



When food means something special . . .

Grillin' and Chillin' . . . An Easy Meal for Informal Seasonal Dining

The dishes of our childhood stay with us forever. Food is one way of staying connected to the people who have contributed to those childhood dishes.

From time to time I reflect on that perspective, and it was what inspired me to prepare the meal shared in this post.

That perspective brought to mind my father, who did not have the luxury of time in his short life to do much cooking—although when he did, the experience seemed to relax him and provide a way for him to express his creative personality.

When he was able to prepare some of the dishes he enjoyed eating most, he wasn't bashful about sharing them with his family and friends around him. Some of those dishes serve as childhood memories for me, such as his infamous cold octopus salad which seemed to find its way to the table at many family gatherings. He loved fresh or steamed shellfish; sweet corn at the height of the season when you could almost eat it off the cob without cooking (which he often did just to impress us kids); grilled fennel sausage, hot or sweet, ribs, and chicken which he usually marinated overnight before it hit the hot coals. It is that marinade that I fondly recall and, after all these years, attempt to recreate (with a few embellishments) as part of the main recipe in this post.

With that perspective, I am sharing recipes that will provide you with a complete menu when combined together, or if you prefer, can be prepared and served individually as you choose.

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Marinated and Grilled Rock Cornish Game Hens, Green and Yellow String Bean Salad, Oven Fries

All recipes serve 4 and can be scaled up as needed

First the marinade.

Ingredients

1 cup red wine (many options to choose from, simply a matter of your personal preference)

1/4 cup red wine vinegar

1/4 cup olive oil

Mince: 1/4 cup pitted, black oil-cured olives; 1 large garlic clove; 1 celery rib; 1 large shallot; 1 fresh rosemary sprig; 2 to 3 fresh oregano or marjoram sprigs

Dry spice: using a spice or coffee grinder, finely grind 1 medium, dried chipotle pepper, including seeds, stem, and ribs; 1 tablespoon black pepper corns; 1 tablespoon fennel seeds; 1 teaspoon sea salt. This dry spice rub is one of my embellishments that I find adds an element of heat to the marinade and an additional level of flavor. This is of course optional, but recommended, adding 1 to 2 teaspoons per your taste.

Method

Whisk all the ingredients together and set aside to macerate and develop their flavors while you prepare the hens.

Besides flavoring the Cornish Game hens over the next 24 hours as they rest in the refrigerator, the marinade will also be used to baste the birds while they grill.

Finally, when the basting is complete, the marinade can be placed in a sauce pan on the stovetop, reduced to thicken, and used as an optional sauce to be drizzled on the grilled hens when served.

Cornish Game Hens

Back in April 2022, I published a post titled Three to Make One. I was featuring poussin (aka Spring chicken) at that time, although for this recipe I wanted a bigger bird. In that post I drew the comparison between the poussin and the hen, where I stated:

“Poussins are baby chickens that weigh about a pound. Their name translates as “chicks” in French. They are brought to market reaching maturity and full flavor at 3 to 4 weeks.

Poussin are easy to prepare, cook very quickly, and their meat is extremely succulent and tender. They are the ideal serving size for a whole bird per person.

From my perspective they bring all the goodness of grilled or roasted chicken to the table without the need to carve.

If you are unable to source poussin, an excellent substitute for this recipe would be the Rock Cornish game hen. They are often considered one and the same bird, with the game hen being the larger of the two.

They are a cross between the slow-growing Cornish game hen with its plump, succulent white meat, and the fast-growing Rock chicken. If you were to substitute the game hen for the poussin, then the game hens should be split in half for a single serving and double the cooking time.”

If you purchase your poultry from a market, these hens usually come two per pack. I recommend buying fresh, not frozen hens, although if frozen is your only option you will need to add two extra days to this recipe preparation to allow the birds to properly thaw in the refrigerator.

If you work with a local butcher, the hens will usually be fresh and if you prefer, the butcher can spatchcock them for you.

To prepare the hens for marinating, wash them in cold water inside and out; thoroughly dry them, and using sharp kitchen shears cut along both sides of the backbone to remove it. Spread out the cut bird with the skin side facing up and using the heel of your hand, push down until the body is flattened out—this is called spatchcocking, which as noted, your butcher could do for you. Now the hens are ready for the marinade.

Place the prepared hens in a large bowl or sheet pan with high sides, large enough to hold the hens splayed out flat. Pour the marinade over them, turning once or twice to thoroughly coat and cover them. Seal the bowl or pan with clear film and place it in the refrigerator for 24 hours.



Marinated hens ready for the grill

Now for some sides.

Green and Yellow String Bean Salad

Ingredients

3/4 pound each of green and yellow string beans of uniform size if possible 1 large shallot

1/4 cup pitted, black, oil-cured olives

1 pint of cherry or grape tomatoes

1 to 2 sprigs each of fresh basil, mint, and parsley

Lemon juice, olive oil, sea salt, and black pepper, all to your taste to serve

Method

Trim off the stem ends, and halve any beans that are extra long.

Peel the shallot and slice it into 1/8-inch rings. Allow the rings to soak in cool water with the juice of half a lemon, which allows the shallot to purge some of its strong flavor since it will be a raw ingredient in the salad.

Finely mince the olives and set aside.

Finely mince the mint and parsley, and tear the basil into small pieces so as not to mash it with a knife. Set the herbs aside.

OK, I know, I know, tomatoes in May, not ready quite yet! However, they make a nice colorful component to this salad and you can coax some depth of flavor from them with either one of the following approaches.

Blister

In a post written in August 2022 titled *Hunting and Gathering*, I described blistering cherry tomatoes like this:

“Preheat your oven broiler, with a rack placed in the upper-middle position. Line a sheet pan with aluminum foil and scatter the tomatoes around. Place the sheet under the broiler and allow the tomatoes to char, gently burst, and collapse, giving up some of their moisture. Shake the sheet pan or turn it 180 degrees until the tomatoes are blistered, approximately 10 minutes.”

Once the blistered tomatoes have cooled they will be ready to assemble with the salad. Set them aside.

OR,

Slow Roasted cherry tomatoes, which will yield more layers of flavor over the blistered approach.

Method

If they are a large variety, slice the tomatoes in half and place the halves in a large stainless or glass work bowl. Otherwise work with them whole.

Drizzle with some olive oil and season with a tablespoon of Herbs du Provence, a pinch of sugar, sea salt, and pepper to your taste.

Place a sheet of foil on the bottom of a sheet pan large enough to hold the tomato halves arranged in rows.

Preheat the oven to 225 degrees and slowly roast the tomatoes for 2 to 4 hours until they soften and shrink in size.

Once the roasted tomatoes have cooled they will be ready to assemble with the salad. Set them aside.

Alternately, instead of dressing this salad with the lemon and oil as noted in the ingredients list above, the following recipe for a creamy Italian dressing makes a flavorful option.

Ingredients

1 large egg yolk

1 tablespoon Dijon mustard

1 large garlic clove, finely chopped

4 anchovy filets, chopped

4 tablespoons lemon juice

1/4 cup white balsamic vinegar

1-1/2 teaspoons dried oregano, preferably Sicilian

Pinch of black pepper

1/3 to 1/2 cup grated Parmigiano-Reggiano

Approximately 3/4 cup olive oil or as needed

Finely minced parsley to your taste (optional)

Method

Place all the ingredients except the olive oil in the work bowl of a food processor. Pulse several times to thoroughly mix together. With the processor running, slowly drizzle the olive oil into the bowl until a smooth, creamy emulsion results. Taste and correct the seasoning to your liking. Set aside to dress salad or refrigerate to use with other leafy salads.

This salad should be assembled just before you are ready to bring the meal to the table. To do that, place all of the ingredients, except the dressing, in a large stainless or glass bowl. Gently toss and fold to evenly distribute all the elements. Portion the

mixed salad onto side plates and drizzle either the simple lemon and oil dressing, or the creamy Italian option over the top. Additional dressing can be passed at the table.



String bean salad

Oven Fries

We don't eat fried foods but do find French fries can be irresistible when they are prepared correctly. I modeled this oven fries approach after my oven-roasted potatoes, either white, yellow, or sweet. Essentially, you are slicing potatoes resembling French fries, but cooking them in a far more health conscious way by roasting them.

Ingredients

1 medium to large Yukon Gold potato per person

Olive oil

Salt and pepper

Method

Preheat the oven to 425 degrees.

Wash the potatoes thoroughly, thinly slice off the ends and any bruised areas, but do not peel.

Slice the potatoes in approximately 3/8-inch-thick rounds, then slice the rounds into approximately 3/8-inch batons.

Place all the sliced pieces into a large stainless or glass bowl, drizzle with olive oil, season with a little sea salt and pepper, and, if you want, a light dusting of one of your favorite spice rubs.

Toss the potato slices in the bowl to thoroughly and evenly coat them. Turn them out onto a foil-covered sheet or roasting pan and place them into the preheated oven. Roast for 30 to 40 minutes or until done.



Oven fries

Serve piping hot, plated with half a roasted Cornish Game hen and a side of the string bean salad drizzled with either of the dressings of your choice.

Back to the birds . . . Time to fire up your grill!



Mine being a wood-fire grill, I start the fire 2 to 3 hours ahead while I'm working on the other components of the meal, which allows for a solid bed of hot coals to build so that I don't have to scorch my food over flames. When the coals are ready, or your gas-grill surface is sufficiently hot, place the spatchcocked birds on the grill surface skin side down and allow to sear and cook for 15 minutes or so. Baste as you go.

Turn the hens over and continue cooking and basting for another 15 minutes.

Finally, turn them over one more time and cook for a final 8 to 10 minutes, allowing the skin side to crisp and take on a nice color.



Grillin' and chillin'

Platter the grilled hens, and slice them in half so each diner gets a full half bird including wing, leg, thigh, and breast meat. Tent the platter while you reduce the marinade on the stovetop for your gravy, if using.



Grilled and ready to be plated

Place half a grilled Cornish Game hen on a plate, drizzle with some marinade gravy, set a serving of the oven fires alongside to bring to the table accompanied by the plated side green and yellow bean salad.

Extra gravy can be passed at the table as well.

Better yet, with all the fresh herbs I have growing in my backyard potted herb garden, a fresh batch of a flavorful salsa verde would be a perfect compliment to the grilled hens ... which is exactly what I will do with this meal!

A flavorful, easy to prepare and assemble meal, either for a lunch or dinner to kick off the seasonal Grillin' and Chillin'!

And, for dessert . . . well I'll leave that up to you!

Enjoy . . . cheers!



Eat well * Drink well * Be well

A good meal at home is proof of time well spent.

Good recipes should be passed down and handed over for safekeeping, only to be passed down and handed over once again!