

## FOOD

CHEF'S SECRETS *By Michael Bauer*

# Chicken takes a butter bath

Corso owner Wendy Brucker fell in love with *petti di pollo al burro* at Tuscany's Trattoria Sostanza, which has probably featured this regional specialty since it opened in 1869. When she ate at the modest restaurant, she aimed for the one seat in the house where she could watch the chef frying the chicken in rich butter.

It seems like a simple dish, but it took her many visits to the restaurant and extensive experimentation back in the States to get it right. When she opened Corso in Berkeley about two years ago, the chicken, brought to the table bubbling in a cast-iron skillet, became a star of the menu.

When I asked for the recipe, Brucker's partner Roscoe Skipper, who is also part of the team at Rivoli where she is the chef, said he doubted it was one that could be reproduced by the home cook. However, Brucker came through with a version that's as good as I remembered.

It's a simple recipe, just like the restaurant that originated it, but I'd be hard-pressed to remember a preparation I've tasted that's more appealing. Of course, I'm one of those who think everything goes better with butter, so there's plenty to

love about this dish. The boneless breast is sauteed in butter and finished in the oven, and then more butter is added to the hot pan to produce an even richer, nuttier flavor.

It's not only the chicken that lures me to Corso. The menu is true to the Italian spirit in such dishes as whole grilled fish and thick Florentine steak, glistening with a swipe of olive oil. There's pizza and a stellar lineup of contorni, or side dishes such as cauliflower in anchovy vinaigrette or potatoes roasted in duck fat with garlic and rosemary.

Not only does the food capture the Italian spirit, but so does the interior. It may have come nearly 140 years after Trattoria Sostanza, but Corso feels as if it would be at home in Florence, at least until you see protesters parading up and down Shattuck. Then you know you're back in Berkeley.

*1788 Shattuck Ave. (near Delaware), Berkeley; (510) 704-8004 or trattoriacorso.com. Lunch (or brunch) daily; dinner nightly. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted.*

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Craig Lee / Special to The Chronicle; styled by Julia Mitchell

## Pollo al Burro

### Serves 4

At Corso, chef Wendy Brucker and her staff prepare the chicken individually, but we've adapted it to serve four. Make sure you buy boneless breast with the skin on and use Plugra, which is creamier and has a lower moisture content than most butters. No matter what, this is rich — not a dish to serve every day.

**4 6-ounce chicken half breasts, boneless, skin-on (see Note)**

**Kosher salt to taste**

**½ cup all-purpose flour or as needed**

**1 pound "red label" unsalted Plugra butter, room temperature (see Note)**

**1 lemon (Eureka or Meyer) or lime, seeded and quartered**

**Instructions:** Preheat oven to 500°. Remove the small tender from the inside part of each breast and cook separately, or reserve for another use. Generously salt chicken then dredge in flour, shaking off the excess.

Heat a large cast iron skillet or other heavy, oven-proof skillet over medium heat. Add 4 ounces (8 tablespoons) butter. When the butter begins bubbling, add the chicken, skin side down. Cook 15 minutes without moving the breasts.

Place the skillet in the oven and bake for 10 minutes.

Return the skillet to stovetop over medium heat. Turn the breasts over, then add remaining butter. Continue to cook until the melted butter turns a nutty brown color, about 5 minutes, and the chicken reaches an internal temperature of about 160°.

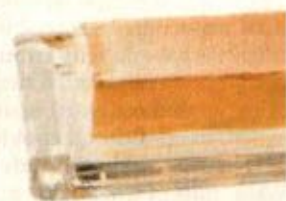
Remove chicken from the skillet, place in warmed shallow bowls, and pour about one quarter of the butter over each breast. Season to taste and squeeze lemon wedge over each to finish. Serve immediately.

**Note:** A half chicken breast ("one" breast is technically two halves that are still connected) can weigh as much as 12 ounces. A gigantic breast will serve two, but will probably take longer in the oven or rested in the still-hot skillet, where it will continue to cook.

You can substitute unsalted Challenge Dairy's European Style butter. If the butter becomes too dark — more black than brown — discard it, wipe out the pan and replace it with new butter.

**Per serving:** 982 calories, 52 g protein, 9 g carbohydrate, 80 g fat (46 g saturated), 325 mg cholesterol, 121 mg sodium, 0 g fiber.

**Wine pairing:** The rich butter can use a wine with acidity to cleanse the palate. A white Burgundy will work well, but with bubbles the match is even better. Try a richly textured Blanc de Blanc sparkling wine.



Craig Lee / Special to The Chronicle

## The secrets

### Butter, and lots of it.

Plugra from France is especially creamy and has a low water content. It produces a sauce with a rich, nutty flavor.

**Boneless chicken with skin.** Removing the bones helps the flesh cook. Don't use skinless breasts because the skin adds flavor and helps keep the meat moist during cooking.

### Frying, then roasting.

The breast is first browned in butter, preferably in a cast-iron skillet, and then finished in the oven. The last addition of butter browns quickly when mixed with the juices from the chicken.