

COQ AU VIN

Although one normally thinks of pairing white wine with chicken, one of the greatest chicken stews is the classic French dish, *coq au vin*. Although traditional recipes for *coq au vin* can be a bit of a business, it's basically a stew of chicken and mushrooms and pearl onions cooked in red wine. I've made a number of different versions over the years, but this is one that I really like—and it's not all that difficult to make.

Traditionally, *coq au vin* is made with an entire cut-up chicken, but as I like dark meat, I use chicken thighs. But you can use whatever cuts you like. I also take the skin off, as chicken skin in most stews can get a bit gummy, and it adds lots of extra calories. So take about 3 ½ to four pounds of chicken thighs, and pull off the skin and trim off any extra fat.

Take 12 small pearl onions and trim them and peel them but leave them hole. Take 4-6 large white mushrooms, trim the stems and clean them, and cut them into quarters. Put the onions into a small saucepan, along with about 1 tablespoon of olive oil, half a teaspoon of sugar, and half a cup of water and bring to a boil over high heat. Boil for a few minutes, until all the water has evaporated, and the onions start browning in the oil. Turn the heat down to medium and cook, shaking the pan often, until the onions have browned on all sides. Add the mushroom pieces and cook for another minute or so. Take the pot off the stove and let it sit, covered, while you make the rest of the dish.

In a large heavy covered skillet or sauté pan, heat another tablespoon of oil over medium-high heat and brown the chicken thighs for about 5 minutes. You may need to do this in a couple of batches. Put all the browned chicken pieces on a plate while you keep working. Then, peel and finely chop half of a medium onion and about three cloves of garlic. Add the chopped onion to the drippings in the pan and cook for about a minute. Add the chopped garlic and cook for just a few seconds.

Then add 1 ¼ cups of a dry, fruity red wine, like an Amador County zinfandel or one of the rare Italian varietals now grown in the Shenandoah Valley, along with a couple of bay leaves and half a teaspoon of dried thyme. (If you have any fresh thyme in your garden, use a couple of sprigs of fresh thyme instead.) Add about half a teaspoon of salt and about the same of freshly ground black pepper. I like pepper, so I usually add a little extra pepper. Then return the chicken thighs to the pan, along with any juices that may have accumulated, bring to the boil, cover and simmer for about 15 minutes. If you're cooking white meat as well, add them about halfway through the cooking time, otherwise it will get tough.

Then thicken the sauce, using either cornstarch and water or I like to shake in some Wondra flour, which is a mixture of flour and cornstarch. Cook that until the sauce is a moderately thick consistency, and then add then cooked pearl onions and mushrooms to the pan and stir them in. Garnish with some finely chopped fresh Italian parsley, and serve.

This goes very well with the pureed potatoes and turnips that I talked about a few weeks ago. Or you can simply serve some good French bread with it, or something like the roasted garlic sourdough you can get at Andrae's Bakery in Amador City.

The beverage of choice should be the same wine that went into the sauce. I never cook with a wine I won't drink. It doesn't have to be fancy and expensive wine, but if you would drink it, you can cook with it. Stay away from so-called and labeled "cooking wines". They are simply really bad wine with salt mixed in.

To accompany this, particularly this time of year, I'd serve a green salad with some Fuyu persimmons cut into the salad, along with some toasted walnuts and a balsamic vinegar dressing. For an easy dessert, I had some Ben and Jerry's Apple Pie Ice Cream the other day that would be perfect. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.