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Discover the artistic riches of Poland

A hen for Zinfandel

Linda Murphy, Chronicle Staff Writer



Cornish game hens -- single-serving-sized birds that are a cross between two breeds of chicken, the Cornish gamecock and the Plymouth Rock hen -- are unclothed mannequins ready to be dressed up.

They have a mild, delicate flavor when cooked with basic seasonings -- think khaki slacks and white oxford shirt. Add a boldly flavored sauce and the bird flashes red satin, high heels and an attitude.

The "white wine with white meat and fish" advice for matching wine to food usually holds up if the white meat, such as a Cornish game hen, is roasted simply, with butter, herbs, salt and pepper. Chronicle staff writer Tara Duggan's Game Hens with Bulgur Stuffing and Fig and Port Sauce are birds of a different feather, rich, flavor-packed and calling for a hearty, full-bodied red wine. Zinfandel from California's Sierra Foothills region suits this dish to a Z.

The key to this pairing is the fruitiness of Zinfandel working with the sweetness of the dried figs and tawny port used in both the sauce and the stuffing. Zinfandel grapes need to get quite ripe to show the jammy blackberry,

black cherry and raspberry characteristics that define the varietal.

This dish has its own obvious sweetness, which comes from the dried figs in the stuffing that are rehydrated in tawny port -- a rich, sweet fortified wine made in Portugal that tastes of dried fruit, spice and nuts. The birds are basted with the port and finished with a buttery, port-and-fig sauce. It makes for a rich, complex, soul-satisfying dish that can handle the lusty, ripe fruitiness and slightly rustic qualities of Sierra Foothills Zinfandel.

Use a good-quality tawny port for this recipe. Portuguese tawnies can be pricey -- starting at \$20 -- because they are aged 10 years or more in wood

Thursday, April 3, 2003

San Francisco Chronicle

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casks, but a little goes a long way. Dow's, Cockburn's, Smith Woodhouse, Osborne and Graham's are top producers. For California tawny port, try Ficklin 10-Year California (\$25) and nonvintage Orfila California (\$20).

GAME HENS WITH BULGUR STUFFING AND FIG & PORT SAUCE

Recipe created by Chronicle staff writer Tara Duggan. After the hens have cooked for about 30 minutes, begin making the sauce.

Ingredients:

Stuffing

1/4 cup chopped dried Mission figs

1/4 cup tawny port

2 tablespoons olive oil

1/2 onion, diced

1 cup cracked bulgur wheat

2 cups unsalted beef broth

1 teaspoon kosher salt

Freshly ground pepper to taste

1/3 cup chopped toasted walnuts

1 teaspoon finely chopped thyme

1/4 cup chopped Italian parsley

Fresh lemon juice to taste

Hens

4 Cornish game hens

Salt and pepper to taste

2 to 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, at room temperature

1/2 cup tawny port

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Sauce

4 tablespoons butter

1 tablespoon chopped shallots

1 tablespoon flour

5 tablespoons tawny port

1/4 cup chopped dried Mission figs

1 cup unsalted beef broth

1/2 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme

Salt and pepper to taste

Sherry vinegar or red wine vinegar (optional)

INSTRUCTIONS: Stuffing: Soak figs in port for about 20 minutes, then drain and set aside.

Heat olive oil in a medium saucepan with a tight-fitting lid. Add onion and saute until softened, about 5 minutes. Add bulgur and stir, increasing heat, until all grains are lightly toasted.

Add broth, salt and pepper, then bring to a boil. Reduce heat, cover and simmer for 15 minutes. Remove from heat and let stand, covered, for 5 minutes.

Transfer bulgur to a large metal bowl. Let cool. Stir in figs, walnuts, thyme and parsley. Taste and adjust seasoning with salt, pepper and lemon juice.

For hens: Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Rinse hens and pat dry. Season inside and out with salt and pepper. Rub backs with softened butter and slide some under skin on breast. Stuff cavities with bulgur, tuck wings behind backs,

and put birds in a large roasting pan.

Roast for about 1 hour, basting every 20 minutes with port. After hens have cooked about 30 minutes, begin making sauce.

When hens are done, remove from oven, tent with foil and let rest for 10 minutes.

For sauce: Melt 2 tablespoons of butter in a small saucepan. Add shallots and saute until translucent, about 4 minutes. Add flour, reduce heat to low, and cook for a few minutes. Add port and figs. Simmer

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until port is reduced by half, about 10 minutes. Add broth and thyme, then keep at a low but steady simmer until sauce reduces and thickens, about 15 to 20 minutes.

Season sauce with salt and pepper, then add a drizzle or two of optional vinegar to reduce sweetness. Remove from heat and whisk in remaining 2 tablespoons butter.

Serves 4

Note: Look for frozen beef broth concentrate, which is superior to canned, at specialty supermarkets.

PER SERVING: 1,250 calories, 92 g protein, 53 g carbohydrate, 67 g fat (21 g saturated), 299 mg cholesterol, 2,123 mg sodium, 9 g fiber.

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