

# Quick Chicken Fricassee

This classic French dish of poached chicken in cream sauce would have a lot going for it, if we could streamline the recipe and punch up the flavors.

≧ BY ANDREA GEARY ≦

There's a reason legendary chefs from Auguste Escoffier to Fannie Farmer to Julia Child and James Beard published recipes for chicken fricassee: Made the classic French way by poaching chicken pieces, mushrooms, and pearl onions in stock and saucing them with a cream-enriched reduction of the cooking liquid, the dish captures both richness and clean chicken flavor all on one platter. There's also a reason the dish has fallen out of favor: It's a bit bland for modern tastes, and many versions feel fussy and time-consuming. This is especially true in recipes that brown the chicken before poaching—a crucial contemporary update that ensures deep, savory flavor in today's lean, bland, mass-produced birds.

Still, I was intrigued by this old-fashioned dish with luxe texture and straightforward chicken flavor, and I had ideas for a few refinements—namely, a streamlined technique that would give the dish week-night potential, and a brighter, more complex sauce.

First up: The thick bone-in chicken parts would have to go. They took up too much room to brown in a single batch and required nearly 30 minutes of poaching. Instead, I decided to try the busy cook's favorite timesaver: boneless, skinless breasts and thighs. These thinner pieces of meat not only fit nicely into my 12-inch skillet, but they were mostly cooked through after the initial sear.

That was the good news. The bad news was that doing without skin and bones meant losing the chicken's two primary sources of flavor. Browning the meat in a combination of butter and oil added back some richness. But predictably, sautéing the skinless meat left very few browned bits (called *fond*) in the pan for creating a flavorful sauce.

In the past we've built up savory flavor by thoroughly browning vegetables until they develop their own *fond*. I took the same tack here, but made two key changes to the traditional fricassee components: First, I swapped the pearl onions for a regular chopped onion, which would provide more surface area for browning and caramelization. Second, because mushrooms are an excellent source of glutamates—compounds that significantly boost meaty *umami* flavor in food—I upped their amount from 12 ounces to a full pound.



A holdover technique from traditional fricassee—an egg yolk "liaison"—makes the sauce exceptionally silky.

Sure enough, sautéing these ingredients for eight to 10 minutes with a splash of white wine coated the pan with a layer of dark, browned bits. Just before deglazing with chicken broth, I stirred in a little minced garlic as well as a tablespoon of flour to help gently thicken the sauce. Finally, I slid the chicken back into the skillet to finish cooking. Within 10 minutes, the breast meat was up to temperature and the poaching liquid had reduced to savory gravy.

The final step was to finish the sauce with dairy. My tasters found that the traditional choice of heavy cream muted the flavors I had so carefully built up, while half-and-half left the sauce thin. Sour cream was the best choice, adding body and pleasant tang. To create a satiny smooth consistency, I decided to try a technique popular in many early fricassee recipes: whisking an egg yolk into the sauce. Yolks contain the powerful emulsifier lecithin, and I was guessing it would have the same impact on my gravy as it does in mayonnaise—keeping fat (in this case from the sour cream) suspended in water. I whisked a single yolk into the sour cream before incorporating the mixture into the thickened broth, and was pleased to find that it turned the sauce incredibly silky. All that was left was to add a squirt of lemon juice, grated nutmeg, and minced tarragon to lend a little more complexity.

Earlier generations might not consider my streamlined approach a true "fricassee," but they couldn't take issue with this quick dish's deep, rich chicken flavor and smooth, creamy sauce.

## QUICK CHICKEN FRICASSEE

SERVES 4 TO 6

**NOTE:** Two tablespoons of chopped fresh parsley leaves may be substituted for the tarragon in this recipe.

- 2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken breasts, thighs, or a combination
- Table salt and ground black pepper
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 pound cremini mushrooms, stems trimmed, caps wiped clean and cut into ¼-inch slices
- 1 medium onion, chopped fine (about 1 cup)
- ¼ cup dry white wine
- 1 tablespoon unbleached all-purpose flour
- 1 medium garlic clove, minced or pressed through garlic press (about 1 teaspoon)
- 1½ cups low-sodium chicken broth
- ⅓ cup sour cream
- 1 egg yolk
- ½ teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
- 2 teaspoons juice from 1 lemon
- 2 teaspoons minced fresh tarragon (see note)

1. Pat chicken dry with paper towels and season with 1 teaspoon salt and ½ teaspoon pepper. Heat butter and oil in 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat. When foaming subsides, place chicken in skillet and cook until browned, about 4 minutes. Flip chicken and continue to cook until browned on second side, about 4 minutes longer. Transfer chicken to large plate.

2. Add mushrooms, onion, and wine to now-empty skillet and cook, stirring occasionally, until liquid has evaporated and mushrooms are browned, 8 to 10 minutes. Add flour and garlic; cook, stirring constantly, 1 minute. Add broth and bring mixture to boil, scraping bottom of pan with wooden spoon to loosen browned bits. Add chicken and any accumulated juices to skillet. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover, and simmer until instant-read thermometer registers 160 degrees when inserted in breasts and 175 degrees when inserted in thighs, 5 to 10 minutes.

3. Transfer chicken to clean platter and tent loosely with foil. Whisk sour cream and egg yolk together in medium bowl. Whisking constantly, slowly stir ½ cup sauce into sour cream mixture. Stirring constantly, slowly pour sour cream mixture into simmering sauce. Stir in nutmeg, lemon juice, and tarragon; return to simmer. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Pour sauce over chicken and serve.

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