

On a hot grill, the burgers cooked to a tender, juicy medium-rare in about 10 minutes, with warm, smoky flavor from the Spanish paprika and cumin. But something was missing: a secret sauce.

So we combined ingredients from El Mago's frita and its sauce (onion, garlic, paprika, cumin, tomato paste, hot sauce, ketchup and water), added some of our own devising (butter and molasses) and reformulated them to make a thick sauce that balanced heat with a rich, ketchupy sweetness. Slathered on a bun and sandwiched together, the homemade condiment made the perfect match for our smoky, savory Cuban-spiced burger.

## Cuban-Spiced Burgers

*Start to finish: 1 hour  
(20 minutes active) | Servings: 4*

**P**ARTIALLY FREEZING the ground beef before mixing in the spices helped prevent the meat from becoming compacted during mixing and shaping. But it's still important to use a light touch when handling the beef. To pan-fry the burgers, heat 1 tablespoon grapeseed or other neutral oil in a large skillet over medium-high until smoking. Add the patties and cook until well browned, about 5 minutes; flip and continue to cook to desired doneness. This recipe can easily be doubled.

**Don't knead or overwork** the ground beef when mixing in the seasonings. This will make the texture of the burgers dense.

—DIANE UNGER



**A smoky, sweet ketchup**, inspired by Miami's fritas, tops our spiced burger.

1½ pounds 85 percent lean ground beef  
2 teaspoons Spanish smoked paprika  
2 teaspoons ground cumin  
1¼ teaspoons kosher salt  
½ teaspoon ground black pepper  
4 burger buns, toasted  
Smoked paprika and cumin ketchup

▪ **Line a baking sheet** with parchment. Set the beef on the sheet, then use 2 forks to gently spread the meat. In a small bowl, combine the paprika, cumin, salt and pepper. Sprinkle over the beef. Freeze until the meat is very cold and beginning to firm up at the edges, about 20 minutes.

▪ **Use a rubber spatula** to gently fold the spice mixture into the beef without compacting it; it's OK if the spices are not completely blended. If the beef is still partially frozen, let stand

10 to 15 minutes until slightly softened. Divide the beef into 4 even portions. Shape each into a 4-inch patty about ½-inch thick.

▪ **Prepare a grill** for direct, high-heat cooking. For a charcoal grill, spread a large chimney of hot coals evenly over the grill bed; open the bottom grill vents. For a gas grill, set all burners to high. Heat the grill, covered, for 5 to 10 minutes, then clean and oil the cooking grate.

▪ **Grill the burgers** until well charred on the first side, about 4 minutes. Using a wide metal spatula, flip the patties and cook until well charred on the second side and the center is 125°F for medium-rare, another 4 to 5 minutes. Transfer to a plate and let rest for 5 minutes. Set the burgers on the buns. Top with smoked paprika and cumin ketchup (see sidebar).



## Smoked Paprika and Cumin Ketchup

*Start to finish: 45 minutes*

*Makes about 2 cups*

**T**HIS CONDIMENT, inspired by the many Cuban fritas we sampled in Miami, is a balanced blend of smoky, savory, sweet, tangy and spicy flavors. Butter adds richness. We liked Cholula and Crystal hot sauces best here.

**Don't use** double-concentrated tomato paste, often packaged in tubes. The flavor will overwhelm the sauce.

4 tablespoons salted butter  
1 large yellow onion, chopped  
¼ cup tomato paste  
2 tablespoons Spanish smoked paprika  
1 tablespoon ground cumin  
2 garlic cloves, finely grated  
2 cups water  
6 tablespoons hot sauce  
3 tablespoons ketchup  
1 tablespoon molasses  
½ teaspoon kosher salt  
½ teaspoon ground black pepper

■ **In a medium saucepan** over medium-high, melt the butter. Add the onion and cook, stirring, until golden brown, 7 to 10 minutes. Add the tomato paste and cook, stirring, until beginning to brown, about 3 minutes. Stir in the paprika, cumin and garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds.

■ **Stir in the water** and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer, stirring occasionally, until the sauce has the consistency of jam, about 20 minutes. Off heat, stir in the remaining ingredients. Let cool for 15 minutes, then process in a blender or food processor until smooth, about 1 minute. Cool to room temperature. The sauce keeps refrigerated for up to 1 week. ♦