

CHICKEN

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The simplicity and purity of the chicken is only emphasized and enhanced by the sauce.

In delicious contrast is the Japanese way of frying chicken, called karaage. This chicken is cut into thin strips and marinated briefly in a highly seasoned mixture of soy sauce, sake, ginger and garlic.

Thus imbued with the essential flavors of Japan, the strips are then dredged through corn starch for extra crispiness when fried.

How good is it? The first time I made karaage, a videographer and I finished the entire batch in maybe two minutes. And we wanted more. If these five recipes are my favorite ways for cooking chicken, then karaage may be my favorite favorite.

Which is not to discount my next chicken dish, which comes from one of the most famous Italian restaurants in America, Rao's in New York City. It is literally impossible to get a reservation at this small, 125-year-old Harlem establishment; the tables have been assigned to regulars for decades. When one of the regulars dies, his heirs inherit the table.

The most popular dish at Rao's is the lemon chicken, and with the recipe published in their cookbook, it is easy to see why. I have served it to guests on numerous special occasions.

The recipe calls for garlic and oregano, but what makes it truly stand out is a large amount of olive oil and an even larger amount of fresh-squeezed lemon juice. Your arm may get tired from all the squeezing, but you know the saying: When life hands you lemons, make Rao's Famous Lemon Chicken.

Chicken and lemon always go well together and, as it turns out, so do chicken and an awful lot of lemon. The other secret to this iconic dish is that it is partially broiled, which sets down a base of earthy undertones that makes the contrasting brightness of the lemon soar even more.

Roast chicken with herbed butter and croutons was next. I know a chef who judges restaurants on the quality of their roast chickens. It is easy to do, he says, but difficult to do right.

Maybe he doesn't know how to make roast chicken with herbed butter and croutons.

Most of the herbed butter goes between the skin and flesh of the chicken, which makes the most satisfying, buttery chicken ever, and also crisps the skin. The rest of the herbed butter goes into the savory croutons, which become rich and flavorful.

The croutons are stuffed into the chicken's cavity before roasting, like a Thanksgiving turkey, so they can absorb the juice of the chicken as it cooks.

My final favorite way to make chicken is specifically a recipe for wings. That is, I once made a recipe for the whole chicken that was enjoyable enough — but the wings were amazing. So now I use the recipe for wings only.

It is a simple application of flavors that go well together. Maple syrup goes with bourbon, and bourbon goes with chicken. And because sweet foods often benefit from a little heat, I throw in some crushed red pepper just to awaken the flavors even more.

Buffalo wings have their place, but to my taste buds,



Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

Karaage (Japanese fried chicken).

maple syrup, bourbon and a little heat are the ultimate expression of chicken wings.

And it's never, ever bland.

CRISPY-SKIN CHICKEN WITH PAN SAUCE

Yield: 2 servings

4 small chicken thighs or 2 large thighs
Salt and pepper
1/2 cup dry white wine, see note
1/2 cup chicken broth, see note
3 sprigs basil, thyme or tarragon, or 2 sprigs rosemary
1/2 tablespoon butter

Note: If you don't want to use wine, use 1 cup chicken broth.

1. With a sharp knife, cut fairly deeply along both sides of the bone on the back of the thighs. Season chicken with salt and pepper and place skin-side down on an unheated skillet.

2. Place skillet on stove and turn heat to medium-high. Cook a few minutes until you see rendered fat emerge from under the meat. Cover and cook until meat is done, 20 to 30 more minutes, depending on the size of the thighs (cut into meat to check; it is done when meat at thickest point is no longer pink).

3. Remove chicken and keep warm. Pour out fat from skillet. Place skillet back over high heat and add wine, if using, broth and herbs. With a wooden spoon, stir up all the brown bits on the bottom. Simmer until liquid is reduced by half or more. Remove pan from heat, add butter, and swirl butter around until it is melted and incorporated into sauce.

4. When serving, place chicken on plate and spoon sauce around it, to keep the skin crispy.

Per serving: 365 calories; 28 g fat; 9 g saturated fat; 155 mg cholesterol; 25 g protein; 1 g carbohydrate; 1 g sugar; no fiber; 1,532 mg sodium; 15 mg calcium

— Crispy-skin method by Jacques Pepin; pan sauce recipe by Daniel Neman

KARAAGE

Yield: 4 to 6 servings

3 tablespoons soy sauce
2 tablespoons sake
1 tablespoon grated

fresh ginger
2 garlic cloves, minced
3/4 teaspoon granulated sugar
1/8 teaspoon table salt
1 1/2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs, trimmed and cut crosswise into 1- to 1 1/2-inch strips, see notes
1 1/4 cups cornstarch
1 quart peanut or vegetable oil, for frying
Lemon wedges

Note: Do not use chicken breasts, which will dry out during the frying.

1. Combine soy sauce, sake, ginger, garlic, sugar and salt in medium bowl. Add chicken and toss to combine. Let sit at room temperature for 30 minutes. While chicken is marinating, line a rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper. Set wire rack in second rimmed baking sheet and line rack with triple layer of paper towels. Place cornstarch in wide bowl.

2. Lift chicken from marinade, 1 piece at a time, allowing excess marinade to drip back into bowl but leaving any garlic or ginger bits on chicken. Coat chicken with cornstarch, shake off excess and place on parchment-lined sheet. Reserve marinade.

3. Add oil to large Dutch oven until it measures about 3/4 inch deep and heat over medium-high heat to 375 degrees. While oil heats, check chicken pieces for white patches of dry cornstarch. Dip back of spoon in reserved marinade and gently press onto dry spots to lightly moisten.

4. Using tongs, add half of chicken, 1 piece at a time, to oil in single layer. Cook, adjusting burner if necessary, to maintain oil temperature between 300 and 325 degrees, until chicken is golden brown and crispy, 4 to 5 minutes. Using spider skimmer or slotted spoon, transfer chicken to paper towel-lined rack. Return oil to 325 degrees and repeat with remaining chicken. Serve with lemon wedges (the lemon adds an important flavor note).

5. For even better results, fry a second time at least 1 or 2 hours, and as long as 24 hours, after frying the first time. Keep refrigerated before frying a second time.

Per serving (based on 6): 423 calories; 23 g fat; 4 g saturated fat; 107 mg cholesterol; 23 g protein; 27 g carbohydrate; 1 g sugar; no fiber; 375 mg sodium; 12 mg calcium

— Adapted from "The Chicken Bible" by America's Test Kitchen



Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

Maple-Bourbon Chicken Wings.



Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

Roast Chicken with Herbed Butter and Croutons.

MAPLE-BOURBON CHICKEN WINGS

Yield: 4 to 6 servings

2/3 cup maple syrup
2/3 cup bourbon
1/4 cup dark brown sugar, firmly packed
1/2 teaspoon crushed red pepper or cayenne pepper, or to taste, optional
3 pounds chicken wings

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

2. In a small saucepan, mix together maple syrup, bourbon, brown sugar and pepper, if using. Bring to a boil, reduce the heat and simmer until it reaches the thickness of a syrup. You will have about 1 cup of liquid. Allow to cool and thicken.

3. Season wings with salt and pepper. Spread on a baking sheet in a single layer. Roast for 20 minutes. Flip and roast 15 more minutes. Place wings in a bowl and toss with maple-bourbon mixture.

4. Spread coated wings back on baking sheet and cook until

done (internal temperature of 165 degrees), 10 to 20 minutes, depending on size of wings. If wings start to get too dark, cover with a sheet of aluminum foil.

Per serving (based on 6): 415 calories; 8 g fat; 2 g saturated fat; 129 mg cholesterol; 50 g protein; 30 g carbohydrate; 29 g sugar; no fiber; 188 mg sodium; 65 mg calcium

— Adapted from "Salt Sugar Smoke" by Diana Henry

ROAST CHICKEN WITH HERBED BUTTER AND CROUTONS

Yield: 4 servings

4 tablespoons (1/2 stick) butter, slightly softened
1/2 cup chopped fresh herbs, such as flat-leaf parsley, chives, chervil, basil or cilantro
1 teaspoon table salt

or fine sea salt
1/2 teaspoon dried garlic flakes
1 whole small chicken, about 3 1/2 pounds
1 2/3 cups cubed day-old bread

Note: The chicken can be buttered and stuffed up to a day in advance, wrapped in plastic wrap and refrigerated.

1. Preheat oven to 450 degrees.

2. In a medium bowl, mash together the butter, herbs, salt and garlic flakes.

3. Put the chicken breast-side up, neck end facing you, on a clean work surface. Slip a clean hand under the skin, starting at the base of the neck, and work your hand further in gently, lifting the skin over each breast and down over each thigh, without tearing. Once the skin is loosened, slip in two-thirds of the herbed butter (reserve the rest for the croutons), pushing it under the skin to coat the breasts and thighs evenly.

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