

Roast chicken with courgette and Parmesan stuffing

Serves: 4-8 (depending on chicken and appetite sizes)

Total time needed: 2-2½ hours



Ingredients:

- 1 whole chicken, giblets removed
- 2 small courgettes, grated and squeezed to remove water
- 2-3 large shallots, finely chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 large handfuls grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 egg, lightly beaten
- approx 100g (4 oz) butter
- approx 4 tbsps olive oil
- 3 tbsps chopped mixed fresh herbs: choose 2 or 3 from tarragon, rosemary, thyme, sage, parsley, marjoram, savory
- salt and pepper
- glass white wine
- ladle full of chicken stock
- a lemon

Method:

1. Slowly fry shallots in oil and butter until totally soft. When nearly done, add the garlic, as this needs less time to cook. Remove from pan into a bowl.
2. Add some more butter and oil to the pan and fry the grated courgettes, with some salt and pepper, until cooked. The idea is to get rid of excess moisture so that the stuffing isn't too sloppy, so keep frying the courgettes until the water they release has mostly evaporated. But be careful not to brown or burn them. Add these to the shallots in the bowl and let cool.
3. Add the Parmesan, egg, fresh herbs and a knob of softened butter to the bowl and combine all ingredients well. Add more salt and pepper to taste. The stuffing mixture should be fairly moist and soft. Set aside.
4. Preheat oven to 200 C (400 F).
5. This recipe works best if the chicken is spatchcocked. This makes it easier to get the stuffing under the skin all over the bird, reduces the cooking time, and makes the bird easy to divide into pieces later. To prepare the

bird: Turn the bird onto its breast and cut out the backbone using strong scissors. Simply cut along either side of the backbone working from the tail end to the neck. Turn the bird over, open it out skin side up, and flatten it by pressing down hard on the breastbone. You should hear bones crack (breastbone, ribcage, collarbone and wishbone). See pic of bird ready for stuffing. (You can actually totally remove the breastbone, but it's a little tricky and not necessary for this recipe.) Wipe the bird all over with kitchen paper to clean and dry it as much as possible. Sprinkle the underside of the bird with salt and pepper.

6. To insert the stuffing first loosen the skin all over the bird. Starting at the neck end use your finger tips, and then whole hand, to loosen the skin away from the breasts. Continue over the thighs and drumsticks. Take care not to tear the skin. Then squish handfuls of the stuffing under the skin so that the whole bird is covered with an approx ½ inch layer of stuffing. Start with the legs, then do the breasts.
7. Clean off the skin with kitchen paper. Rub some softened butter all over the skin and sprinkle with salt and pepper. To roast the bird you can either keep it in the spatchcocked position, or reform it into a chicken shape. Lightly oil the roasting tin so it doesn't stick. It should take up to one hour, depending on its size. There should be no need to cover the bird with foil or lower the oven temperature, but it's worth checking it a couple of times and basting when you do so.
8. To check the bird is ready, stick a skewer into one of the drumsticks and squeeze it. If the juices run out totally clear, the bird is done. Remove from the tin, cover with foil and let rest for 10 mins.
9. It's really not essential, but if you want, use this time to make a little sauce from the pan juices. Pour any excess fat out of the tin, set it over a medium heat and use a glass of white wine to deglaze. Scrape up all the lovely brown gooey bits with a wooden spatula and let the wine simmer for a few minutes to reduce. Add a ladle full of chicken stock to the pan and simmer a few minutes more. Add salt, pepper and a little lemon juice to enhance the flavours, then strain the sauce into a warmed container.
10. Cutting up the bird: I recommend simply dividing it into 4, 6 or 8 pieces, rather than carving it. Use a strong, sharp knife to cut the bird in half along the length of the breast. Remove the legs by cutting through the 'hip' joint – the knife should go through easily. If they're big, cut each leg in half at the 'knee'. Then if the breasts are big enough, they can also be cut in half. One half will have the wing on it. See pic.
11. Serve with the pan juices, potatoes and some green vegetables or salad.

This recipe is an adaptation of one by Richard Olney which I have tried out at school and at home. Richard Olney was a well-known American food writer who lived most of his life in Provence and valued simple, home cooking. He died in 1999. He became a bit of a cult figure and had a reputation for enjoying a colourful lifestyle within France's gastronomic social circles. His mouth-watering description of this dish is worth reproducing:

"This recipe...seems to be possessed of a multitude of virtues, the ease of its preparation and the beauty of its presentation being not among the least; the breasts, moreover, being both protected from the direct onslaught of heat and nourished by the melting fats of the stuffing, remain moist and are delicately perfumed; the skin, basted from within as well as from without, crispens evenly to a rich golden brown, a miracle of beauty and flavour; it is elastic and, unlike stuffed flesh, will not shrink in contact with the heat, splitting beneath the presence of a swelling forcemeat." (Simple French Food, 1974)

Not a man of short sentences! You can make the stuffing with other vegetables too, such as sautéed wild mushrooms, parboiled peas, or roasted aubergine, and the addition of little bacon, pancetta or prosciutto pieces can only be a good thing.



A few roast chicken tips:

- Of course, buy the best one you can - organic, free-range, etc. During processing water is normally used to remove the feathers. This gets inside the flesh and increases the bird's water content and weight. Some people like this as it makes the flesh more moist; others claim it dilutes the flavour, and prefer their birds with as little added water as possible.
- Brining birds is big in America. Soaking the bird in a salt solution overnight before cooking it is supposed to make it juicier and tastier. It's true – we tried it. I roasted two identical Cornish game hens. One had been brined for 24 hours and the other hadn't. The brined bird ended up bigger, juicier and tastier. To brine a bird: Make a solution of 1 part sugar, to 2 parts salt, to 8 parts water (by volume), large enough to cover the whole bird. Add flavourings if you wish, such as a few garlic cloves, bay leaves, sprigs of thyme, allspice berries, juniper berries, peppercorns etc. To ensure the sugar and salt dissolve, and to get the flavours going, bring them to a boil in some of the water, and then add in the rest of the water and cool before pouring over your chicken/turkey/game hen/whatever. Store the brining bird in the fridge overnight. Drain and dry well before roasting.
- For the best crispy skin, ensure the bird is really dry before roasting it. Rub well all over with kitchen paper, and if possible, leave it uncovered in the fridge overnight to dehydrate the skin some more. Then cover the skin in fat, in the form of butter, oil and/or streaky bacon, before roasting. Spreading soft butter under the skin too is also a good idea.