

One-Pan Chicken and Potatoes

We produced a trio of heavy hitters—tender, crisp-skinned chicken; well-browned potatoes; and a garlicky white wine sauce—all in the same pan.

BY ANDREA GEARY

Roast chicken and potatoes are near-universal favorites. Add a superflavorful pan sauce and you've got a slam dunk. A terrific example of this combination is chicken Vesuvio, a dish beloved in the Italian American restaurants of Chicago: Chicken and potatoes are cooked in a single skillet along with a garlicky white wine pan sauce that practically makes itself. So why aren't we all making chicken Vesuvio at home?

Before I answer, a look at how the dish comes together in a restaurant kitchen: A line cook makes each serving to order by searing a half chicken skin side down in an olive oil-slicked skillet and then adding potato wedges, which brown and crisp in the rendered fat. Everything is sprinkled generously with minced garlic and dried herbs, and then the chicken and potatoes are turned browned side up. Plenty of white wine goes into the pan, which is then transferred to a hot oven until everything cooks through.

With the cooked chicken and potatoes transferred to a warm plate, the sauce is briefly reduced in the skillet. A handful of peas or a sprinkling of parsley might be added before pouring the loose sauce around the chicken and potatoes. The whole process takes about 30 minutes.

Now, back to why Vesuvio isn't at the top of anyone's Tuesday night dinner list: None of the recipes I tried were particularly successful. They were all designed to serve at least four, which meant that the skillet was crowded. In cramped conditions, the chicken skin didn't render adequately, so it remained flabby, and the potatoes didn't brown well. Plus, the compact layer of chicken and potatoes acted like a lid, inhibiting evaporation of the sauce in the oven, which left it thin and sharp-tasting. Even after I reduced the sauce on the stovetop, it had a disappointingly watery consistency, with a layer of fat floating on top and



The sauce ingredients—dry white wine, garlic cloves, oregano, and thyme—go into the pan once halved potatoes are browned in savory chicken fat.

all the garlic particles lurking at the bottom.

But the prospect of a chicken Vesuvio with enough crisp-skinned chicken, well-browned potatoes, and potent sauce to serve at least four was a powerful inducement. And if I could make the dish almost as quickly as a Chicago line cook? Even better. I pressed on.

Sizing Up the Skillet

Most of the faults in my first round of testing could be attributed to a single factor: insufficient surface area. A restaurant cook makes each serving of chicken Vesuvio in its own skillet, so there is ample room for a half chicken and four or five wedges of potato to brown and for the sauce to cook down.

More servings required more surface area, but simultaneously wrangling two skillets seemed intimidating. Instead, I dug out my roasting pan, which was broad enough to accommodate all the ingredients, heavy enough to heat evenly, and tall enough to contain any sloshing of sauce.

Vesuvio Victories

Even with so much surface area at my disposal, a half chicken per person seemed excessive. Instead, I decided to go with just thighs. They cook up tender and juicy without salting or brining, they have plenty of skin for crisping, and they exude a good amount of fat, which would enrich the potatoes and sauce.

I placed the roasting pan over two burners set at medium-high heat. Instead of the traditional olive oil, which would lose its distinctive flavor over the heat, I added a tablespoon of vegetable oil and waited for it to shimmer. In went eight thighs, skin side down. After they'd released some fat, I added 1½ pounds of Yukon Gold potatoes (we liked this variety for its creamy texture) that I had halved crosswise, which made them sturdier than the wedges. What's more, they didn't occupy as much of the precious cooking

Are Some Dried Herbs as Good as Fresh?

We often prefer the flavor of fresh herbs in recipes, but dried oregano and thyme—the traditional choices in chicken Vesuvio—work fine here for two reasons. First, the ample amount of wine in the recipe provides moisture, which softens the herbs. The second reason has to do with the nature of the herbs themselves.

Delicate herbs such as basil and chives are native to wet, temperate regions. Their flavor compounds are more volatile than water, so they're gone before the leaves are fully dehydrated, leaving these herbs nearly flavorless in their dried form. But harder oregano and thyme (as well as rosemary, bay, and sage) are native to hot, dry climates, so they've evolved to withstand warm, arid conditions. Their flavor compounds are less volatile, so they retain much of their flavor when dried.



HERBS THAT CAN TAKE THE HEAT

Herbs native to hot, dry climates—oregano, thyme, rosemary, bay, and sage—retain their flavor compounds when dried.



► **Look: Vesuvio at Home**
A step-by-step video is available at CookIllustrated.com/oct18

surface, and they required browning on only one side. I added a whopping 12 cloves of minced garlic, sprinkled dried oregano and thyme (see “Are Some Dried Herbs as Good as Fresh?”) over the whole thing, and flipped the chicken. After turning all the potatoes browned side up, I poured in 1½ cups of dry white wine and moved the roasting pan to the oven. Twenty minutes later, I transferred the cooked chicken and potatoes to a platter, returned the roasting pan to the stovetop, and reduced the sauce, which took only about 4 minutes. I skipped the peas since they made the sauce sweet and vegetal, but I included a bit of parsley for color and freshness.

This was a huge improvement. The thighs were moist, tender, and crisp-skinned, and the potatoes were deeply browned. However, the sauce—although garlicky and bright—was still separated and thin, and the garlic detritus scattered throughout was irksome.

Garlic Gains

I considered skimming the fat from the sauce, but I didn’t want to lose its rich flavor, which was a perfect foil for the wine’s acidity. Stumped on that score, I turned my attention to those troublesome garlic bits.

For my next batch, I halved the garlic cloves instead of mincing them. My plan was to steep them in the sauce while it cooked and then fish them out before serving. But with their reduced surface area, they hadn’t released much flavor. My sauce had gone from punchy to puny, and it was still greasy and thin.

Luckily, the softened garlic had made it only as far as my cutting board. I chopped it coarse, mashed it with the side of my knife, scooped it up, and whisked it back into the sauce. And then something unexpected happened: The fat that had been on the surface of the sauce was instantly incorporated, leaving nary a droplet behind. It turns out that garlic can be a powerful emulsifier (see “Bet You Didn’t Know That Garlic Can . . .”). The garlic paste also added a bit of bulk, which gave the sauce even more body.

Bet You Didn’t Know That Garlic Can . . .

. . . Be Tamed with Lemon Juice

Garlic cloves contain a compound called alliin, which has a mild flavor, and an enzyme known as alliinase. When the clove is whole, the two substances are kept in different parts of the plant’s cells, but as soon as the garlic is cut and the cells are damaged, they mix. Within 30 seconds, the enzyme converts mild

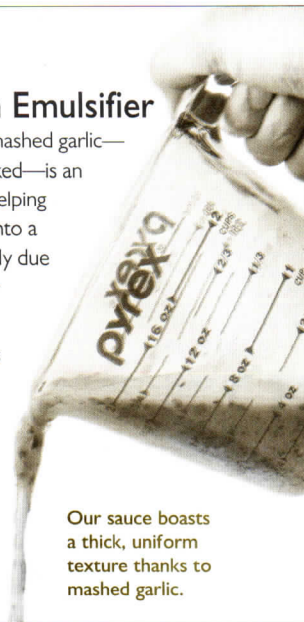


Acid mellows the fiery taste of fresh garlic.

alliin into a third compound: pungent allicin, which gives raw garlic its bite. However, when an acidic ingredient such as lemon juice is quickly added to the cut garlic, the acid mostly prevents the enzyme from working, leaving the garlic with more of the mild—and less of the biting—compound.

. . . Act as an Emulsifier

We’ve noticed that mashed garlic—whether raw or cooked—is an effective emulsifier, helping blend fat and water into a creamy sauce, possibly due to some of the sulfur compounds that are formed when its cells are ruptured (the 12 cloves of garlic also add bulk). Whisking mashed garlic into our sauce changes its texture from thin and separated to thick and uniform.



Our sauce boasts a thick, uniform texture thanks to mashed garlic.

The mashed garlic added a welcome note of nutty sweetness, but the sauce needed a little more zing. I minced two more cloves and mixed them with a bit of lemon juice. The acid limits the formation of the pungent compound allicin, the source of garlic’s heat. Perfect: The sauce now had well-rounded, punchy garlic flavor, and whereas 12 minced garlic cloves had marred its texture, these final two cloves weren’t noticeable. I poured the sauce around the chicken and potatoes so as not to obscure their beautiful brown hues.

Chicago has many attractions, but chicken Vesuvio is one that no longer requires a plane ticket.

CHICKEN VESUVIO

SERVES 4 TO 6

For this recipe you’ll need a roasting pan that measures at least 16 by 12 inches. Trim all the skin from the underside of the chicken thighs, but leave the skin on top intact. To ensure that all the potatoes fit in the pan, halve them crosswise to minimize their surface area. For the most efficient browning, heat the roasting pan over two burners. Combining the garlic with lemon juice in step 1 makes the garlic taste less harsh, but only if the lemon juice is added immediately after the garlic is minced. Our recipe for Chicken Vesuvio for Two is available for free for four months at CooksIllustrated.com/oct18.

- 8 (5- to 7-ounce) bone-in chicken thighs, trimmed
- Kosher salt and pepper
- 1½ pounds Yukon Gold potatoes, 2 to 3 inches in diameter, halved crosswise
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 14 garlic cloves, peeled (2 whole, 12 halved lengthwise)
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1½ teaspoons dried oregano
- ½ teaspoon dried thyme

- 1½ cups dry white wine
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley

1. Adjust oven rack to upper-middle position and heat oven to 450 degrees. Pat chicken dry with paper towels and sprinkle on both sides with 1½ teaspoons salt and ½ teaspoon pepper. Toss potatoes with 1 tablespoon oil and 1 teaspoon salt. Mince 2 whole garlic cloves and immediately combine with lemon juice in small bowl; set aside.

2. Heat remaining 1 tablespoon oil in large roasting pan over medium-high heat until shimmering. Place chicken, skin side down, in single layer in pan and cook, without moving it, until chicken has rendered about 2 tablespoons of fat, 2 to 3 minutes. Place potatoes cut side down in chicken fat, arranging so that cut sides are in complete contact with surface of pan. Sprinkle chicken and potatoes with oregano and thyme. Continue to cook until chicken and potatoes are deeply browned and crisp, 8 to 12 minutes longer, moving chicken and potatoes to ensure even browning and flipping pieces when fully browned. When all pieces have been flipped, tuck halved garlic cloves among chicken and potatoes. Remove pan from heat and pour wine into pan (do not pour over chicken or potatoes). Transfer pan to oven and roast until potatoes are tender when pierced with tip of paring knife and chicken registers 185 to 190 degrees, 15 to 20 minutes.

3. Transfer chicken and potatoes to deep platter, browned sides up. Place pan over medium heat (handles will be hot) and stir to incorporate any browned bits. Using slotted spoon, transfer garlic cloves to cutting board. Chop coarse, then mash to smooth paste with side of knife. Whisk garlic paste into sauce. Continue to cook until sauce coats back of spoon, 3 to 5 minutes longer. Remove from heat and whisk in reserved lemon juice mixture and 1 tablespoon parsley. Pour sauce around chicken and potatoes. Sprinkle with remaining 1 tablespoon parsley and serve.

No Room for the Potatoes

In restaurants, one or two servings of chicken Vesuvio are prepared to order in a skillet. But when we made enough to serve four, the pan was so overcrowded that the chicken skin stayed flabby, the potatoes didn’t brown, and the sauce failed to reduce. Our fix: a roasting pan. Its large surface provides ample room for eight chicken thighs and 1½ pounds of potatoes to brown and for the sauce to simmer.



FOUR SERVINGS JUST WON’T FIT