

A New Way with Sauces for Chicken

We rework classic French pan sauces to reduce the fat and punch up the flavor.

BY ERIN McMURRER

French pan sauces are made from the fond (intensely flavorful bits of browned protein) left in the skillet after you have cooked meat or poultry. These sauces are quick, reliable, and easy, but classic recipes require an awful lot of butter, usually about 1 tablespoon per serving. Newer sauces based on chutneys, relishes, and salsas have less fat, but they generally don't take advantage of the savory fond. I wanted to create lower-fat versions of classic French pan sauces for chicken.

First, a crash course in pan sauces. They must begin with an empty pan covered with fond. Aromatics, such as shallot or garlic, are quickly cooked in a thin film of oil on top of the fond. Next, a liquid (usually broth and/or wine) is added to loosen and dissolve the fond; scraping the pan bottom with a wooden spoon helps this process along. The sauce is then simmered rapidly to concentrate flavors and is finally enriched with a generous amount of cold butter.

Simply reducing the amount of butter left in my sauces thin and brothy. But after some trial and error, I found that adding a teaspoon of flour with the aromatics helped to thicken the sauce, allowing me to reduce the butter to just 1 tablespoon. Using less butter had an unexpected benefit—the other flavors seemed amplified. Adding an acidic ingredient to the finished sauce (I had good luck with lemon juice, sherry, mustard, and brandy) provided a final blast of flavor.

SAUTÉED CHICKEN CUTLETS

SERVES 4

The chicken breasts will be easier to slice in half if you freeze them for 15 minutes. To slice in half, place one hand on top of the breast to secure it, hold a chef's knife parallel to the cutting board, and slice through the middle of the breast horizontally. Serve with any of the sauces that follow, or Brandy, Cream, and Chive Pan Sauce, available free at www.cooksillustrated.com/october.

- 4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts (6 to 8 ounces each), tenderloins removed, trimmed of excess fat, halved horizontally, and pounded 1/4 inch thick (see note above)
Table salt and ground black pepper
- 4 teaspoons vegetable oil

Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 200 degrees. Season both sides of each cutlet

with salt and pepper. Heat 2 teaspoons oil in 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat until smoking. Place 4 cutlets in skillet and cook without moving them until browned, about 2 minutes. Flip cutlets and continue to cook until second sides are opaque, 15 to 20 seconds. Transfer to large oven-safe plate. Add remaining 2 teaspoons oil to now-empty skillet and repeat to cook remaining cutlets. Cover plate loosely with foil and transfer to oven to keep warm while making pan sauce.

VERMOUTH, LEEK, AND TARRAGON PAN SAUCE

MAKES ENOUGH FOR 8 CHICKEN CUTLETS (4 SERVINGS)

- 2 teaspoons vegetable oil
- 1 medium leek, white part only, halved lengthwise, sliced into 1/4-inch-thick pieces, washed, and dried (about 1 cup)
- 1 teaspoon all-purpose flour
- 3/4 cup low-sodium chicken broth
- 1/2 cup dry vermouth or white wine
- 1 teaspoon whole-grain mustard
- 2 teaspoons chopped fresh tarragon leaves
- 1 tablespoon cold unsalted butter
- Table salt and ground black pepper

Add oil to empty skillet used to cook chicken and return pan to medium heat. Add leek and cook, stirring often, until softened and browned around edges, 2 to 3 minutes. Add flour and cook, stirring constantly, 30 seconds. Add broth and vermouth, increase heat to medium-high, and bring to simmer, scraping pan bottom to loosen browned bits. Simmer rapidly until reduced to 3/4 cup, 3 to 5 minutes. Stir in any accumulated chicken juices; return to simmer and cook 30 seconds. Off heat, whisk in mustard, tarragon, and butter; season with salt and pepper. Spoon over cutlets and serve immediately.

LEMON, CAPER, AND PARSLEY PAN SAUCE

MAKES ENOUGH FOR 8 CHICKEN CUTLETS (4 SERVINGS)

- 2 teaspoons vegetable oil
- 1 medium shallot, minced (about 3 tablespoons)
- 1 teaspoon all-purpose flour
- 3/4 cup low-sodium chicken broth
- 2 teaspoons juice from 1 lemon
- 1 tablespoon capers, rinsed and chopped
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley leaves
- 1 tablespoon cold unsalted butter
- Table salt and ground black pepper

Add oil to empty skillet used to cook chicken and return pan to low heat. Add shallot and cook, stirring often, until softened, 1 to 1 1/2 minutes. Add flour and cook, stirring constantly, 30 seconds. Add broth, increase heat to medium-high, and bring to simmer, scraping pan bottom to loosen browned bits. Simmer rapidly until reduced to 1/2 cup, 2 to 3 minutes. Stir in any accumulated chicken juices; return to simmer and cook 30 seconds. Off heat, whisk in lemon juice, capers, parsley, and butter; season with salt and pepper. Spoon over cutlets and serve immediately.

SHERRY, RED PEPPER, AND TOASTED GARLIC PAN SAUCE

MAKES ENOUGH FOR 8 CHICKEN CUTLETS (4 SERVINGS)

- 2 teaspoons vegetable oil
- 3 medium garlic cloves, minced or pressed through garlic press (about 1 tablespoon)
- 1 teaspoon all-purpose flour
- 1/4 teaspoon paprika
- 3/4 cup low-sodium chicken broth
- 1/2 cup plus 1 teaspoon dry sherry
- 1/4 cup jarred roasted red peppers, patted dry and cut into 1/4-inch dice
- 1/2 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme leaves
- 1 tablespoon cold unsalted butter
- Table salt and ground black pepper

Add oil to empty skillet used to cook chicken and return pan to low heat. Add garlic and cook, stirring constantly, until lightly browned, 30 to 60 seconds. Add flour and paprika; cook, stirring constantly, 30 seconds. Add broth and 1/2 cup sherry; increase heat to medium-high and bring to simmer, scraping pan bottom to loosen browned bits. Simmer rapidly until reduced to 3/4 cup, 3 to 5 minutes. Stir in any accumulated chicken juices; return to simmer and cook 30 seconds. Off heat, whisk in peppers, thyme, butter, and remaining teaspoon sherry; season with salt and pepper. Spoon over cutlets and serve immediately.

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RECIPE IN 60 SECONDS

- Pan Sauces

VIDEO TIPS

- How do I know when the sauce has reduced sufficiently?
- Why don't you make pan sauces in a nonstick pan?