

ROAST CHICKEN

One of the world's greatest dishes is also one of the easiest to prepare—and that is a simple roast chicken. You can buy already roasted chicken in the supermarket deli section, and while they're not bad, nothing beats a home-roasted bird. And it's really not hard.

You'll need a 3 ½ pound chicken, more or less. The weight doesn't have to be exact, but try to keep it under 4 pounds. You'll also need a frying pan that can go in the oven, like a cast-iron skillet. And you'll need a pair of tongs and a couple of pot holders.

To start with, put the rack in the middle of your oven and preheat it to 425 degrees. Remove the giblets from your chicken and save them for another day, or give them to the dog. Wash the chicken and dry it with paper towels. I also like to cut off the wing tips, pull out and discard as much of the pads of fat that I can, and trim off the tail end. Season the chicken inside and out with about ¼ teaspoon of salt and about the same amount of freshly ground black pepper.

When your oven has preheated, heat the frying pan on the stove over medium-high heat, and add just a teaspoon of cooking oil. Swirl the pan to spread the oil around, put the chicken in the pan on its side, and brown the chicken for about 2 ½ minutes. Then, with the tongs, turn the chicken over to the other side and brown that side for about 2 ½ minutes.

Then, leaving the chicken still on his side, put the skillet in preheated 425 degree oven, and cook for 20 minutes. Take the pan out—carefully—and with the tongs, turn the chicken onto the other side, and return the pan to the oven and roast for another 20 minutes. Then, take the pan out again, and this time turn the chicken onto its back, and roast for another 10 minutes, until the top is nice and brown. Take the pan out of the oven and put it on the stove and go ahead and turn off the oven.

Take the chicken out of the pan, put it on a plate, cover it with tin foil, and let it sit for about 15 minutes while you finish dinner. Pour the drippings out of the frying pan into a little bowl, and let them sit for a few minutes for the fat to rise to the top.

While the drippings are cooling, add 3 or 4 tablespoons of water to the hot pan and stir with a spatula to loosen up and dissolve the browned bits stuck to the bottom of the pan. Then, when the fat in the drippings has risen to the top, carefully skim off as much of the fat as you reasonably can, and then add the contents of the bowl back to the frying pan and keep stirring to make sure you've thoroughly deglazed the pan. That's your sauce.

To serve, cut the wings, including the drumettes, off the chicken. Then cut the thighs and legs off the chicken and separate. Then you can carve the white meat off the chicken. Spoon some of the sauce from the pan over each portion. This serves 3 to 4. For a variation, sometimes I'll sprinkle some Cajun seasoning over the chicken before starting to cook it, and I'll use some roasted garlic-flavored oil when I first brown the chicken in the skillet.

You can make an elegant dinner by serving this with some of the asparagus that's in the supermarkets right now. Buy a bunch of thin-stalked asparagus, trim the stems off, and cut the asparagus in about 2-inch lengths. Heat a frying pan over medium-high heat and add a couple of tablespoons of olive oil. Add the asparagus and sauté, adding a pinch or two of salt and a couple of grounds of pepper. Stirring often, sauté the asparagus until cooked and some of the pieces are lightly browned, about 5 minutes or so. Then sprinkle a little grated Parmesan cheese over the asparagus, stir and serve.

I also like to serve the chicken with nothing more than a large tossed salad, with some cucumbers and tomatoes. I'll make a basic vinaigrette, flavored with a little Dijon mustard and red wine vinegar, and add about a teaspoonful of the chicken sauce into the salad dressing, and sprinkle some croutons over the salad just as I serve it.

Your favorite white wine is the perfect accompaniment to this dinner, and some fresh seasonal pears with some Bavarian blue cheese from Andrae's Bakery in Amador City make a delicious dessert. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.