

CHICKEN FRICASSEE

Serves 8

By Dennis W. Viau; modified from several recipes.

Chicken Fricassee has a long history, first appearing in books in 15th century Europe. I think of this comfort food as country cooking, the cuisine of working-class folks who lived on economy. Originally made with the simplest of ingredients, the dish has enjoyed some enhancements over time to make it appropriate for a Sunday family dinner.



Ingredients:

2 tablespoons pure (cooking) olive oil for frying
2 tablespoons butter
3 ounces (85g) pancetta, divided
1 chicken, at least 3 pounds (1.4kg), cut into 8 pieces
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
1 large onion, coarsely chopped
2 to 4 shallots, sliced
2 to 4 cloves garlic, minced or crushed with a garlic press
3 sprigs fresh thyme
4 small Yukon gold potatoes, peeled and cut into $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch (2cm) pieces (or 1 lb. (454g) small potatoes)
2 stalks celery, cut into $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch (2cm) pieces
2 large carrots, cut into $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch (2cm) pieces
12 small mushrooms, cleaned and trimmed
2 cups (475ml) low-sodium chicken broth, preferably homemade chicken stock
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup (60ml) vermouth or dry white wine (dry red wine is okay in this dish)
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon Herbes de Provence

Optional:

1 to 2 ounces prosciutto; diced
1 tablespoon cooked flour (see Note at end)

Directions:

Heat the oil and butter over a medium-high flame in a large skillet. Season the chicken with salt and pepper. Brown the pieces and $\frac{1}{3}$ of the pancetta until well browned, about 10 to 15 minutes. The pancetta might need to be removed early to prevent burning. Transfer the chicken to a platter and wrap with foil. The pancetta can be set aside in a small bowl.

Chop the vegetables. Remove most of the oil from the pan and discard. Sauté the chopped onion, shallots, garlic, and thyme sprigs about 3 minutes, stirring often. Add the potatoes, celery, carrots, and browned pancetta. Cover the pan and cook over medium-low heat 10 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Add the mushrooms to the pan, season with salt and pepper, and return the browned chicken to the pan. Cover and cook until the largest chicken pieces, typically the breast meat, reaches an internal temperature of 165°F to 170°F (74°C to 77°C).

Transfer all the cooked ingredients to a larger casserole dish, arranging for presentation, and cover with foil. Keep warm, such as in a low (200°F/93°C) oven.

Pour the chicken stock into the skillet, keeping any brown bits (the fond) that are in the pan, and add the vermouth, remaining pancetta, Herbes de Provence, and optional prosciutto. Bring to a boil and reduce by about half. Then strain and discard the solids.

The reduced stock can be thickened with cooked flour mixed into about half a cup of cooled stock and then stirring the mixture into the pan of concentrated stock. Bring to a boil to thicken. Pour the finished stock over the chicken and vegetables in the casserole. Serve immediately.

STEP-BY-STEP

1



Although the *mise en place* for this dish might look extensive, this dish is relatively easy to make. The uncovered jar to the right is clarified butter. You can use whole butter. The jar to the lower-left is my cooked flour. The blocks of ice in the upper left are two cups of frozen homemade chicken stock. You can use the chicken broth available in the grocery store. I am using fingerling potatoes here, but you can use small Yukon golds or small new (pink) potatoes. Some recipes say no fricassee would be complete without mushrooms.

2



I prefer to buy whole chickens and cut them up myself. It is the most economical way to buy chicken, but you can purchase chicken pieces. If you prefer, you can use only the pieces you like best, such as chicken breast meat. This dish is typically made with bone-in pieces, but feel free to substitute with boneless pieces if they work better for your meal.

3



Here are my chicken pieces. To the back is the keel (breast bone), neck, and the back, which I will use for flavor and then discard.

4



Heat the oil and butter in a skillet and add $\frac{1}{2}$ of the pancetta with the chicken pieces. Brown everything well over medium-high heat. The browning will cook the chicken pieces most of the way through. They will finish cooking in a later step. The pancetta can be removed from the pan and set aside when crisp.

5



Here are my browned chicken pieces and the browned pancetta. Cover the chicken with foil and set aside until needed. Reserve the pancetta as well.

6



The vegetables for this dish can be coarsely chopped. Think *stew* rather than *ragu*.

7



I am not crazy about the flavor of shallots, unless they are caramelized, in which case I really like them. For this dish I sliced my shallots thinly so that I could caramelize them.

8



The darker pieces in this pan are the caramelized shallots, which cooked about 10 minutes. Then I added the thyme sprigs (tied together with kitchen string to make them easier to remove later) and the chopped onions. Sauté about 3 minutes, stirring often. The onion doesn't need to be cooked tender at this stage.

9



Here is my cooked onion, still a little crisp but slightly browned. You can also see the thyme, which was buried beneath the onions in the previous picture.

10



While the onions are cooking, coarsely chop the celery and carrots. Trim the mushrooms.

11



I peeled the fingerling potatoes, which might not be necessary. Although some people are adamant about never washing mushrooms (they prefer to brush them gently with a soft brush), I throw mine in the sink and give them a good wash. I don't see that it ruins anything.

12



Add the chopped vegetables to the skillet and the browned pancetta. Cover and cook over medium-low heat 10 minutes, stirring often.

13



Add the mushrooms to the pan, season with salt and pepper, and then arrange the browned chicken pieces on top. As I will be cooking these to temperature rather than time, I put the thickest pieces—the breast pieces—on top to make it easier to check with a digital thermometer. Cook the chicken to an internal temperature of 165°F to 170°F (74°C to 77°C), which is considered a safe temperature for cooking chicken.

14



When the chicken is properly cooked, transfer all the ingredients to a casserole dish, arranging the pieces for presentation. Cover and keep warm, such as in a warm oven. Pour the chicken stock and vermouth into the pan and add the remaining pancetta and optional prosciutto. Season with Herbes de Provence. Bring to a boil and cook until the liquid is reduced by about half. Then remove the solid pieces and discard. If preferred, you can thicken the sauce a little with about a tablespoon of cooked flour (see Note at end) by mixing the flour into a little cooled stock, then stirring it back into the pan. Bring to a boil to thicken.

15

As a final step, strain the stock, removing the solids. Pour this stock over the chicken and vegetables in the casserole dish and serve immediately.



Conclusion

This dish seems like down-home country-cooking comfort food to me. It's healthy, delicious, and economical. Versions of fricassee have been around for centuries. It's a classic that has fed many generations. With a few modern touches, it becomes a hearty meal that can be served with pride.

Notes

I keep cooked flour in my cupboard. It is useful for a quick roux or to thicken liquid without adding a raw flour flavor. Put some flour in a skillet (I use stainless steel so that I won't need to worry about a nonstick coating) and whisk the flour over high heat until it starts to change color. Remove from the heat and keep whisking (the pan is still very hot and can scorch the flour) until the pan has cooled enough to avoid scorching. Store in a jar in the cupboard. For a darker flour (good for beef gravy, etc.), cook the flour a little longer.

