

# Coq au Vin

Where would French cuisine be without wine? It is as important in the pot as it is in the glass, the base of myriad stews and braises. One of the best is coq au vin, in which chicken is slowly simmered with red wine.



## WHY MASTER IT?

**BRAISING CHICKEN** in wine is an age-old tradition, and a method used all over France. You brown the meat, add liquid to the pot, be it water, wine or stock, and then set it over low heat for a lengthy simmer. That initial browning creates the foundation of the sauce, lending complex layers of flavor to the final dish.

In a traditional *coq au vin*, which hails from the Burgundy region, wine is used both to tenderize what was traditionally a tough old rooster (a *coq* in French) and to imbue the meat with its heady flavor. When the bird is slowly simmered, often for hours and hours as the oldest recipes suggest, its sinewy flesh slackens, growing soft and aromatic, and easily yielding to the fork.

As the simmering wine seasons the chicken, the chicken seasons the wine, helping transform it into a savory sauce. The wine, which reduces as it cooks, also takes on the other flavors in the pot, in this case brandy, mushrooms, onions, bacon and herbs, along with the savory fond — that is, the caramelized bits on the bottom of the pan that you get from the initial browning of the chicken. The young, tender chickens of today cook more quickly than those earlier birds, but they are imbued with similar lusty flavors.

There are variations of *coq au vin* all over France, each a celebration of local wines both red and white. In Alsace, a dry riesling is used, resulting in a lighter, brighter sauce that is often enriched with a little cream or *crème fraîche* stirred in at the end. The Jura and the Champagne regions also have their own recipes; cooks in the Jura sometimes substitute morels for the more common white or brown button mushrooms. In Beaujolais, the young dark purple *nouveau* wine gives that dish the name *coq au violet*. But Burgundy's version, made with its local wine, is the best known across France and all over the world.

No matter what kind of wine you pour into your pot, the method of simmering it with chicken or other meat is applicable across the kitchen. Case in point: *Boeuf bourguignon*, another French classic, is essentially *coq au vin* made with chunks of stewing beef instead of fowl. (A recipe can be found at [nytcoking.com](http://nytcoking.com).) Mastering this one technique leads to many excellent dinners.

## TECHNIQUES AND TIPS



MARINATING THE CHICKEN.



COOKING THE PEARL ONIONS AND MUSHROOMS.

### Preparing and Browning the Chicken

- Using only bone-in dark meat makes the stew richer and thicker, because of the marrow in the bones. And dark meat isn't as prone to drying out as white meat. However, it is traditional to use a whole chicken, cut into pieces, and you can do that if you'd prefer; just add the breast to the pot 30 minutes after adding the dark meat.

- Marinating the chicken before browning it will give you a more evenly seasoned bird whose flesh is fully imbued with wine. The ideal

marination time is 24 hours, but even four to six hours helps the cause.

- To get a good sear, the chicken must be fully dry, otherwise the skin will steam instead of brown. Pat it well with paper towels after marinating.

- Take your time when browning the meat; it's one of the most important steps for getting robust flavor out of the chicken, and creates a brawny base for the sauce. Plan to spend at least 15 to 25 minutes at the stove for this step, searing the pieces in batches. Use tongs to hold the chicken and change its position, pressing it into the pan when necessary, so that all sides make contact with the hot metal to get a deep sear.

### EQUIPMENT YOU'LL NEED

**Dutch oven** A 6- to 8-quart Dutch oven or heavy-bottomed pot with lid (a *rondeau* pot) is an essential tool for a braise. If the pot is too small, the liquid won't evaporate enough to give you a rich sauce; if it's too large, the wine in the pot won't sufficiently cover the chicken.

**Skillet** The pearl onions and mushrooms for the topping are cooked separately from the chicken, so they have their own distinct flavor and texture. A 10-inch skillet with a lid is ideal.

**Tongs** A good pair of kitchen tongs will help you maneuver the chicken as you brown it, allowing you to fully sear the skin all over.

### Cooking and Serving

- Some *coq au vin* recipes call for chicken stock to replace a portion of the wine, which accentuates meaty notes in the finished sauce. But this can dilute the wine flavor. The bacon and the searing of the chicken skin provide sufficient meatiness here, so this recipe omits the stock.

- Sautéing the tomato paste with the vegetables caramelizes the tomato. It also eliminates any metallic flavor, which can be an issue with canned tomato paste.

- Adding flour to the pot helps thicken the sauce. Here, it is stirred into the vegetables while they're browning, which allows the taste of raw flour to cook off.

- Brandy brings complexity to the final dish. Igniting the brandy in the pot is a quick way to cook out the alcohol, and it's easier than you think. Use a long-handled igniter match to light the flame. It burns pretty quickly, so there is not much to fear. However, you can skip this and simply let the brandy cook in the pan for 1 minute.

- One quick way to peel pearl onions for the topping is to blanch them for a minute in a pot of boiling water. Drain, let cool, then slip off their skins. (Frozen peeled onions should be used only as a last resort. They tend to be very soggy, and are therefore much harder to caramelize because of their high moisture content.)

- A garnish of crisp toasted bread provides a textural contrast to the soft chicken, but feel free to leave it out.

- Like all braises, *coq au vin* is best made a day ahead, so the flavor has a chance to intensify. Let it cool completely, then store it in the refrigerator. To reheat, first spoon off and discard any solidified fat on the surface, then place the pot over a low flame for about 20 to 30 minutes, stirring occasionally. Or reheat in a 350-degree oven for about 30 minutes. It's best to prepare the onions and mushrooms, and the croutons just before serving.

- Serve with a green salad, and a good bottle of Burgundy.

## A BRIEF HISTORY

LEGEND HAS IT that Julius Caesar himself introduced a version of coq au vin to France. As the commonly cited (and thoroughly apocryphal) story goes, the Celtic Gauls sent a rooster to Caesar during the Roman occupation. Caesar had his cook stew it in herbs and wine and then returned it to the Gauls. Whether or not this is true, the tradition of simmering poultry in wine does date to ancient Rome, and perhaps even further back.

Because the main ingredient of a coq au vin was historically a tough old rooster, it is very likely that the

earliest versions were peasant fare. Recipes calling for rooster rarely graced the early tracts on French cooking in the 17th and 18th centuries, which documented food for the wealthy. It wasn't until the more current substitution of tender chicken in the 19th century that the dish and all its variations entered the French canon.

That the Burgundian version emerged as the most prominent in the United States is because of Julia Child, who championed the recipe as a symbol of the sophistication and verve of French country cooking.



*"STILL LIFE"*  
BY JACOPO  
DA EMPOLI  
(1551-1640).

SCALA/MINISTERO PER I BENI E LE ATTIVITÀ  
CULTURALI/ART RESOURCE, NEW YORK

## Coq au Vin

TIME: 2½ HOURS, PLUS MARINATING

YIELD: 4 SERVINGS

- 3 pounds chicken legs and thighs
- 2 ½ teaspoons kosher salt, more as needed
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper, more to taste
- 3 cups hearty red wine, preferably from Burgundy
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme leaves
- 4 ounces lardons, pancetta or bacon, diced into ¼-inch pieces (about 1 cup)
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, more as needed
- 1 large onion, diced
- 1 large carrot, peeled and diced
- 8 ounces white or brown mushrooms, halved if large, and sliced (about 4 cups)
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 teaspoon tomato paste
- 1 tablespoon all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons brandy
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 8 ounces peeled pearl onions (about 12 to 15 onions)
- Pinch sugar
- 2 slices white bread, cut into triangles, crusts removed
- ¼ cup chopped parsley, more for serving

1. Season chicken with  $2\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoons salt and  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon pepper. In a large bowl, combine chicken, wine, bay leaf and thyme. Cover and refrigerate for at least 2 hours or, even better, overnight.

2. In a large Dutch oven or a heavy-bottomed pot with a tightfitting lid, cook lardons over medium-low heat until fat has rendered, and lardons are golden and crisp, 10 to 15 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer lardons to a paper-towel-lined plate, leaving rendered fat in pot.

3. Remove chicken from wine, reserving the marinade. Pat chicken pieces with paper towels until very dry. Heat lardon fat over medium heat until it's just about to smoke. Working in batches if necessary, add chicken in a single layer and cook until well browned, 3 to 5 minutes per side. (Add oil if the pot looks a little dry.) Transfer chicken to a plate as it browns.

4. Add diced onion, carrot, half the mushrooms and the remaining  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon salt to pot. Cook until vegetables are lightly browned, about 8 minutes, stirring up any brown bits from the pot, and adjusting heat if necessary to prevent burning.

5. Stir in garlic and tomato paste and cook for 1 minute, then stir in flour and cook for another minute. Remove from heat, push vegetables to one side of pot, pour brandy into empty side, and ignite with a match. (If you're too nervous to ignite it, just cook brandy down for 1 minute.) Once the flame dies down, add reserved marinade, bring to a boil, and reduce halfway (to  $1\frac{1}{2}$  cups), about 12 minutes. Skim off any large pockets of foam that form on the surface.

6. Add chicken, any accumulated juices and half the cooked lardons to the pot. Cover and simmer over low heat for 1 hour, turning halfway through. Uncover pot and simmer for 15 minutes to thicken. Taste and add salt and pepper, if necessary.

7. Meanwhile, melt 1 tablespoon butter and 2 tablespoons oil in a nonstick or other large skillet over medium-high heat. Add pearl onions, a pinch of sugar and salt to taste. Cover, reduce heat to low and cook for 15 minutes, shaking skillet often to move onions around. Uncover, push onions to one side of skillet, add remaining mushrooms, and raise heat to medium-high. Continue to cook until browned, stirring mushrooms frequently, and gently tossing onions occasionally, 5 to 8 minutes. Remove onions and mushrooms from skillet, and wipe it out.

8. In same skillet, melt 2 tablespoons butter and 1 tablespoon oil over medium heat until bubbling. Add bread and toast on all sides until golden, about 2 minutes per side. (Adjust heat if needed to prevent burning.) Remove from skillet and sprinkle with salt.

9. To serve, dip croutons in wine sauce, then coat in parsley. Add pearl onions, mushrooms and remaining half of the cooked lardons to the pot. Baste with wine sauce, sprinkle with parsley and serve with croutons on top.