

Rao's Lemon Chicken, Our Way

Getting a reservation at this New York institution is nearly impossible, so we decided to re-create its beloved lemony chicken dish at home.

BY ANNIE PETITO

Even if you've never landed a table at Rao's, New York City's legendary Italian restaurant, you may have heard of its famous roast lemon chicken. The dish is a take on *pollo al limone* in which two small chickens are cut in half and cooked under the restaurant's powerful broiler (called a salamander). The deeply bronzed birds are then cut into pieces and bathed in a simple, pungent sauce of lemon juice (a full cup per bird), olive oil, red wine vinegar, garlic, and dried oregano before being briefly broiled again and served with crusty bread for dipping.

With its simple, bold preparation, the dish is undeniably appealing, and the restaurant's recipe (published in its cookbook and on the Internet) is hugely popular. But it's not perfect. When I tried to replicate it, I hit a number of snags. First: The small, quick-cooking birds used at Rao's are not available in most supermarkets, and home broilers are not nearly as powerful or even-heating as restaurant broilers. As a result, the skin on the larger supermarket birds (which has more fat than the skin on the younger birds used at Rao's) browned unevenly and was flabby since it didn't fully render. Then there was the sauce. Pouring it over the chicken made the skin soggy, and marrying the two components at the last minute made the flavor transfer between them superficial. Plus, the sauce was thin—fine as a bread dipper but not viscous enough to cling to the meat—and downright puckery.

The good news was that all of these flaws seemed fixable, so I set my sights on making a more accessible version of the Rao's classic and refining its flavors.

Problematic Elements

My first task: picking the right chicken. As an easy alternative to the small birds, I decided to use bone-in chicken parts; 3 pounds of mixed white and dark meat would roughly approximate the yield of two small chickens and would serve four. The Rao's recipe



▶ **Watch It Come Together**
A step-by-step video is available at CookIllustrated.com/june16



To keep the skin crisp, we pour the lemon gravy around—rather than over—the chicken before serving.

doesn't call for brining or salting the chicken, but we've found that both methods season the meat and help keep it moist. To make this a weeknight-friendly dish, I chose brining, which can be done in 30 minutes (salting bone-in chicken pieces takes at least 6 hours to have an impact). I dried the brined meat's exterior well so as not to inhibit browning.

As for the cooking method, a comparison of conventional home broilers to salamanders explained why the former was yielding such uneven results. Most salamanders comprise multiple closely aligned parallel elements that disperse heat evenly over the surface of the food. With home broilers, the design of the heating element can vary considerably: Some models have a single bar running down the middle of the oven, others a serpentine coil—and neither projects widespread, even heat. Plus, the heat output and the distance you can put between the element and the food vary; I needed to lower the oven rack 10 inches from the element in our test kitchen ovens to ensure that the chicken pieces cooked through before burning, but not every home oven offers that option.

The more foolproof approach would be to sear the chicken on the stovetop and then finish cooking it in the oven in the sauce. Doing so meant I could incorporate the flavorful fond left in the pan after searing the chicken pieces into the sauce, and I could also maximize the flavor transfer between the chicken pieces and the sauce.

After patting the chicken parts dry, I browned them in a 12-inch oversize skillet, transferred them to a plate, and briefly sautéed minced garlic and shallot in the rendered chicken fat. To balance the acidity, I reduced the amount of lemon juice to ¼ cup and skipped the vinegar (we couldn't taste it with all the citrus). To this mixture I added 1 cup of chicken broth—which was just enough liquid to submerge the bottom halves of the chicken pieces while leaving the skin exposed. In essence, I'd be braising the meat—but uncovered so that the exposed skin could crisp in the oven's heat.

In less than 15 minutes, the skin was crisp and the white meat was cooked through; the downside was that I had to remove the breasts from the pan before the legs and thighs, which took longer to cook, were done. As for the sauce, cooking the lemon juice had weakened the fruit's flavor, and the consistency was still too thin.

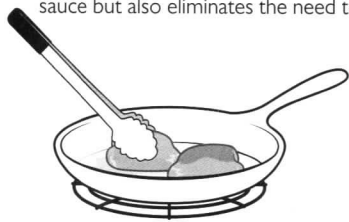
New York's Toughest Table



Unless you're a New York City A-lister, you probably haven't dined at Rao's. The tiny East Harlem institution, famous for its Italian American classics and quirky policies, is like a club for longtime regulars and celebrities, including Al Pacino, Woody Allen, and Robert DeNiro.

Better Results with a Backward Method

Most recipes for roasted chicken with a sauce call for cooking the chicken and then making the sauce. But here we quickly brown the chicken and then braise the meat in the sauce, which not only melds the flavors of the meat and sauce but also eliminates the need to tent the chicken and compromise its crackly skin while making the sauce.



BROWN THE CHICKEN TO BUILD FLAVOR

After searing the chicken to develop the flavorful brown bits called fond (and crisp the skin), we sauté minced shallot and garlic in butter.



ADD THE AROMATICS, FLOUR, AND LIQUID

We use a generous amount of flour to thicken the braising liquid (lemon juice and chicken broth)—no need to reduce it once the meat is done.



WHISK IN THE HERBS AND REMAINING FOND

Just before serving, we whisk the sauce to incorporate the herb mixture and any fond that has built up around the skillet during braising.

Through Thick and Thin

The easiest way to synchronize the doneness of the white and dark meats in the oven was to extend the cooking time of the dark meat on the stovetop, browning it on both sides rather than just the skin side so that it went into the oven at a higher temperature than the white meat. Problem solved.

Since I was cooking the lemon juice, I knew that adding more of it to the sauce would only increase the acidity, not the flavor. Added at the end of cooking, it made the sauce sour. But the aromatic compounds in lemon zest are more stable and retain more fruity lemony flavor when heated. After trying various amounts of zest, I settled on introducing 1 tablespoon right before I added the chicken for the bright, citrusy boost I was after. (For more information, see “The Chemistry of Cooked Lemon Flavor.”)

As for thickening the sauce, I first tried the most conventional tactic—removing the cooked chicken from the liquid and tenting it with foil to keep it warm, whisking some cornstarch into the sauce, and

briefly simmering it. It worked, but at the expense of the chicken’s skin, which steamed under the foil and lost its crispiness. But what if I thickened the sauce at the beginning instead by adding flour, which is more heat-stable than cornstarch, to the aromatics? The tricky part was that as the chicken cooked, it shed juices that thinned the sauce, so it took a few tests before I determined that 4 teaspoons of flour made for full-bodied, lemony gravy. I also swapped in butter for the chicken fat because I found that the rendered fat varied from batch to batch. Two tablespoons of butter gave me a perfectly rich sauce. After transferring the chicken to a serving platter, I gave the mixture a whisk to smooth it out and scrape the flavorful fond from the sides of the pan back into the sauce.

A combination of chopped oregano, parsley, and more lemon zest—stirred into the sauce and sprinkled over top—added fruity brightness that complemented the crisp skin; moist, flavorful meat; and silky, lemony sauce. This wasn’t exactly Rao’s chicken, but in the spirit of New York, I could say I did it my way.

SKILLET-ROASTED CHICKEN IN LEMON SAUCE

SERVES 4

We serve our version of Rao’s chicken with crusty bread, but it can also be served with rice, potatoes, or egg noodles. To ensure crisp skin, dry the chicken well after brining and pour the sauce around, not on, the chicken right before serving.

- ½ cup salt
- 3 pounds bone-in chicken pieces (2 split breasts cut in half crosswise, 2 drumsticks, and 2 thighs), trimmed
- 1 teaspoon vegetable oil
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 large shallot, minced
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 4 teaspoons all-purpose flour
- 1 cup chicken broth
- 4 teaspoons grated lemon zest plus ¼ cup juice (2 lemons)
- 1 tablespoon fresh parsley leaves
- 1 teaspoon fresh oregano leaves

1. Dissolve salt in 2 quarts cold water in large container. Submerge chicken in brine, cover, and refrigerate for 30 minutes to 1 hour. Remove chicken from brine and pat dry with paper towels.

2. Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 475 degrees. Heat oil in oven-safe 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Place chicken skin side down in skillet and cook until skin is well browned and crisp, 8 to 10 minutes. Transfer breasts to large plate. Flip thighs and legs and continue to cook until browned on second side, 3 to 5 minutes longer. Transfer thighs and legs to plate with breasts.

3. Pour off and discard fat in skillet. Return skillet to medium heat; add butter, shallot, and garlic and cook until fragrant, 30 seconds. Sprinkle flour evenly over shallot-garlic mixture and cook, stirring constantly, until flour is lightly browned, about 1 minute. Slowly stir in broth and lemon juice, scraping up any browned bits, and bring to simmer. Cook until sauce is slightly reduced and thickened, 2 to 3 minutes. Stir in 1 tablespoon zest and remove skillet from heat. Return chicken, skin side up (skin should be above surface of liquid), and any accumulated juices to skillet and transfer to oven. Cook, uncovered, until breasts register 160 degrees and thighs and legs register 175 degrees, 10 to 12 minutes.

4. While chicken cooks, chop parsley, oregano, and remaining 1 teaspoon zest together until finely minced and well combined. Remove skillet from oven and let chicken stand for 5 minutes.

5. Transfer chicken to serving platter. Whisk sauce, incorporating any browned bits from sides of pan, until smooth and homogeneous, about 30 seconds. Whisk half of herb-zest mixture into sauce and sprinkle remaining half over chicken. Pour some sauce around chicken. Serve, passing remaining sauce separately.

SCIENCE The Chemistry of Cooked Lemon Flavor

Virtually all of the lemon flavor we perceive is due to volatile aroma compounds that enter our noses as we chew and swallow food—a phenomenon called retronasal smell. In fact, the only flavors we actually perceive from our tastebuds are sour and bitter compounds. Both lemon juice and zest contain volatile aroma compounds (limonene in juice; neral, geranial, and linalool in zest), but because the compounds in each behave very differently when exposed to heat, we use a combination of juice and zest in our lemon sauce to achieve a balance of fruitiness and acidity.

most fruity
aroma compounds
evaporate

acidity is
unaffected

COOKED
JUICE

JUICE KEEPS ITS ACIDITY

The aroma compounds in lemon juice, which are suspended in water, are highly volatile and readily evaporate when heated. But its acidic compounds are unaffected by heat, so juice added during cooking will contribute bright tanginess but little fruity flavor.

ZEST KEEPS ITS FRUITINESS

The aroma compounds in zest are less volatile than those in juice when exposed to heat because they are trapped in oil glands within the peel’s cell walls. Zest added during cooking will thus lend noticeable lemony taste to food; we add more at the end of cooking for a final hit of fruity flavor.

few fruity
aroma compounds
evaporate

fruity flavor stays
largely intact

COOKED
ZEST