

The ultimate comfort food: Chicken and dumplings

By Daniel Neman
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

When people ask me “Why are you so weird?” I always look them square in the eye and say, “It is because I was raised without chicken and dumplings.”

My mother is a wonderful cook and a woman of many accomplishments, and I’m not just saying that because she reads my columns. But for reasons unknown to me, she did not, during my childhood, make chicken and dumplings.

So I did not come to appreciate the dish until adulthood, or at least late teenhood. For everyone else, it was the ultimate comfort food. But for me it was almost a novelty.

After I had it a few times, I thought, “Hey, this is the ultimate comfort food.”

But what about the dish makes it the culinary equivalent of a big hug? Why is it a meal that loves us as much as we love it?

It is soothing, is what it is. It’s warm and filling, with just enough carbohydrates to make us happy. That’s basically the working definition of comfort food.

I knew I was destined to make it for myself, but there was one important decision to make first: Southern dumplings or northern?

Southern dumplings are made with shortening and are simmered in the broth. Northern dumplings — they



Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS
Chicken and dumplings

aren’t necessarily from the north, but they aren’t southern dumplings so I am calling them northern — are made with butter and are steamed on the top of the pot.

I decided to go with the northern dumplings for two reasons. First, I wanted to make as iconic a version of chicken and dumplings as I possibly could, and I thought that nothing is more thoroughly American than chicken and dumplings made from a recipe in “The Fannie Farmer Cookbook,” one of the most influential American cookbooks ever.

If the northern version is good enough for Fannie Farmer, it’s good enough for me.

Also, there is the second reason, which is that I like the northern version better.

Nothing could be easier than making the chicken

part of chicken and dumplings. It is a very simple, very basic recipe for chicken soup. You simmer pieces of chicken in water with mirepoix (carrots, celery and onion), seasoned with a bit of thyme and rosemary.

That’s as far as Fannie Farmer went (or at least Marion Cunningham, who took over the editing duties so long ago that she has been dead for six years). The broth part is just a thin soup. But I like my chicken and dumplings to have a little fortitude to it — some grit, some backbone, some spirit. So I thickened it with a little cornstarch mixed with cold water. Fortitude comes cheap.

Of course, the dumplings are the star of the dish. These are worthy of the hype; these dumplings are practically divas.

They are called feather dumplings, presumably because that is how light they are. Real dumpling aficionados — those who grew up eating chicken and dumplings — know the difference between dumplings that are dropped and those that are rolled. These are dropped by the spoonful into the simmering water, not rolled out into shapes first.

CHICKEN WITH DUMPLINGS

Yield: 6 servings

For the chicken and broth

1 (4- to 5-pound) chicken, in 8 pieces

2 carrots, sliced thin

2 ribs celery, sliced thin

1 large onion, chopped

1½ teaspoons dried thyme

½ teaspoon dried rosemary

2 teaspoons salt

½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

2 tablespoons comstarch, optional

For the feather dumplings

1 cup all-purpose flour

½ cup bread crumbs

2 teaspoons baking powder

¾ teaspoon salt

1 egg, well beaten

2 tablespoons butter, melted

¼ cup finely chopped onion

1/3 cup milk

1 tablespoon finely minced parsley

Freshly ground pepper, to taste

1. Place the chicken pieces in a large pot with a lid, and cover with water. Add the carrots, celery, onion, thyme, rosemary, salt and pepper. Bring to a boil and reduce to a simmer. Cook for 20 minutes. This will make a thin broth; if you want the dish to have the consistency of gravy, mix together the cornstarch with 2 tablespoons cold water, and add to the pot. Boil 1 to 2 minutes, until thickened.

2. If you want, remove the chicken pieces after 20 minutes and shred or cut the meat off the bone. Return the meat to the pot and continue to step 3.

3. While the chicken cooks, combine the flour, bread crumbs, baking powder and salt in a mixing bowl, and stir to mix. In another bowl, lightly beat together the egg, melted butter, onion and milk. Stir in the dry ingredients to make a stiff batter. Stir in the parsley and pepper.

4. When the chicken has simmered for 20 minutes, drop spoonfuls of dough on top of the bubbling broth. Cover and steam for 20 minutes without lifting the cover. Per serving: 232 calories; 8 g

fat; 4 g saturated fat; 61 mg cholesterol; 9 g protein; 30 g carbohydrate; 5 g sugar; 3 g fiber; 1,177 mg sodium; 147 mg calcium

— Adapted from “The Fannie Farmer Cookbook,” by Marion Cunningham

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DORY

Continued from Page 1B

Certainly I could enjoy or frown at those belonging to everyone else, and so I did — from admiring horses in a field down the street and enjoying the parade of every variety of dogs on leashes out for their daily walks to finding my tolerance growing thin over barking dogs throughout the neighborhood. So I haven't been without these things beyond arm's length.

There is a stray cat that enjoys the sun rays of my yard or the shade under the bushes. We eye each other from a distance in peaceful coexistence but I never try to make a pet of it, feed or water it, or look for any reason to take it to a vet. As I said, we just coexist.

I enjoy the sight of the birds

who fly to and from my neighbor's feeders but I didn't even feed the squirrels or the pretty feathered things — that is, until this one day.

It was the afternoon before a thunder/lightning storm that struck in the night and the birds were acting rather crazily, chattering and darting here and there, catching my attention, so I looked out in the yard to watch and wonder what was coming our way.

In the middle of all this, I saw a large and colorful hummingbird fly into my yard and search over every aspect of my gazebo looking for the feeder that wasn't there. We used to feed these long-beaked fellows every year up on the hill, but I had decided against even that in the new place.

At the sight of this granddaddy of all hummingbirds giving me a good scolding,

without question I went to my cupboard and took out the feeder stored there, prepared the sweet water and found a way of hanging the feeder on the gazebo.

Time passed and I was rewarded by the sight of the tiniest hummingbird I had ever seen, a female no bigger than half of my thumb in her dark dressings enjoying a lone feast at my feeder.

The cutest thing I had ever seen came the next day or two after the storm had passed away and the sky cleared somewhat of smoke from distant wildfires.

A lookalike bird was at my feeder but just a mite larger than the first one had been.

But, as it was feeding, my little Thumbalina returned and, while I watched, she flew over and ever so gently tapped the intruder on the shoulder who then turned to look to see who was there.

When she saw who it was, without question she flew off to relinquish the whole feeder to my half-thumb-sized guest. Wee ones affect us all that way, I guess.

And, so, in this moment, I was caught up in seeing that for the season the feeder was kept clean and filled with its nourishing substance.

I guess I'm just an easy pushover, after all, by this tiny one with the Pinocchio-sized nose.

GARDEN

Continued from Page 1B

(Prune Conserve is made by adding slices of fresh citrus fruit (orange and lemon) and small walnut pieces and optional raisins halfway through the cooking process.) When the prune butter (or conserve) is done, put it in canning jars and process it.

The process of making apple butter is very similar. Cinnamon is usually added to apple butter, (usually to excess, also more sugar than necessary. It can be much nicer to be able to taste the fruit rather than have it masked by too much sugar or spices).

When simmering a pot for long times, there is often a tendency for the contents to scorch. Many people have success with apple butter in crock pots, or making theirs in the oven. It seems like a safer way to do it if you are going to get distracted. Just be sure to cook it long enough to caramelize it and bring out as much flavor as it has to offer. Things turn out best in life if we don't rush through them to have them over with.

I'm sure we are all getting a bit tired of gardening by now and are ready for a break, especially with the nippy weather. The chores are whatever you need to do to catch up.

• This time of year is when you think of the maintenance that needs to be done on all the

garden tools for winter storage: painting, oiling, sharpening, and sanding rough parts of handles.

- Think about getting bulbs to plant for spring and where they will be planted.
- Identify areas that will need mulch.
- Keep leaves raked away so that grass gets sunlight.
- When trees and shrubs go into freezing weather thirsty, they are more prone to winterkill.

If you have garden questions or comments please write: greengardencolumn@yahoo.com Thanks for reading!

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