

Biryani (chicken)

Advanced · Non-vegetarian · ± 4 to 6 people · 75 min · Ahead: 3 hours marinating, or overnight if you have the time

Biryani is built in layers. Half-cooked rice goes on top of chicken that is nearly done, and then they finish together under a sealed lid. The steam does the last part of the cooking and carries the spices up through the rice.

Most of the work is in the preparation: the birista, the masala and the marinade. Do those a day ahead and the dish itself takes under an hour.

The masala makes more than this recipe needs. Keep the rest in a sealed jar, because it is exactly what the next biryani asks for.

Spiciness. This is the amount of chilli as it is used in India. The heat lives in the biryani masala, so that is the dial: use fewer dried red chillies when you grind it and the whole dish comes down with it. The rest of the recipe stays the same.

Tip. The masala above carries no salt, which is why you salt the chicken and the rice water yourself. Many shop-bought biryani masalas do contain salt. Check the label and take the salt down accordingly, or the dish comes out too salty.

Ingredients

Birista (crispy fried onions)

- 500 g onions, sliced thin and evenly
- oil, for frying

Biryani masala

- 2 tbsp coriander seeds
- 1 tsp cumin seeds
- 2 tsp shah jeera (caraway seeds)
- 2 tbsp green cardamom
- 5 to 6 black cardamom pods
- 7,5 cm cinnamon
- 1 tbsp black peppercorns
- 7 to 8 hot dried red chillies
- 7 to 8 bay leaves
- 2 tsp cloves
- 3 blades of mace
- 1 tbsp kasuri methi (dried fenugreek leaves)
- ½ nutmeg, grated
- ½ tsp turmeric

Chicken marinade

- ± 800 g chicken
- ½ tsp salt
- juice of 1 lemon
- 4 tbsp ginger garlic paste (half ginger, half garlic)
- 2 tbsp Kashmiri chili powder
- ½ tsp turmeric
- 2 tsp ground coriander
- 1½ tbsp biryani masala
- 3 to 4 tbsp birista oil (the oil the onions were fried in)
- half of the birista, while it is still only half cooked
- 200 ml yoghurt
- a handful of chopped coriander and mint leaves

Rice and the spiced water

- ± 600 g basmati rice
- 1 to 2 bay leaves
- 4 cm cinnamon stick
- 1 tsp shah jeera (caraway seeds)
- 3 to 4 green cardamom pods, crushed
- 4 to 5 cloves
- 1 star anise
- 3 to 4 black peppercorns
- juice and peel of ½ lemon
- 1 green chilli, slit
- salt, enough to make the water taste properly salty

For cooking and layering

- 2 tbsp ghee
- chopped coriander and mint
- a pinch of biryani masala
- the rest of the birista
- 3 tbsp crème fraîche
- 3 to 4 strands of saffron
- dough, to seal the lid

Method

1. Start with the birista. Slice 500 g onions thin and evenly. Bring the oil to 135 °C and put them in. Fry on a medium-low flame, moving them around every few minutes. Take them out as soon as they start to turn orange: they carry on cooking out of the pan and will go brown by themselves. Keep the oil, it goes into the marinade later.

2. Make the biryani masala. Heat a dry frying pan and turn the heat low. Add the coriander seeds, cumin seeds, shah jeera, green and black cardamom, cinnamon, peppercorns, dried red chillies, bay leaves, cloves, mace and the grated nutmeg. Toast for about a minute, stirring throughout, until you can smell them clearly.
3. Add the kasuri methi, toast another 15 seconds and turn off the heat. Let it cool completely, grind it fine and stir in the turmeric at the end. You will have masala left over; keep it in a sealed jar.
4. Put about 800 g of chicken in a bowl. Add ½ tsp salt, the juice of 1 lemon, 4 tbsp ginger garlic paste, 2 tbsp Kashmiri chili powder, ½ tsp turmeric, 2 tsp ground coriander, 1½ tbsp biryani masala, 3 to 4 tbsp birista oil and half of the birista, while it is still only half cooked. Mix very well, so the spices cover the chicken completely.
5. Then add 200 ml yoghurt and a chopped handful of coriander and mint, and mix well again. Leave the chicken to marinate for 3 hours, or overnight if you have the time.
6. Take a thick-bottomed pan, put it on the heat and add 2 tbsp ghee.
7. When the ghee is hot, add the chicken mixture. Sear it on high heat for 5 minutes, then lower the flame, put the lid on and cook until the chicken is about 85 to 90% done. This takes roughly 10 to 12 minutes.
8. Meanwhile, in another deep pan, heat plenty of water until it is at a rolling boil, enough that the rice can dance freely in it. Add 1 to 2 bay leaves, a 4 cm cinnamon stick, 1 tsp shah jeera, 3 to 4 crushed green cardamom pods, 4 to 5 cloves, 1 star anise, 3 to 4 black peppercorns, the juice and peel of ½ lemon, 1 slit green chilli, and enough salt that the water tastes properly salty.
9. Wash about 600 g basmati rice until the water runs clear, then add it to the spiced boiling water.
10. Cook the rice to about 80% done, without stirring it much.
11. Drain the rice and let it rest for 4 to 5 minutes.
12. Now the layers. Make sure the chicken is spread evenly across the pan. On top of it put chopped coriander and mint, a pinch of biryani masala and 80% of the birista you have left. Then add the 80% cooked rice, with gentle hands.
13. Warm 3 tbsp crème fraîche with 3 to 4 strands of saffron over a low heat, stirring slowly until the saffron has given up its colour. Spoon it over the rice, followed by some more coriander and mint and the last of the birista.
14. Put the pan on an indirect heat source, such as on top of another pan, and put the lid on. Seal the gap with dough, so the biryani cooks under a little pressure.
15. Cook on medium for 5 minutes, then on low for another 10 minutes.
16. Turn off the heat and let it rest in the sealed pan for another 10 minutes before opening and serving.