

Twice the tart

Recipe takes lemon chicken to the next level

BY GRETCHEN MCKAY • Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Don't you hate it when someone improves on a dish you've made dozens of times, and are pretty sure you've already perfected?

One of my family's favorite meals is a tangy lemon chicken recipe I found years ago in a long-forgotten cookbook that takes around 15 minutes to cook in a simple sauce of butter, olive oil and the juice of one or two fresh lemons.

Dang, has Yotam Ottolenghi got me beat.

In his latest cookbook, the Israeli-born British chef known for his expert take on Mediterranean cooking (much of it vegetarian) takes lemon chicken to the next level by pairing crispy, pan-fried chicken with a sauce that marries homemade preserved lemon with fresh lemon juice kissed with garlic, a pinch of sugar, turmeric and the warm, citrusy bite of cumin seed.

He calls the preserved lemon a "cheat" because, rather than ripening in a jar for a few weeks, the citrus slices are brought to a simmer with juice over medium heat until tender and translucent and then blitzed into a curd-like, spreadable sauce. Also a little different: Rather than simply dusting the chicken in flour to make it fry up crispy, he gives the pounded breasts a 30-minute soak in a mixture of egg white and cornstarch flavored with soy sauce.

Garnished with a crunchy mix of green onion and fresh cilantro, the end result is a standout dish with nuanced layers of flavor you'll want to eat again and again.

If you don't have a meat mallet, use a rolling pin or the bottom of a heavy pan to pound the chicken breast into thin pieces between parchment or waxed paper.

For a complete meal, Ottolenghi suggests serving the chicken with plain white rice and some lightly cooked greens. But it's pretty darn delicious on its own, right out of the pan.

DOUBLE LEMON CHICKEN WITH CHEAT'S PRESERVED LEMON

For cheat's preserved lemon

1 large unwaxed lemon, ends trimmed and discarded, cut into 1/4-inch slices, seeds removed
1/4 cup lemon juice
2 teaspoons flaked sea salt

For chicken

2 large egg whites
2 tablespoons soy sauce
2 tablespoons cornstarch
4 large chicken breasts
6 tablespoons sunflower oil
1 green onion, trimmed and finely sliced at an angle
1/4 cup cilantro leaves, roughly chopped
2 tablespoons lemon juice
Salt and black pepper
For lemon sauce
3 tablespoons preserved lemon (see above)
3 cups chicken stock
2 tablespoons unsalted butter
2 garlic cloves, minced
1 tablespoon sugar
1/8 teaspoon ground turmeric
1 1/2 teaspoons cumin seeds, toasted and roughly crushed, divided
1 1/2 tablespoons cornstarch
2 tablespoons lemon juice

Make preserved lemon: Put all the ingredients into a small saucepan with lid. Bring to a simmer on medium-high heat, cover with lid and cook for 12-14 minutes, or until rinds start to look translucent and the juice has reduced by about half. Set aside to cool slightly then transfer to the bowl of a food processor and blitz until you have a smooth, spreadable paste.

Meanwhile, in a large bowl, whisk together egg whites, soy sauce, cornstarch, 1/2 teaspoon salt and a good grind of pepper until there are no lumps, about 30 seconds.

Working with one breast at a time, place chicken between 2 pieces of parchment paper and use a meat mallet (or bottom of pan) to pound chicken evenly so it's just 1/2-inch thick. Transfer to the egg-white bowl and continue with

the remaining breasts. Stir everything together gently to coat, then marinate at least half an hour, or refrigerate overnight if you're getting ahead.

Make the sauce by first putting 3 tablespoons of the preserved lemon, stock, butter, garlic, sugar, turmeric and half the cumin in a medium saucepan and placing it on medium-high heat. Bring to a boil, then cook for 15 minutes, stirring a couple of times, until reduced by about half. Add 3 tablespoons of sauce to small bowl, add cornstarch and whisk until there are no lumps. Whisk this back into the saucepan and cook for 1 minute on medium-high, whisking continuously, until smooth and thickened slightly. Remove from heat.

Heat 6 tablespoons oil in a large, high-sided frying pan over medium-high heat. Once hot, fry two of the marinated breasts for 3 minutes per side, or until nicely browned and just cooked through. Transfer to a paper towel-lined plate and continue with remaining chicken. Pour off oil into a bowl. Add lemon sauce to the frying pan and bring to a simmer on medium-high heat.

Put back the chicken breasts and cook for just 3 minutes, gently turning them halfway through. Remove from heat and stir in 2 tablespoons lemon juice for the sauce.

Transfer chicken breasts to a large serving platter with a lip and pour sauce all over. Sprinkle with remaining cumin seeds. In a small bowl, toss together green onion, cilantro and lemon juice and spoon over top.

Serve immediately.

Serves 4.

— "Ottolenghi Test Kitchen: Extra Good Things" by Noor Murad and Yotam Ottolenghi (Clarkson Potter, 2022, \$32)

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Yotam Ottolenghi's lemon chicken recipe is made with a "cheat's" preserved lemon paste.

Gretchen McKay/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette-TNS

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As winter dries the air, it's time to move gardening indoors



JENNIE HAGEN

GARDENING WITH GRANDMA

We'll take our gardening inside this week and try to get, and keep, our houseplants in top condition as the dry air of winter surrounds them.

Whether we have wood heat or forced air furnaces, it's going to be drier inside. I have noticed my summer schedule of weekly inside waterings are now way too few and my larger plants are needing water at two-day intervals. And as much as I like them, they are sometimes forgotten. And seldom are they forgiving.

A useful tip for plants that require increased humidity are acrylic trays, or deep plates, that can have gravel filled bottoms about halfway up the sides. The type of colored gravel most often used in fish aquariums is perfect for this application. It's strongly recommended that gravel from our yards or driveways not be used, as it frequently has contaminants that can spread to plants. Keep these

trays filled with water just up to the top of the gravel — your plants will appreciate this increased humidity.

While the growing cycle of outdoor plants has ceased, most indoor plants will stay healthier if given low doses of fertilizer about once a month. Just use the fertilizer at one-quarter the normal application rate, then along about March we'll start to increase this.

Routine indoor maintenance should include removing the top layer of soil, when possible, and replacing it with new potting mix. Just replacing the top layer of soil can really rejuvenate a plant that has been in the same pot for years.

Another must-have for indoor maintenance are bonsai or garden tool sets. These miniature tools aren't just cute, they can be powerful work horses, too! With their tiny design, it becomes possible to get between the small stems of even the most delicate plants for trimming old or dead growth. These tiny tool sets can be purchased online for a very reasonable price. A single pair of trimming snips can cost as little as \$8, while sets of up to 20 items can be purchased for less than \$30. The items in the accompanying photo were purchased

for less than \$20. Many online retailers have these small gardening tools.

Have any of your "indoor" plants spent the summer on the deck, or somewhere else outside? If possible, try to isolate them for up to a week from your other indoor plants. This will give you the opportunity to discover what diseases or pests have infiltrated both the upper and lower levels of growth or soil. The hitchhikers can be sneaky, so if you suspect unwelcome guests, isolation will more readily allow you to identify and remove the intruders.

My indoor ferns are struggling to survive in my home, I know they need more watering than I have been giving them. So before I put these tools away, I need to get some trimming done. And watering.

This is all from Grandma, hope your ferns are happier than mine!

■ Jennie Hagen is a native Oregonian who has spent 40 years gardening east of the Cascades. She is a member of the Garden Writers Association and has previously written for the Home & Garden section of *The Oregonian*, and for *The Observer*, the *Baker City Herald*, and the *Burns Times Herald*.



Jennie Hagen/Contributed Photo

Bonsai gardening tools are inexpensive but very helpful in maintaining houseplants.