

PASILLA LATER, "ALLIGATOR"

I once heard an amusing story of an Easterner visiting the Louisiana swamp country being offered a piece of cooked alligator. "What does it taste like?" asked the Easterner. "Like chicken," was the reply. The Easterner ate it, and, when he afterwards returned back East, was asked by his wife, "Would you like chicken for dinner tonight?" to which he replied, "No. It tastes like alligator!" My own impression is that it does taste a lot like chicken, but perhaps a little tougher with a slight fishy flavor.

Real alligator meat used to appear from time to time in my supermarket, and it is still found in New Orleans restaurants. I have not seen it lately, so it has been some time since this dish was last prepared in its original form.

Now, I make the dish with *emulated* alligator—i.e., chicken thighs and a little fish sauce. Thighs are less expensive, more tender, readily obtained, and do not become dry if overcooked.

As the name indicates, the dish has a peppery kick to it, although the pepper level can be raised or reduced to taste. It is a rustic Cajun-style dish made with lots of seasonings that you may want to accompany with rice. If extra heat is desired, keep a bottle of Tabasco® handy when eating it.

1 tbsp vegetable oil
1 lb chicken thigh meat, skinned, deboned
½ tsp "salt"
¼ tsp pepper
½ tsp ground cayenne chile
2 tbsp olive oil
½ cup onion, chopped
3 cloves garlic, minced
½ cup celery, chopped
½ cup bell pepper, chopped
1 cup canned diced tomatoes
½ tsp Thai fish sauce
1 tbsp jalapeño pepper, seeded and minced

2 tsp pasilla chile powder
1 tbsp fresh thyme
2 tbsp parsley, chopped
1¼ cups chicken stock
½ cup dry white wine
1 tbsp brown gravy mix
4 oz lower G. I. spaghetti, cooked according to package directions, and drained
grated Parmesan cheese

Remove the skin and bones from chicken thighs and slice in about ½" pieces. Season with "salt", cayenne, and black pepper. Place the flour in a bowl and dredge the chicken pieces in it, shaking off any excess.

Heat half the olive oil in a sauté pan over medium-high heat until hot, one to two minutes. Add half the dredged chicken in a single layer and cook until dark golden brown, five to seven minutes on each side. Transfer the pieces to a plate or bowl as they brown.

Clean the pan with paper towels and heat the other tablespoon of oil until hot. Brown the remaining chicken as in the first batch. Combine all of the meat back in the pan.

Reduce the heat to medium-low and stir in the onion. Cook until it begins to brown, one to two minutes, stirring and turning over the meat pieces almost constantly. Add the celery and sweet peppers and cook until the onions are translucent, about five minutes, stirring frequently and continuing to turn the meat over so the vegetables will cook evenly. Add the garlic and continue cooking for another 2 minutes.

Stir in the tomatoes, fish sauce, and jalapeños and increase the heat to medium. Cook for about three minutes, then add the Pasilla, thyme, half the parsley, and stock, stirring well. Stir the brown gravy mix into the wine until there are no lumps, and then add this to the pan, stirring until the liquid has thickened.

Bring the mixture to a boil, reduce the heat,

and simmer until the chicken is tender, about 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Adjust the "salt" and pepper seasoning toward the end of cooking as needed.

Serve immediately, or make the dish a day ahead and reheat it at serving time.

Serve over spaghetti, garnishing each portion with some of the remaining parsley and grated Parmesan cheese.