

Chicken Cacciatore – Comfort du Jour

Chicken cacciatore is my “comfort du jour”—moist and oh-so-tender chicken, stewed slowly and thoughtfully with tomatoes and Italian herbs and spices. This is some serious, old-school Italian comfort food right here! My grandmother taught me some authentic Scandinavian dishes, but I had to do my own research to learn the real deal on Italian flavors so I could ditch the bland and overly sweet jarred sauces. Hopefully, this recipe will help prove that I can rock a red sauce that is *molto buono*!

Serves 4 – Prep in 20 minutes, cook for 90 minutes

INGREDIENTS

Extra virgin olive oil
4 large chicken thighs (bone-in, skin on)*
2 large bell peppers, seeded and sliced lengthwise, about 1/4” thin
1 medium-size sweet onion, sliced lengthwise 1/4” thin
4 or 5 cloves fresh garlic, rough chopped or sliced
2 tsp. Mama Mia Italian seasoning blend (recipe follows)—or
1/4 tsp. each: oregano, basil, ground fennel seed, thyme leaves, garlic powder, onion powder, crushed red pepper flakes (this is not exactly the same as my Mama Mia blend, but close enough)
1 or 2 tsp. bomba hot pepper sauce*
Handful Kalamata olives (pitted), rough-chopped into pieces
1/4 cup dry red wine
1 28 oz. can whole plum tomatoes (San Marzano, if possible)
1/2 pound linguine (preferably “bronze-cut” for best texture)
Small handful Italian flat leaf parsley, cleaned and chopped
Freshly grated parmesan or parm-romano blend, for serving

*NOTES

Substitute boneless, skinless or breast meat if you must, but the dish will not have the same flavor or richness. Also consider using more olive oil to prevent the meat from sticking to your pan.

Bomba sauce is a paste-like seasoning, centered on dried chile peppers from the southern region of Italy, mixed with olive oil, spices and vinegar. It’s a pungent condiment that is meant to be used sparingly. Trader Joe’s has a terrific version of this, or you could substitute extra red pepper.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Pat the chicken pieces dry with a paper towel and season both sides with kosher salt and black pepper.
2. Heat a large (12”) cast-iron skillet (or electric skillet) to medium-hot (375° F), and swirl in about 2 tablespoons of olive oil. When oil is just shimmering, place chicken thighs in pan, skin side down, leaving plenty of room between them. Cover the pan (I use a spatter screen) and leave them undisturbed about 7 minutes to allow a deep golden crust to form on the skin. Loosen and turn the thighs and cook until just

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lightly browned on the other side, about 2 minutes. The chicken will finish cooking later in the sauce. Remove the pieces to a plate and keep warm while you prep the sauce.

3. If the remaining oil is sputtering or popping in the pan, allow a few seconds for the moisture droplets to cook off. Reduce heat to medium (350° F). All at once, add your onions and bell peppers to the pan, and stir them around until they begin to soften. Add the seasonings, plus salt and pepper, over the entire mixture. Add the garlic and cook another 2 to 3 minutes, or until the onions are slightly translucent. Stir in the Kalamata olives, the Bomba sauce and the red wine.
4. Add the peeled tomatoes, using your hand to squeeze each one into the pan. This releases more of the juices quickly and gives the tomatoes a head start on breaking up. Pour all remaining juice from the tomatoes into the pan, but discard any large basil leaves that may have been included in the can (they've already done their job). Add a splash of water (or wine!) to the tomato can to swish out every last bit of flavor in there. Scrape up any browned bits that may be stuck to the pan and stir the mixture until it has a uniform appearance. Cover and allow the mixture to come up to a slight boil.
5. Add the chicken thighs back to the pan, skin side up, and spoon the tomato mixture lightly over the tops. They don't need to be covered in it, but you want to moisten them with the flavorful sauce. Cover the pan and reduce heat to medium-low (275-300° F), turning the chicken only twice over the next 90 minutes.
6. When the sauce is a deep red color and the chicken shreds with a light twist of your fork, reduce heat to warm (200° F) and prepare your pasta water. Remember to use plenty of water and plenty of salt.
7. When the salted water reaches a steady boil, add your pasta and stir at once to prevent sticking. Cook to just under al dente, or a couple of minutes under what seems perfect. You're going to finish it in the sauce. Before draining the pasta, ladle out 2 to 3 tablespoons of the water into the sauce. This adds the pasta starch to the sauce, which helps "marry" them to coat the pasta better.
8. Move the chicken pieces to the outer edges of the pan (or remove to a plate if the pan is crowded), making a well of sauce in the center. Drain the pasta and immediately add it to the center of the pot, stirring quickly to evenly coat it in the sauce. I use silicone tongs to do this because I can grab hold of the pasta while moving it. Cover the pan and turn off the heat while you pour another glass of wine and call everyone to the table.

Portion the pasta onto the serving plates, top with a spoonful of sauce, then a chicken thigh, and divvy out the rest of the flavorful sauce. Sprinkle a bit of fresh chopped parsley on top and enjoy!