosemary or handful of fresh leafy herbs, or a small palmful of dried herbs. If you happen to use a lot of lemon and not a lot of herbs, the chicken will just taste more like lemon with a hint of herb, or if you have only half a lemon but a lot of rosemary, the chicken will taste more like rosemary with just a hint of lemon. Both are great. Don't stress. It's not science. It's cooking. Even though there is a science to cooking but whatever you don't need to know it to be a good cook!

I also love a good Asian marinade. It's my go-to in so many things and works great for chicken, beef, pork, and lamb. We've made lamb like three times in my family's existence, but I'm mentioning in case you eat more than we do. It still works. So my favorite Asian marinade starts with salt in the form of soy sauce. There's always more soy than anything else. Then for the fat, I'll add a little vegetable oil or peanut oil to do the work of fat, or if I want flavor from the fat, I'll use sesame oil. Sesame oil is really strong, so just a few drops will do great, but using up to a couple of tablespoons will still have tremendous flavor. Next comes the acid. Rice wine vinegar is the best here, but lemon or just plain vinegar is fine, too. We eat Asian food at least once a week if not more, so rice wine vinegar gets used a lot and is totally worth the cabinet space. You could stop there with the soy, sesame oil, and vinegar, but if you want to continue adding flavor, it's nice to add a bit of sweetness to all that strong saltiness and earthiness with sugar, honey, or my personal favorite, mirin. I use it all the time, and you can get it at regular stores in the international section. It's sweetened rice wine and super lovely to have around. It's more mellow than sugar and has its own flavor which goes great with other Asian flavors. What else could you add? Fresh garlic or ginger or both. A handful of cilantro or green onion. A dried chili for some heat. Some Chinese five spice powder. There are so many great flavors to add, but just starting with mostly soy, a few drizzles of sesame oil, and a healthy glug of rice wine vinegar will be a delight. I personally almost always add garlic and ginger to that if I have them because I love the flavor, but I don't stress if I don't have them. It still tastes great. And again, this works for any kind of meat. Side note: if you're cooking ground meat, it's better to not marinate it beforehand because you can't remove enough liquid to get a good sear on the ground meat in the pan. So brown the meat, drain off some fat if you need to, and add that same marinade mixture to the meat in the last few minutes of cooking to add the flavor without affecting the

texture. If you need it to thicken a little, add a small spoonful of cornstarch to the cold or room temperature marinade and whisk it well before adding it to the skillet of browned ground meat.

And my third favorite marinade I use often is a Tex-Mex flavored one. I season the meat beforehand (pork, beef, or chicken) with salt. I use a flavorless oil like vegetable or canola for the fat, the juice of a couple of limes or even a lime and an orange for the acid, and then a mess of spices to get some flavor, along with some garlic if I think about. The spices could be a packet of taco seasoning or just a generous palmful of any combination of chili powder, cumin, garlic powder, smoked paprika, and/or cayenne. You might love the flavor of cumin, so use more of that or just that. Throw in a handful of fresh cilantro or some green onion to add some freshness in there, too. Again, you can't mess it up. Start with the basic building blocks and add flavor. If you have a lot of cumin, your meat will taste more like cumin than the other stuff which isn't necessarily a bad thing. It's a great thing if you love cumin. If you're feeling weird about ingredients screaming too loudly, just don't use one thing in way larger proportions than something else. And when you eat it, pay attention to the taste. Does it taste more of something than you thought it would? File that away for next time and cut back or use more.

So that's it! You do not need a recipe or exact measurements of marinades, mostly because you don't need to dirty up that many measuring cups but also because you have different tastebuds than I do and like different flavors. You also might be marinating two pieces of chicken versus eight which will affect how far your measured marinade stretches. Marinades are such a great way for you to take low-grade risks in the kitchen. Unless you dump an entire jar of chili powder into your bag of two pork chops with nothing else to help balance it out from the basics I already shared, you're not going to mess anything up. So just try! Play around. Start small and add one item to bring flavor each time. Before you know it, you'll be throwing stuff in plastic bags like a champ.

If you have any questions about this, join me on Instagram @thelazygenius this Thursday around 12:15pm EST. I'm there every Thursday to talk about the podcast episode, so I hope you can come join me there. If you can't make it live, remember that Instagram lives are available for 24 hours.

Thanks again for all your encouragement last week, and thanks in advance to those of you who will leave reviews on Apple Podcasts this week. I'm so incredibly grateful for your support of this show. Alright, that's it for today! Thanks for listening, and until next time, be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. I'm Kendra, and I'll see you soon!