

CHICKEN CACCIATO-NAILS

My old and dear friend Felix Conti made this dish for me when I had dinner in his home sometime in the mid-1960s. Fil, as we called him, was an energetic and fun-loving Italian born in Waltham, Massachusetts, about 1915, I judged. He lived to the ripe age of 92½ years¹.

He was an always-merry hair dresser (I get in women's hair, he used to say), who jokingly referred to this entrée as "chicken cut-your-toe-nails." It was his version of the famous Italian staple, chicken cacciatore, meaning chicken hunter-style.

I rarely order cacciatore in restaurants anymore, because they never come close to capturing that rich, full flavor that Fil's wife, Diane (born in Lake Como, Italy), had created for us in her kitchen. I have tried to approximate the taste sensations my mind remembers of that night in the ingredients listed below. But to approximate the whole of my remembrance, they must be served to those whose warm friendship and spontaneous mirth you deeply cherish.

When you plan to have that special evening with good and cordial friends, then perhaps this recipe will record equally unforgettable tracks in your mind.

1 tbsp olive oil
one lb chicken thighs, skinned, boned, and cut into 2" pieces
¾ lb hot Italian sausage, cut into 1" pieces
1 bell peppers, seeded, cut into ¼" × 1" slices
¼ lb mushrooms, sliced thinly
1 medium onion, diced
3 cloves garlic, diced
1 (14-oz) can crushed tomatoes, with juice
1 (8-oz) can tomato sauce
1 cup dry white wine

¹Fil laughingly always added ½ to his age, whatever it was, after a short pause for effect.

3 tsp chicken base, or 3 bouillon cubes
1 tsp meat glaze or yeast extract (e.g. Marmite® or Vegemite®)
¼ tsp rosemary
¼ tsp leaf oregano
¼ tsp tarragon
¼ tsp leaf thyme
1 tsp parsley
¼ tsp white pepper
1 tsp cornstarch, wet with 1/8 cup white wine

Brown the chicken in the oil and remove to a platter. Similarly, brown the sausage in the same pan and remove it to the platter containing the chicken. Then sauté the mushrooms, bell peppers, onion, and garlic until brown also. This much can be done ahead of time, if desired. Then, in a larger stew pot, add all the ingredients, except the cornstarch, and simmer 20 to 30 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add the cornstarch and stir until thickened. Serve with (or on) wild rice, garlic cheese toast², and a good Italian white wine, such as Soave.

This should be enough to serve six here, but it really only feeds four, because some will want seconds.

²Garlic Cheese Toast, page 279.