

CHICKEN IN THE POT

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Sautéing chicken pieces and then braising them with vegetables produces both perfectly cooked white and dark meat.

Like almost everyone else these days, I'm always looking for versatile, nearly effortless recipes that don't take much time. That way I can cook them during the week or fancify them up a bit to serve to company on the weekend. Perhaps my favorite of these all-purpose recipes is what I call "Chicken in the Pot".

Unlike the classic French recipe of this name, which calls for a mature stewing hen stuffed with forcemeat and poached in stock for hours, my modern version is something of a cross between sautéed chicken and braised chicken, cooked and served with vegetables. It's a meal-in-one, done in about forty-five minutes and using only one pan.

Because chicken's mild flesh matches well with delicate seasonings and vegetables but also stands up superbly to bold spices and hearty ingredients, you can vary the recipe in almost endless ways.

Choosing the Chicken and the Pot

When I set out to create a quick and adaptable one-pot Chicken in the Pot recipe, I wanted to make use of the virtues of both sautéing and braising. But since sautéing usually calls for a cut-up broiler/fryer, while braising is best done with an older, tougher, whole bird, the first decision I had to make was what kind of chicken to use.

I knew that if I wanted to prepare a meal in less than an hour, I'd need to go with the cut-up broiler/fryer. A whole chicken simply takes too long. Broiler/fryers come in several sizes. I found that the smaller ones, weighing in at two and one-half to three pounds, tasted fine and took only twenty minutes to cook through. However, when I tried larger chickens, weighing about three and one half pounds, they proved an even better choice. Even though I had to brown the pieces in batches so that the recipe consequently took longer, I found that the meat was juicier and that the vegetables, seasonings, and fluids had more time to send flavors to each other, giving the dish a richer, more harmonious taste.

I also tried using only white meat and only dark meat, both of which worked fine. I also tried using a large roaster, but didn't like the results. First, it was more difficult to cut the bird into pieces—and you can't purchase precut parts as you can with a broiler/fryer. Second, the meat took longer to cook, so the white portions were too dry and the vegetables were mush by the time the meat cooked through completely. Finally, the roaster rendered much more fat after the initial browning. That's something nobody wants these days. Getting rid of the fat required too much effort too.

Because my family consists of white-meat eaters, I tried the dish using only breasts and wings. Lucky us, it worked, without any change in time, temperature or method. Dark meat pieces also cooked about the same way, except there was more fat in the pan after browning the pieces. No matter, because you spill off all but a film of fat before you add the vegetables anyway. Basically, this easygoing recipe works perfectly well with a whole cut-up chicken or any parts you like, about three and one-half pounds worth.

I then set about trying to make Chicken in the Pot in several different kinds of cookware. What I discovered is that you don't need any special equipment, only a skillet and lid, to make this recipe. The skillet can be any old twelve-inch or fourteen-inch skillet, as long as it is heavy. (Thin, lightweight cookware cooks unevenly and can cause scorching.)

Even so, given a choice, I prefer some cookware to others. For example, I found that by using a deep, straight-sided, twelve-inch sauté pan or a Dutch oven, there was less spatter on the stovetop. I also preferred the results from my anodized aluminum and pressure-cast aluminum pans; the chicken browned beautifully in both. Nonstick cookware other than the pressure-cast aluminum variety was just okay. It didn't brown the chicken as well. I do not use cast-iron or regular aluminum cookware for this recipe because it calls for wine, and those metals react with wine or other acids, causing an off-taste in the food. As far as the lid goes, any tight fitting cover will do.

The Cooking Process

The first decision to be made about the actual cooking was whether or not to brown the chicken. When you sauté chicken, you always brown it first, but you can prepare braised chicken without doing so. I tried it both ways and concluded that browning was better, even though it added about fifteen minutes to the recipe. Browning the chicken gave it a deeper, almost "nutty" taste and crisped the skin. While the skin doesn't stay crisp, the initial searing gives it an enduring resilience that's texturally pleasing. Unbrowned skin was flabbily soft. Those who are concerned with fat content can easily remove the skin before serving. I prefer this approach to cooking without the skin, since when I tried the latter idea, the flesh of the chicken tightened up around the edges during cooking.

Having thus decided to brown the chicken, my cooking began by heating a small amount of fat in the pan—about two tablespoons is adequate for one chicken. I tried to cut down on this amount and use cooking spray, but

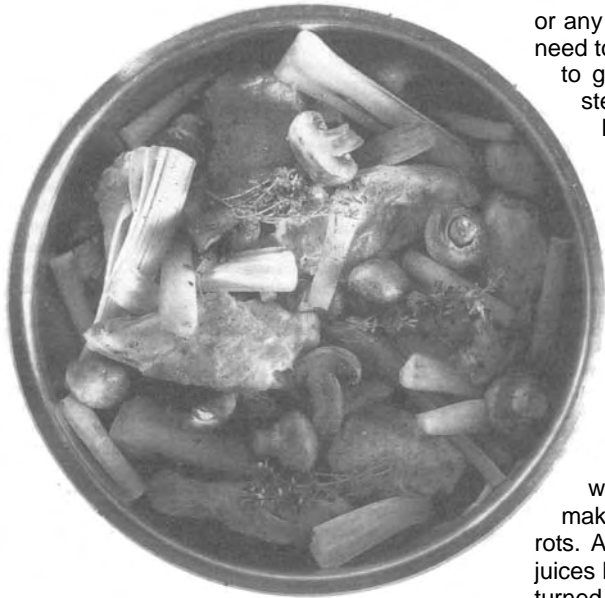
the skin burned and the flesh just beneath became stringy. I tried various combinations of butter, butter and oil, olive oil, and so on and found that the all-butter version was most tasty. A problem existed, however: Butter burns easily. I didn't want to make the effort to clarify the butter, so I used the old standby combo of butter and oil. It worked perfectly: a rich, buttery flavor and no burning. The all-vegetable oil version was fine, just not as enticing to the palate.

Many sautéed and braised chicken recipes call for flouring the chicken before browning it, so I tried that to see what additional benefits it might provide. The results were disappointing. Although the pan gravy was an attractive color, this was the only asset of the process. Flouring caused the chicken to absorb more fat (none remained to spill off before adding the vegetables to the pan) and gave the finished chicken a gritty surface. In deciding to eliminate flouring, I found it essential to dry the chicken thoroughly before adding it to the pan, or the water caused excess spattering.

When the butter has melted and begins to look foamy, the pan is hot enough to receive the chicken. I found that if you don't wait for the pan to heat adequately, two things happen. First, the chicken absorbs too much fat. Second, it doesn't brown properly because heat rising in the flesh causes a "steam" effect. To brown chicken well, you have to keep the heat moderately high, enough to hear a sizzle.

Although you cook the vegetables separately in a classic chicken sauté, my goal was to use only one pan. At first I cooked the vegetables in the fat left in the pan after browning the chicken. It was terrific. In an effort to cut the fat, though, I tried spilling off almost all the pan fat before sautéing the vegetables. That worked beautifully although I had to watch the ingredients carefully and stir them often to prevent scorching.

Chicken in the Pot is so accommodating, you can use just about any vegetable. I began with some basics: carrots, mushrooms, and onions. Sometimes I substituted leeks for the onions and liked that better, but this is a matter of taste. Whichever vegetables you use, it is important that you put them on top of the chicken pieces when you return the chicken to the pan. That way, they won't be crushed by the weight of the meat and will stay attractive. Second, when placed on top of the chicken the vegetables render their juices to the meat below, assuring that the chicken will be soft and succulent. When I tried keeping the vegetables at the bottom, which was a little easier, I wound up with mush and too little pan fluid.



or any other starch you choose. There's no need to reduce the liquids unless you prefer to glaze the chicken and vegetables instead of using the pan juices as a sauce.

In that case, remove the chicken and the vegetables to a serving platter and keep them warm while you boil the pan fluids until they look syrupy. It takes about a minute or two.

CHICKEN IN THE POT WITH TOMATOES, BLACK OLIVES, AND CAPERS

Serve with polenta or pasta

Follow recipe for Chicken in the Pot with Carrots, Mushrooms, and Thyme, making the following changes: Omit carrots. Add 1 garlic clove, minced, once pan juices have evaporated. Once chicken is returned to pan, add 1 can (28 ounces) plum tomatoes, drained, halved, seeded, and chopped coarse; 3 tablespoons each minced fresh parsley and basil leaves; 1/2 cup black olives, pitted and chopped coarse; and 2 teaspoons drained capers. Decrease wine to 1/4 cup using hearty red wine instead of white.

CHICKEN IN THE POT WITH TURNIPS AND NORTH AFRICAN SPICES

Serve with steamed couscous

Follow recipe for Chicken in the Pot with Carrots, Mushrooms, and Thyme, making the following changes: Substitute 2 turnips, sliced 1/4 inch / 1/2 cm thick, then cut into 1/4 inch / 1/2 cm strips, for the mushrooms. Add 1 garlic clove, minced, once pan juices have evaporated. Once chicken is returned to pan, add 1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper, 1/4 teaspoon ground cumin, 1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon, and 1/8 teaspoon ground coriander, along with 1 cup / 240ml cooked chickpeas. Substitute 1/2 cup / 120 ml chickpea cooking liquid for wine in recipe.

CHICKEN IN THE POT WITH POTATOES AND INDIAN SPICES

Serve with cooked white rice

Follow recipe for Chicken in the Pot with Carrots, Mushrooms, and Thyme, making the following changes: Substitute 3 medium all-purpose potatoes, peeled and cut into 1-inch chunks, for the mushrooms. Add 2 garlic cloves, minced, and 1 tablespoon fresh ginger, minced, once pan juices have evaporated. Once chicken is returned to pan, add 1 teaspoon ground cumin, 1/2 teaspoon ground turmeric, 1/2 teaspoon ground coriander, 1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper, pinch of ground cinnamon, and 1/4 teaspoon salt. Substitute 1/2 cup / 120 ml plain, unflavored yogurt mixed with 1/2 cup / 120 ml chicken stock for the wine, and rather than bring liquid to boil, bring it barely to simmer. Add 1 cup / 240 ml thawed frozen peas in last 3 minutes of cooking.

I experimented quite a bit with the amount of liquid to add. I was looking for just enough to bathe and baste the meat and vegetables in about a half hour, like a sauté, yet little enough so that it would have an intense, concentrated flavor, like a slow-cooking braise. I started by using a cup of liquid but found the resulting pan gravy too thin and lacking in flavor. Half a cup turned out to be perfect. Of course, you will need to change the amount if you vary the vegetables in the recipe. For example, more watery vegetables such as mushrooms, tomato, zucchini, and yellow squash render more liquid so you may need less fluid to begin with. On the other hand, ingredients such as potatoes, beans, dried fruit, and dried mushrooms absorb liquid during cooking, so you will need to increase the amount of fluid with which you start.

The type of liquid you use is a matter of taste. I used white wine in the master recipe because I found it tastier than stock. You need not bother preheating the liquid; there is so little that its temperature is irrelevant.

After you add the liquid, it's time to lower the heat. To assure the meat will be braise-soft with sauté-quickness, the ingredients must cook just below a simmer. Too high a flame and the chicken will contract like a rubber band; too low and the meat will still be cooking when the vegetables are over the hill.

It is also a good idea to baste the ingredients three to four times during cooking. When I didn't do that, the flavors didn't seem as well blended. For this reason, it is more convenient to complete the cooking on top of the stove. However, if you're short on stove-top space, you can finish the dish in a preheated 300°F / 150°C oven. In that case, you'll need a heatproof-handled pan. Either way, the chicken will cook through in about twenty-five minutes.

When the dish is done, you've got an unpretentious, savory meal of tender meat, flavor-rich vegetables, and about three-quarters to one cup of fragrant juices you can serve over cooked rice, polenta, egg noodles,

CHICKEN IN THE POT WITH CARROTS, MUSHROOMS, AND THYME

Serves 4

If you like, you can substitute two medium leeks for the onion in this recipe (or use both). To prepare leeks, trim the dark green leaves and root end, keeping the base intact. Quarter each leek lengthwise and rinse thoroughly. Rice pilaf makes a nice accompaniment. You can make this dish in a smaller sauté pan, but you will then need to brown the chicken in batches.

3-4 lbs / 1.5-2 kg assorted chicken pieces (thighs, legs, breasts) with skin on, or 1 chicken, rinsed, patted dry, and cut into 8 pieces

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/4 teaspoon ground black pepper

1 tablespoon butter

1 tablespoon vegetable oil

1 large onion, sliced (and/or leeks)

4 medium carrots, halved crosswise, then halved or quartered lengthwise depending on thickness

8 oz / 250 g domestic mushrooms, cleaned and halved if large

3 large thyme sprigs (1 1/2 teaspoons fresh leaves) or 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme

1/2 cup / 120 ml dry white wine

1. Sprinkle chicken with salt and pepper. Heat butter and oil in 12-inch / 30 cm sauté pan over medium-high heat. When butter foaming subsides, add chicken; sauté until browned on both sides, moving around to brown evenly, 10 to 15 minutes. Remove from pan and set aside.
2. Discard all but thin film of fat from pan. Add onion, carrots, and mushrooms; sauté, stirring frequently to prevent scorching, until pan juices evaporate, 4 to 5 minutes.
3. Return chicken and accumulated juices to pan, moving vegetables to top. Add thyme sprigs and wine; bring to boil. Lower heat, cover, and barely simmer until chicken is cooked through, basting three or four times, about 25 minutes. Place portion of chicken on each plate; top with vegetables. Ladle juices over both chicken and vegetables and/or accompanying starch and serve immediately.