



Beer And Food: Jamaican Curry Chicken and Nightmare on Mill Street

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A large number of people like Pumpkin beer, and this is very largely because it tastes like fall. It has those pumpkin pie spices in it that make it reminiscent of coming in from raking leaves before Sunday dinner. That being said, it can be a little difficult to find something to do with Pumpkin beer, since it already tastes like dessert. They're typically fairly sweet and they contain a mixture of allspice, cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg and any number of other things depending on the brewery.

The obvious thing to do is to serve it alongside pumpkin pie. If you're particularly adventurous, you might even want to try it alongside another dessert like ginger cake that has a selection of the same spices. This might be alright for home consumption, but if you're at a beer dinner, that sort of double barreled approach might not really be welcome after about five courses. At that point, it's a whipped cream topped overload.

Since I'm always looking for something interesting to do with beer and food, I googled the ingredients that go into pumpkin pie. Sure enough, if you throw those ingredients in to google, you come up with jerk chicken.

Initially, this seemed like an ideal solution. I checked through a bunch of online recipes and then dug through *The World Cookbook for Students* in order to find something that would give me a reasonably effective version that I could try at home. I failed pretty badly, but mostly on the basis of equipment. I don't have a grill that I can use for this kind of thing.

That's when I realized that I know a professional cook who might be able to furnish some insight into my problem. I'm lucky enough to know La-Toya Fagon from Twist Catering from another life. At the time, I had no idea that I would end up writing about beer, but she had already managed to secure some pretty promising weekend gigs as a cook. After I left that job, I lost track of her, but cut to three years later and she's on Marilyn Denis's show doing a cooking demo. It turns out she's doing Mediterranean inspired Caribbean food.

Talk about a stroke of luck.

The Beer

The beer I'm working with in this case is Mill Street's Nightmare on Mill Street. It's a good candidate for pairing as a pumpkin beer for the reason that it is restrained. First of all, the base recipe is a wheat beer, so it's not a high alcohol beer. It clocks in at an even 5% and is brewed with actual pumpkin. The orange colour and head retention are good. Plus, the spice blend is nicely balanced. Some of the pumpkin beers out in the LCBO overbalance in favour of cinnamon or ginger. That's fine if it's to your taste, but if you want to talk about a prototypical pumpkin beer, this is it.

The spice blend was inspired by brewmaster Joel Manning's wife's recipe for pie, which is a nice thing. Well done, Mrs. Manning.

They sent over some sample bottles for me to play with, and on my recommendation sent some to La-Toya.

The Recipe

I got in touch with La-Toya about jerk chicken, but she played around with a couple of recipes and had a better idea. The problem with jerk chicken is that because the spice blend is so similar, you'd be pairing it with beer on a complimentary basis. That was more or less what I wanted to avoid by skipping the pumpkin pie and dessert angles. I'm sure it would work, but she came up with a pairing that's a great deal more interesting.

JAMAICAN CURRY CHICKEN

1lb boneless skinless thighs
4 tbsp. vegetable oil
4 tbsp curry powder
1 tbsp garlic powder
Salt and pepper to taste
6-7 pimento seeds crushed
1 medium onion diced
1 bell pepper diced
1/2 Scotch bonnet pepper
6 spring's fresh thyme
4 medium size potatoes
2 c. water

Heat oil in pan till smoking level. Cut up chicken in bite size pieces, place in a bowl. Add in all ingredients except potatoes and water. Place chicken mixture in pot, stir, and cook on high add water. Cook, till it comes to a boil, stir, lower heat until chicken is almost cooked. Add in potatoes. Cook until water is thickened.

Serve over steamed white rice or with roti.

The Pairing

This is what your food looks like if your professional cook friend takes the pictures and sends them to you.

Now, this is a vastly different flavour profile than what I started out with, and in terms of cooking curry at home, I'm lost at sea. What better way to learn than by doing?

The reason that this works is because of the pimento seeds (which I discovered are allspice after 10 minutes of standing in the spice aisle) and the thyme. The thyme plays with whatever earthiness is in the beer as a result of the hopping as an aroma, while the allspice comes through in the heat at the back of the palate. Now this makes a great deal of sense as a pairing because the heat from the Scotch Bonnet is just enough to make you want a mouthful of a cold beer. The spice mix from the Pumpkin beer chases the heat with the carbonation, but from a sensory



standpoint it lends even more depth to the curry by suggesting spices that it doesn't necessarily contain. Salting slightly higher than normal is not a bad idea because of the steamed rice and the contrasting sugars in the beer.

Now, when I mentioned I might be doing this on facebook, Garrett Oliver from Brooklyn suggested that you'd probably want quite a sweet pumpkin beer if you were going to pair with Jamaican food. I can certainly see how he would have been right if we'd gone with jerk chicken. Because we went with curry, I think that the slightly wheaty finish on the Nightmare on Mill Street works pretty well. Also, from the standpoint of personal preference, I have to suggest that you really want a lighter alcohol pumpkin beer than some of the monsters out there. The dish is spicy enough that you are likely to want more than one beer with it. Safety first.

And this is what it looks like when you do it at home and are not interested in plating. Still tasty.



WHAT DID WE LEARN

- 1) The proper soundtrack for this dish is Jimmy Cliff's The Harder They Come
- 2) La-Toya Fagon knows what she's doing, which is not exactly a surprise since she always struck me as extremely competent. She managed to steer me to a more complex pairing from a less complex one. Good eye, and I think a good appreciation of what I'm trying to do.
- 3) If it says $\frac{1}{2}$ scotch bonnet, don't go adding a whole one, especially if you're new to the flavour profile. I know you probably won't have anything you can use the other half in, so just discard it. I mean, it cost you 10 cents, so this is no time to be miserly.