

IN HONOR OF CHICKENS

Today chicken has become so much a part of our menu that we don't tend to think much at all about these noble little birds. In the '90s, chicken overtook pork; then, in 2014, chicken surpassed beef as the most popular meat in the country.

We've all heard I think about the issues around chicken production. Much of conventional chicken farming is done in not very kind ways especially since these are sentient beings. I won't belabor the downside of the industry here, but it does suggest that you should only buy chicken that is raised what I call "ethically".

A good way of determining this is to look for those that carry an "Animal Welfare Certified" label. This certification comes from GAP (Global Animal Partnership) a non-profit certifier of meats including chicken. There are 5 levels of certification which you can go on line to familiarize yourself with but it basically requires minimum space, 6 hours of darkness daily for proper rest and health, no physical alterations such as beak trimming, despurring, dubbing or caponization. As you move up the levels, many more requirements come into effect. Most important at all levels is that every chicken farm must be audited every 15 months to be certified.

Some local brands that meet the standards are Mary's, Bell and Evans, Whole Foods, Sonoma Meat Company, Perdue and their brands Coleman, Niman Ranch, Sonoma Red and Petaluma Poultry.

There is also a lot of hype and I think misunderstanding about the chicken we get in our markets today. Here are some things I think we should all be aware of:

Hormone Free – Some producers now label their chickens "hormone free". Sounds like a good thing. Here's the scoop however. Prior to 1960 or so hormones were used to help make chicken more "uniform" and to calm them down. If you've ever been around a chicken house, you know it can get raucous. The truth however is that hormones have not been used in the poultry industry for over 40 years. Thus, any "hormone-free" claims on poultry are irrelevant since the entire poultry industry is "hormone-free."

Antibiotics – Unfortunately, it's a common practice in most commercially produced chickens to feed them a steady diet of antibiotics. Because they typically are grown in stressful crowded conditions, they are prime candidates for all kinds of diseases and afflictions. All it takes is for one chicken to get sick and the rest quickly follow. There is also a real concern by dieticians and the medical community about the consumption of "second hand" antibiotics.

Natural -We also see chickens labeled as "natural" - - ever wonder what that means? In 1982, the USDA declared that any product could be labeled "natural" if it did not contain any artificial flavoring, coloring ingredients, chemical preservatives, or any other synthetic ingredient, and is minimally processed. Minimal processing may include those

traditional processes (smoking, roasting, freezing, drying, and fermenting) used to make food edible or preserve it or make it safe for human consumption. "Natural," as the USDA defines it, represents little more than a minimal standard. The myth that the word "natural" suggests is that *Natural* Chickens are raised antibiotic-free. The fact is that it's legal for poultry producers to market "naturally grown" chicken that has been raised with antibiotics. Unfortunately, any conventionally grown chicken can qualify for a "natural" label claim so it means little.

Free Range – Sounds like a good and humane thing. Though there are no strict standards for using this term it has come to mean that *Free-range* chickens have an outdoor pen in which to roam and forage freely, in addition to an enclosed poultry house. The yards are normally the same size as the house. Conventional chickens are never allowed to go outdoors. Another myth is that all "natural" chickens are free-range.

Here are my suggestions for what to look for when you buy a chicken. It should be:

- antibiotic free
- humanely and wholesomely grown
- organic and certified by a reputable 3rd party
- fed a vegetarian diet. That adage of "you are what you eat" applies equally to chickens. Many commercially grown chickens are fed animal by-products which is a questionable practice at best
- air cooled – a more recent development which lessens the spread of diseases such as salmonella

Well I hope I haven't turned you off chicken. It really is one of the most delicious, adaptable, and economical meat proteins available. Here are some yummy recipes:



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KOREAN FRIED CHICKEN WINGS

Serves 4 depending on your appetite

Gojulang chile paste is one of the indispensable condiments in the Korean kitchen. It is made by combining powdered red chili peppers, glutinous rice powder and soybean paste. It's widely available in Asian markets and on-line.

Canola or other vegetable oil for frying
2 tablespoons pressed fresh garlic
1-1/2" piece peeled ginger, finely minced
3 tablespoons soy sauce
3 tablespoons gojulang
1 1/2 tablespoons rice vinegar
1 tablespoon toasted Asian sesame oil
2 tablespoons honey
1/3 cup each rice flour, all-purpose flour and corn starch
16 chicken wings, tips removed and saved for stock (about 1 3/4 lbs.)

Pour oil into a 6-qt. pot to a depth of 2". Heat over medium-high heat until a thermometer reads 350°. In a small saucepan add garlic, ginger, soy, gojulang, vinegar, sesame oil, and honey. Bring to a simmer over moderate heat and keep warm.

Whisk flours and cornstarch together with 1 cup water in another bowl. Add chicken and toss. Working in batches, fry chicken until golden, 6–8 minutes. Drain on paper towels. Return oil to 350°. Fry chicken a second time until crisp, 6–8 minutes more. Drain again. Toss chicken in sauce and serve hot.

Note: Alternately you can forego the second frying and instead arrange once fried wings on a rack on a sheet pan and put in a preheated 425-degree oven for 5 – 7 minutes.

TUSCAN CHICKEN LIVER TOASTS

Makes about 2 dozen crostini

Chicken livers are a powerhouse of B vitamins and Folic Acid. They also contain a healthy dose of essential iron and zinc. Most important, they are delicious. This is a riff on a recipe I fell in love with in Tuscany years ago.

1-pound organic chicken livers
2 tablespoons unsalted butter
2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
2 large shallots, thinly sliced
1 large garlic clove, smashed

3 anchovy fillets (or 1 tablespoon anchovy paste), chopped
1 tablespoon capers, minced
4 fresh sage leaves, chopped
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
1/2 cup dry white wine
1/2 teaspoon grated lemon zest
1/2 cup grated Parmesan
Grilled country bread, for serving

Trim and discard any sinew and spots from the livers and dry them well with paper towels.

In a large skillet, melt half the butter and olive oil over medium-high heat. Sauté the shallots, garlic, anchovies, capers, and sage until the shallots are lightly browned, 6 minutes or so. Set aside.

Add remaining butter and olive oil to pan. Season the chicken livers with salt and pepper and over medium high heat cook until golden brown but still rosy in the center. Add the wine and keep stirring with a wooden spoon, breaking up the livers as they start to cook through.

Remove from the heat and transfer the mixture to a food processor along with the shallot mixture. Process until nearly smooth, and then add the lemon zest and Parmesan and process again. Taste and add salt or pepper as needed. Serve warm or at room temperature, spread on grilled country bread.



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CHICKEN AND SHRIMP MEATBALL SOUP

Serves 6

Southeast Asia flavors are at work here. I discovered this during a trip to Thailand.

5 ounces dry mung bean or rice noodles, softened according to package directions

1/2 pound peeled and deveined shrimp

1/2-pound boneless, skinless chicken thighs, chopped

2 teaspoons finely chopped garlic

3 tablespoons finely chopped green onions including the green tops

2 tablespoons fish sauce

1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

1 teaspoon sugar

8 cups rich chicken stock of your choice

2 tablespoons soy sauce

1 tablespoon brown sugar

2 teaspoons chili garlic sauce, or to taste

1 2-inch piece fresh ginger, peeled and cut in fine julienne

1/4 cup fresh lime juice

1/4 cup roughly chopped fresh cilantro

Fried garlic or shallots, if desired

Prepare noodles according to package directions. Drain and set aside.

In a food processor with the metal blade and pulse the shrimp and chicken separately until coarsely chopped. Place both into a large bowl and stir in garlic, green onions, fish sauce, black pepper, and sugar. Using a tablespoon to measure, gently roll each spoonful into a ball and set aside.

Add stock, soy sauce, brown sugar, chili garlic sauce and ginger to a soup pot and bring to a boil. Drop in the meatballs and cook until meatballs are done, about 8 minutes. Keep the soup at a gentle simmer so that it doesn't cloud. Adjust seasoning to your taste. Divide the noodles and lime juice among soup bowls, add the meat balls and ladle the broth over the soup and top with chopped cilantro and fried garlic or shallots.

CHICKEN AND RICE SOUP WITH EGG AND LEMON

Serves 4

So, let me admit here that my comfort food is soup and that's why I've included a second soup recipe. This is based on *Avgolemono*, a traditional Greek sauce made of lemon and egg. It requires some attention to not curdle the eggs but it's very easy and fast. Great use for leftover rotisserie chicken.

3 large lemons
5 cups chicken stock
1 teaspoon dried oregano
Salt and pepper to taste
2 cups cooked and shredded chicken
1 cup diced carrot
1/2 cup diced celery
1/3 cup long grain rice
1 large egg
2 tablespoons minced fresh mint

Zest and juice 1 lemon. Add to a soup pot with the stock, oregano, salt and pepper, carrot, celery and rice and simmer for 10 minutes or until vegetables and rice are tender. Remove from heat and allow soup to cool for 5 minutes.

Whisk egg in a small bowl then beat in the juice of 1 lemon. Gradually beat in 2 cups of soup liquid, being careful not to overheat and curdle the eggs.

Return soup to medium-low heat and whisk in egg mixture. Continue cooking, being careful not to boil, until soup is somewhat thickened and creamy. Stir in mint and serve immediately with remaining lemon cut into wedges for guests to squeeze in.



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VIETNAMESE SALAD WITH CHICKEN

Serves 4

Any crisp vegetables that you like could be added or substituted here. There are several inexpensive tools on the market which make julienning a snap. I like the julienne peeler from OXO which is less than 10 bucks. Nuoc Cham is a spicy dipping sauce that has as many variations as those who make it. I love serving this in little Asian to-go boxes!

For the chicken:

1-pound skinless, boneless chicken thighs
3 tablespoons fresh lime juice
2 tablespoons olive oil
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

2 ounces thin rice noodles softened in hot water and drained*
Toasted sesame oil
2 cups very finely sliced green or Nappa cabbage
1 cup or so carrot cut in fine julienne
1 cup or so finely julienned daikon radish, crisped in ice water and drained
1 medium red bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and cut into fine julienne
2 cups seeded and thinly sliced English cucumber
Nuoc Cham (recipe follows)
1/4 cup or so loosely packed tender cilantro and/or mint sprigs
2 tablespoons chopped toasted peanuts

Gently pound the chicken until it is relatively the same thickness. Whisk together the lime juice, olive oil and salt and pepper to taste and coat the chicken. Grill or pan sear until chicken is just done. Set aside to cool. Slice relatively thinly

Meanwhile in a bowl toss the softened noodles with a few drops of sesame oil. Combine the cabbage, carrots, daikon, red pepper, and cucumber and gently toss with the noodles. Add the chicken and artfully arrange on a plate or in a small Asian to-go box. Spoon the Nuoc Cham over and top with cilantro and chopped peanuts. Serve with chop sticks.

Nuoc Cham

Makes about 1 cup

1/2 cup fresh lime juice
4 tablespoons Asian fish sauce
1 - 2 teaspoons Asian chile** garlic sauce or to taste
5 tablespoons sugar or to taste
1 tablespoon cilantro leaves, coarsely chopped

Combine all ingredients and stir until sugar is dissolved. Let stand at least 30 minutes before serving for flavors to develop. Adjust salt/sweet/tart/hot flavors to your taste.

*If noodles haven't softened sufficiently (they vary by producer), drain, and pour simmering water over then run under cold water to stop the cooking. Try a bite and see if its to your liking.

**Every Asian cuisine has their own riff on this sauce. I like Lee Kum Kee from Hong Kong that is widely distributed in Asian markets and some supermarkets.

CHICKEN WALDORF SALAD

Serves 4

The original Waldorf salad was created at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York in the late 1890's by Chef Oscar Tschirky. It was considered the height of sophistication and originally was not more than apples, celery, and mayonnaise. Chopped nuts and grapes came later and a once popular version for kids contained tiny marshmallows.

Dressing:

1/2 cup good quality mayonnaise
1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
1/3 cup buttermilk

2 teaspoons fresh lemon or lime juice
1/2 teaspoon sugar
2 teaspoons roughly chopped fresh tarragon
Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

1 pound or so attractively chopped cooked chicken of your choice
1-1/2 cups (1 small) diced tart sweet apple such as Fuji, peeled or not as you please
1 cup thinly sliced celery or fennel
1 cup red seedless grapes, cut in half
1/4 cup blanched slivered almonds, lightly toasted
1 tablespoon coarsely chopped chives (optional)
12 tender butter lettuce leaves

Whisk the dressing ingredients together seasoning to your own taste and set aside.

Add chicken to a large bowl along with the apple, celery, and grapes. Stir in prepared dressing and mound on serving plates. Sprinkle almonds and chives over top. Place lettuce leaves attractively next to salad so that guests can use them to roll up and eat the salad. Salad can be made a couple of hours ahead but its best when eaten the day it's made.



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CHICKEN PICCATA

Serves 4

This is a classic American-Italian recipe that is easy and quick. Since it's done in one pan it makes cleanup a breeze. Great adapted to other meats like pork or turkey.

2 boneless, skinless chicken breast halves, each 10 to 12 ounces each
Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper
1/2 cup all-purpose flour
3 tablespoons olive oil
3 tablespoons unsalted butter
2 tablespoons finely chopped shallot
1/4 cup dry white wine
3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice or to taste
1/3 cup chicken broth
2 tablespoon drained capers
2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley
1 tablespoon finely chopped chives

Butterfly the chicken breasts and cut them in half horizontally. Working with one breast half at a time, place the chicken between 2 pieces of plastic wrap and, using a meat pounder or other heavy, flat object like a skillet, gently pound to an even thickness of about 1/4 inch thick.

Season the chicken on both sides with salt and pepper. Place the flour in a shallow bowl and dredge the chicken in it. Shake off the excess.

In the nonstick fry pan over medium-high heat, warm 2 tablespoons of the olive oil. Place 2 pieces of chicken in the pan and cook, turning once, until browned on both sides, 2 to 3 minutes per side. Transfer to a platter or individual plates. Warm the remaining 1 tablespoon oil in the pan and repeat with the remaining chicken.

Reduce the heat to medium and add 1 tablespoon butter in the pan. Add the shallot and cook until softened and lightly brown, about 1 minute. Add the wine, lemon juice and broth, increase the heat to medium-high and cook until the liquid is slightly reduced, about 5 minutes.

Remove the pan from the heat and whisk in the remaining 2 tablespoons butter, the capers and parsley. Season to your taste with salt and pepper and additional drops of lemon juice if desired. Splash the sauce over the chicken and serve immediately topped with a sprinkling of chives.

BRICK CHICKEN

Serves 2 – 4

One of the best ways to cook a chicken (or most other birds for that matter) is to butterfly or spatchcock it, season it well and then cook it weighted with foil covered bricks either on the grill or in a heavy skillet as I've done below. Instruction for spatchcocking follows.

1 tablespoon fresh pressed garlic
Kosher or sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
1/3 cup plus 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil, divided
2 tablespoons finely grated lemon zest
3 tablespoons finely chopped fresh herbs such as chives, parsley, rosemary, etc., divided
3-1/2 pound or so butterflied chicken, preferably organic
1 tablespoon or so flour
1-1/2 cups rich chicken stock or combination of stock and dry white wine
2 tablespoons lemon juice

Combine the garlic, 1 tablespoon salt, 2 teaspoons freshly ground pepper, olive oil and lemon zest, and half the herbs in a small bowl. With your fingers loosen the skin over the breast and thighs and work the garlic mixture as evenly as you can under the skin. Spread any remaining over the bone side of the bird. Place chicken on a rack set in a rimmed baking sheet and refrigerate for up to 3 hours.

Heat the remaining 2 tablespoons oil in a heavy 12-inch skillet over high heat. Either wrap two bricks with foil or set another heavy skillet aside. Add the chicken to the skillet skin side down and place bricks or another skillet with a couple of soup cans in it on top.

Reduce heat to medium and cook until the skin is beautifully golden brown and crisp, 15 – 18 minutes. Remove the top weight, turn chicken over and pour out all but a couple of tablespoons of fat. Replace the weight on top and continue to cook for another 12 – 15 minutes or until an instant read thermometer inserted into the thigh reads 165 degrees.

Remove chicken to a cutting board and allow it to rest for 5 – 10 minutes before carving. Meanwhile pour off all but 2 tablespoons of fat in pan, add flour and stir to make a roux. Whisk in stock and lemon juice and whisk until sauce thickens. Stir in remaining herbs, adjust seasoning to your taste and serve chicken with the pan sauce.

To spatchcock a Chicken: Place chicken, breast side down, on a cutting board. Using poultry shears, cut along both sides of backbone; remove and discard backbone (or save for stock). Turn chicken breast side up. Place a heavy skillet on the breast and press firmly against breastbone until it cracks, and breast meat is an even 1-inch thickness.

COUNTRY CAPTAIN CHICKEN CASSEROLE

Serves 4

If you grew up in the South, then this is probably a dish familiar to you. It is a Low Country classic and its origin is somewhat controversial. The English have a similar dish with a similar name and believe that its origins were from a British officer who brought the recipe back from his station in India. Others maintain that the dish originated in Savannah, Georgia, which was a major shipping port in America for the spice trade. There are probably as many variations on this recipe as there are cooks who prepare it.

1 cup flour
1 teaspoon dried thyme
Kosher or sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
4 plump chicken whole leg-thighs
3 tablespoons vegetable oil
6 slices bacon, chopped
2 tablespoons finely chopped garlic
2 cups cored, seeded, and chopped poblano or green bell peppers
3 cups chopped onion
2 tablespoons or so Madras style curry powder, or to taste
1 28-ounce can crushed tomatoes with basil
1 cup or so chicken stock or dry white wine
1/2 cup golden raisins or currants
2 bay leaves
4 cups steamed fragrant white rice such as Basmati
1/4 cup chopped, dry roasted peanuts
1/4 cup toasted dried and shredded coconut, optional

Combine the flour, thyme, 2 teaspoons salt and 1 teaspoon pepper. Dredge the chicken in the seasoned flour and shake off excess. Heat a large Dutch oven or deep skillet with the oil over moderately high heat. Add chicken, skin side down, and cook, turning once, until golden brown, about 10 minutes. Transfer chicken to a plate and set aside.

Discard all but 1 tablespoon of oil from the pan and oil add bacon and cook, stirring occasionally, until crisp, about 6 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer bacon to a paper towel-lined plate and set aside. Add the garlic, peppers, and onions to the Dutch oven and cook, stirring occasionally, until soft and just beginning to brown, about 10 minutes. Add the curry and cook stirring for another minute or 2 or until curry is fragrant. Add tomatoes, stock, raisins, and bay leaves and season to your taste with salt and pepper.

Add the reserved chicken to the Dutch oven, nestling it into the sauce; spoon some of the sauce over chicken. Cover and cook the chicken at a simmer until it's very tender, about 1 hour and 15 minutes. Serve on rice topped with the reserved bacon, peanuts, and coconut.

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