

CAJUN SHARK

On the whole, I am opposed to pre-mixed spice blends. They contain all sorts of chemical preservatives, MSG, too much salt, and generally taste like the container they came in. There are a few exceptions, however. The herb blends called *herbes de Provence* and *fines herbes* are quite useful. I particularly like the *herbes de Provence* that contain a little fresh lavender in the mix. I also keep a good chili powder and a couple of good curry powder blends in the cupboard.

I like a Cajun/Creole spice blend, but I've never found a pre-made one that I really liked. However I found an excellent recipe for a Cajun/Creole spice blend in a cookbook by one of television's most annoying celebrity chefs, Emeril Lagasse—he of “bam” and “kick it up a notch” fame.

Lagasse, a half French-Canadian half Portugese from Fall River, Massachusetts, became a transplanted citizen of New Orleans as well as a great Cajun and Creole cook after a stint as the executive chef of the famous restaurant Commander's Palace as well as opening his own restaurants, Emeril's and Nola, in The Big Easy. His recipes tend to require more work than I'm willing to give, although one of his books, *Real and Rustic*, is actually very good and full of do-able and delicious recipes. His spice blend has a million uses—a pinch can jazz up some scrambled eggs and a tablespoon does wonders for a pot of beans. Here's the secret.

Combine the following ingredients in a large bowl and mix well: 2 ½ tablespoons paprika, 2 tablespoons salt, 2 tablespoons garlic powder, 1 tablespoon onion powder, 1 tablespoon freshly ground black pepper, 1 teaspoon or more to taste of cayenne pepper, 1 tablespoon of dried leaf oregano, and 1 tablespoon of dried leaf thyme. This makes about 2/3 of a cup and can be stored in an airtight jar. It will last up to three months, but if you're like me, you'll use it up sooner than that. Don't worry if you've missed the list of ingredients—it will be on Hometown Radio's web site.

The spice blend is very useful in making “blackened” dishes, such as a “blackened ribeye” or my favorite, “blackened fish”. When the craze for “blackened” food arrived some years ago, I tried “blackening” various foods, but only succeeded in blackening my stove and my eyebrows and smoking up the house.

At long last I came upon a technique that can easily be done in a home kitchen. Although it was originally done with swordfish, I prefer it with shark steaks, (which are cheaper than swordfish), and to my taste, are more flavorful.

Mix together one tablespoon of the Creole/Cajun spice blend and one teaspoon of ground cumin. Take four shark steaks, approximately 6 ounces each and about an inch thick. Rinse the steaks thoroughly and pat them dry. Pat the shark steaks with the spice mixture, using about half a teaspoon per side. Then turn the fan on over the stove vent. Heat a large heavy non-stick skillet (or two smaller ones) over high heat until hot. A drop of water flicked on the pan should bounce right off.

Spray the pan with a vegetable cooking spray, or swirl in about a tablespoon of vegetable (not olive) oil. Put in the shark steaks. Cook over high heat for one minute and then turn the steaks over, re-spraying the pan as you do. Cook the steaks for another minute over high heat, then turn the heat down to low, cover the pan, and cook for another 3-4 minutes. Serve, garnished with lemon or lime wedges.

(If you're working with an electric stove, when you cover the pan, move it to another burner already set on low, otherwise the heat won't reduce quickly enough and you'll overcook the fish.) The shark steaks should be nicely browned on each side, (not really “blackened”), and still moist inside. You do not want to cook the shark until it's firm all the way through—it will get tough and dry.

A nice side dish is a vegetable medley of some chopped onion, chopped mushroom, finely minced garlic, a couple of chopped small zucchini, and a 16-ounce can of whole hominy, either white or yellow, including the liquid, all simmered together for five or ten minutes and finished off with a handful of chopped fresh cilantro.