

Spanish Braised Chicken

The rich flavor and lush consistency of this classic dish from Spain's Castilla–La Mancha region depend on a sherry-based sauce thickened with ground almonds and egg yolks.

≧ BY ADAM RIED ≦

At a Spanish restaurant not long ago, a chicken dish called *pollo en pepitoria* caught my attention. The meat, which had been braised until it was incredibly tender, arrived covered in a creamy, fragrant, subtly coarse sauce that featured three of the cuisine's star ingredients: sherry, saffron, and almonds. Scattered over the chicken were chopped egg whites and fresh parsley. The flavors and lush consistency were so appealing that I sopped up the extra sauce on the plate with pieces of crusty bread. I then hurried home to find recipes so that I could make the dish myself.

I quickly learned that the dish, which some sources note is a great specialty of the saffron-producing Castilla–La Mancha region of Spain, gets its creamy-but-not-quite-smooth consistency from a *picada*. This nut-based paste seasoned with garlic and herbs or spices is commonly used in Spanish cuisine to thicken soups, stews, and sauces. Interestingly, the *picada* for *pollo en pepitoria* is made even more rich by mashing hard-cooked egg yolks with the nuts. That explained the chopped egg white garnish.

But as stunning as this dish was in the restaurant, the versions I tried were not. Every one had richness in spades, but the creamy sauce usually came off as cloying and even a bit one-dimensional. With some work, though, I was sure I could produce a luxurious, complex-flavored sauce that was as rich and satisfying as it was balanced.

The Bright Side

Most Spanish cookbook authors note that the dish is traditionally made with a whole chicken (in



Tomatoes and lemon juice balance the richness of the almonds and hard-cooked egg yolks in our sauce. We garnish the dish with chopped egg white.

those cases, it's called *gallina en pepitoria*), but plenty of modern recipes call for chicken parts—particularly thighs. The dark meat is especially nice for braising because it contains abundant connective tissue, which melts into gelatin as the chicken cooks, leaving the meat nicely tender. In fact, when we braise chicken thighs in the test kitchen, we maximize that texture by cooking them slowly and not just until they hit their target

doneness temperature of 175 degrees, but well beyond that to 195 degrees; at that point, they're not just tender but downright silky. (For more information, see "Overcook Your Chicken Thighs—and Do It Slowly.")

The cooking method starts as does any classic braise: with browning the meat. I chose skin-on thighs, since the rendered fat from the skin would contribute big savory flavor to the dish. I would remove and discard the skin before serving since a long simmer makes chicken skin soggy.

From there, I softened a chopped onion with a couple of minced garlic cloves and salt in the rendered fat and saw to the sherry. We avoid "cooking sherry," which contains salt and preservatives that distract from the wine's nutty flavor. Sweet sheries, such as Pedro Ximénez, and cream sheries would also taste cloying in a savory braise. Instead, I reached for a dry, light-bodied variety called fino that's equally widely available. I poured a generous $\frac{2}{3}$ cup into the pan, scraped up the flavorful browned bits known as fond, added chicken broth and brought the pot up to a simmer, and placed the parcooked thighs in the liquid. I simmered the thighs with the lid on for the better part of an hour, by which point the meat just barely clung to the bone.

Then came the *picada*, which is made like a pesto: Nuts—almonds are most traditional—get blitzed in the blender with more garlic, a pair of hard-cooked egg yolks, and a pinch of saffron (a little goes a long way) until the mixture is as smooth as possible. After stirring the thick paste into the pan, you simmer everything for another few minutes to meld the flavors and thicken it further.

Picada: A Nutty Thickener

Unlike stews, sauces, and stir-fries that are thickened with starches or dairy, many Spanish stews and braises get their rich, hearty body from a pesto-like nut-based thickener called a *picada*. The basic formula, which many sources claim dates back to at least the 13th or 14th century, includes finely ground almonds or hazelnuts (*picar* means "to chop") and seasonings like garlic, herbs, and spices. But many versions also contain toasted or fried bread or even hard-cooked egg yolks, as in the recipe here. The ingredients are traditionally pounded to a thick paste with a mortar and pestle (we use a blender for speed) and stirred into the pot toward the end of cooking so that it can lend body, richness, and flavor to the cooking liquid.

Almonds processed with garlic, saffron, and hard-cooked egg yolks add body and flavor to the braise.





COOKING ONLY

SHOPPING Sherry

What's What?

Sherry, a wine fortified with brandy, can be confusing to buy because it comes in a wide range of styles such as dry, sweet, cream, and "cooking." But for savory cooking purposes, stick with the dry kind. Sweet and cream sherries will taste overwhelmingly sweet when reduced in sauces, and cooking sherry, which has been treated with salt and preservatives to make it shelf-stable, can render a dish too salty.

Which Can I Use?

Dry sherries come in a variety of sub-classifications that represent degrees of aging and fortification—from drier, lighter-bodied, and less expensive fino to nuttier, heavier, and pricier oloroso. We've found that it's fine to cook with an inexpensive fino, such as Taylor Dry Sherry (\$5.99 for 750 milliliters), but if you want a bottle that's as good to drink as it is to cook with, consider Lustau Palo Cortado Peninsula Sherry (\$19.99 for 750 milliliters). —A.R.



COOKING AND DRINKING

To brighten the rich almond-egg sauce, I finished it with a spritz of fresh lemon juice, which turned out to be a good move, albeit too subtle. I couldn't add much more lemon juice before the sauce would turn distinctly citrusy, but tomatoes also contain acid and were worth trying. Unlike in Italian sauces, where they're often the focal point, tomatoes are sometimes introduced in Spanish sauces to complement other flavors. Going forward, I experimented with chopped and grated fresh and canned whole tomatoes. I found that a small can of whole peeled tomatoes, drained and chopped fine, offered the necessary brightness along with nice savory sweetness. While I was making flavor tweaks, I also added a bay leaf and a dash of cinnamon—elements I'd seen in a handful of published recipes—when I sautéed the garlic, which made the sauce just a bit more fragrant.

The Grind

The sauce was just about there, but I had two quibbles with the almonds. Most recipes I found didn't call for toasting them, so I hadn't up until now, but not surprisingly this quick step noticeably deepened their flavor and, thus, the flavor of the sauce. The bigger issue was their texture; pepitoria is meant to have a rustic, slightly coarse consistency, but here the picada was too gritty to integrate well in the braising liquid. I tried simply buzzing the ingredients for longer in the blender, but even after 3 full minutes, they didn't break down sufficiently. I also tried replacing the nuts themselves with almond butter—an admittedly odd move that unfortunately did away with the sauce's pleasantly coarse texture.

I finally realized that the way to make a smoother picada was to treat it like soup and blend it with some of the braising liquid. The liquid not only saturated and smoothed out the dry nut mixture but also increased the volume of food in the blender jar, making it easier for the ingredients to engage the blade and process the picada more thoroughly. The resulting sauce was thick, creamy, and just shy of smooth—ideal for coating the moist chicken or swiping up with a piece of good crusty bread.

SPANISH BRAISED CHICKEN WITH SHERRY AND SAFFRON (POLLO EN PEPITORIA)

SERVES 4

Any dry sherry, such as fino or Manzanilla, will work in this dish. Serve with crusty bread.

- 8 (5- to 7-ounce) bone-in chicken thighs, trimmed
- Salt and pepper
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 bay leaf
- ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¾ cup dry sherry
- 1 cup chicken broth
- 1 (14.5-ounce) can whole peeled tomatoes, drained and chopped fine
- 2 hard-cooked large eggs, peeled and yolks and whites separated
- ½ cup slivered blanched almonds, toasted
- Pinch saffron threads, crumbled
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
- 1½ teaspoons lemon juice

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 300 degrees.

2. Pat thighs dry with paper towels and season both sides of each with 1 teaspoon salt and ½ teaspoon pepper. Heat oil in 12-inch skillet over high heat until just smoking. Add thighs and brown on both sides, 10 to 12 minutes. Transfer thighs to large plate and pour off all but 2 teaspoons fat from skillet.

3. Return skillet to medium heat, add onion and ¼ teaspoon salt, and cook, stirring frequently, until just softened, about 3 minutes. Add 2 teaspoons garlic, bay leaf, and cinnamon and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add sherry and cook, scraping up any browned bits, until sherry starts to thicken, about 2 minutes. Stir in broth and tomatoes and bring to simmer. Return thighs to skillet, cover, transfer to oven, and cook until chicken registers 195 degrees, 45 to 50 minutes. Transfer thighs to serving platter, remove and discard skin, and cover

SCIENCE

Overcook Your Chicken Thighs—and Do It Slowly

Unlike white meat, which dries out and toughens when overcooked, dark meat actually benefits from being cooked well beyond its doneness temperature (175 degrees). That's because dark meat contains twice as much collagen as white meat, and the longer the meat cooks, the more that collagen breaks down into gelatin, which coats the meat's protein fibers and makes it more moist and tender. (Dark meat also contains roughly twice as much fat, which coats the meat's proteins, and has a higher pH, which helps it retain moisture more effectively.) But it's also important to cook thighs low and slow so that they spend as much time as possible between 140 and 195 degrees—the temperature range in which collagen breaks down.

We proved the point by cooking two batches of chicken thighs to 195 degrees, one on the stovetop and one in a slower, gentler 300-degree oven. Whereas the stovetop-cooked thighs reached 195 degrees in about 25 minutes and were just moderately tender, the oven-cooked thighs lingered in that zone for nearly twice as long and were much more tender and pleasant to eat.



FORK-TENDER

For ultratender results, we slowly cook the chicken in the oven until it reaches 195 degrees.

loosely with aluminum foil to keep warm. While thighs cook, finely chop egg whites.

4. Discard bay leaf. Transfer ¾ cup chicken cooking liquid, egg yolks, almonds, saffron, and remaining garlic to blender jar. Process until smooth, about 2 minutes, scraping down jar as needed. Return almond mixture to skillet. Add 1 tablespoon parsley and lemon juice; bring to simmer over medium heat. Simmer, whisking frequently, until thickened, 3 to 5 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

5. Pour sauce over chicken, sprinkle with remaining 1 tablespoon parsley and egg whites, and serve.

Watch Every Step

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