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## How to cook the perfect chicken cacciatora

Cacciatora, or hunter's chicken, is a classic Italian dish. How do you make it – and what other traditional Italian recipes are ripe for a revival?

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Felicity Cloake's perfect cacciatora: a rich and aromatic one-pot meal. Photographs: Felicity Cloake for the Guardian

*Pollo alla cacciatora*, or hunter's chicken, is such a stalwart of the traditional Italian restaurant menu in this country that it wasn't until I came to write this piece that I paused to wonder why anyone, Fantastic Mr Fox aside, would go out hunting and come back with a chicken.

Jamie Oliver reckons it's "obviously the type of food that a hunter's wife cooks for her fella [!]" when he gets back from a hard morning spent in the countryside", but I suspect it's more likely to have been originally made with rabbit or game birds – the slow, gentle braise would be the ideal treatment for such tasty, but potentially dry and stringy, meats.

As with so many Italian classics, arguing about the animal used is only the beginning. Marcella Hazan explains in *The Essentials of Classic Italian Cooking*: "Since there has always been a hunter in nearly every Italian household, every Italian cook prepares a dish with a claim to that description. There are uncounted permutations in the dishes that go by the *cacciatora* name, but what they generally consist of is a ... fricassee with tomato, onion, and other vegetables." Generally, yes – but, as we shall see, not always.

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## The chicken

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Marcella Hazan's chicken cacciatora.

All the recipes I find call for chicken, so that's what I'm sticking with, but later in the season, it would be well worth experimenting with joints of pheasant or rabbit, or even whole partridge or other small birds. Most suggest jointing a whole bird, but I find the breasts disappointingly chewy after such a long simmer.

If you'd like a bit of variety, add them to the dish later, as Hazan suggests (about 15–20 minutes should do it), but I prefer to use just legs, as Angela Hartnett does in her book *Cucina*: the tastier, more succulent meat should be fairly falling off the bone after 45 minutes.

Oliver and Hazan both dust their chicken with seasoned flour before browning, which gives the meat a lovely golden crust. Oliver also marinades it in red wine, garlic and herbs overnight before use, but given all the different flavours going into the sauce, it's nice, as a contrast, to allow the meat to taste of just that.

No one mentions whether the chicken should keep its skin on during cooking, which I assume means it should – but although it provides a useful layer of fat, I'm not keen on the texture or the look of slow-cooked, shrivelled skin, so for my perfect recipe, I'm removing it. If you'd like to do the same, make sure you don't skimp on the fat during

the initial saute stage, or you may end up with burnt, rather than browned, meat.

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## The sauce

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Angela Hartnett's chicken cacciatora.

Once it has been briefly fried to caramelize the outside, the chicken is then gently braised in liquid until not only cooked through, but as tender as can be. The Silver Spoon uses water as lubrication; Oliver red wine; Hazan and [Delia Smith white wine](#); and Hartnett a splash of white wine and chicken stock.

All of them, with the exception of Hartnett, however, also add moisture in the form of tomatoes: tinned for Hazan and Oliver and fresh for the Silver Spoon and Smith, who also sticks in a tablespoon of tomato puree. Hartnett's tomato-free version is not what I want in a cacciatora: it may well be what hunters eat in Emilia-Romagna, where her maternal family is from, but I'm used to tomatoes, and I miss them.



Delia Smith's chicken cacciatora.

Smith's version suffers from the opposite problem: it's far too tomatoey, tasting more like a fresh and fruity pasta sauce than a meaty stew – the chicken is completely lost. The Silver Spoon dish is nice enough, though a little bland and oily (Italian tomatoes may fare better), but Oliver and Hazan's cacciatoras are the best: rich and flavourful. I think the latter's white wine works better than Oliver's red, which has a tendency to take over, giving the whole thing a whiff of coq au vin.

Hazan's stew is surprisingly, deliciously creamy, but Hartnett's recipe has given me an idea to improve it further: using a mixture of chicken stock and white wine adds a savoury, meaty depth to the tomato sauce, which I'd modestly suggest makes it even better than the original.

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## Flavourings

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Silver Spoon's chicken cacciatora.

Smith, Hazan and the Silver Spoon start their dish with onion, and the first two add garlic in moderate quantities later on, while Oliver and Hartnett eschew the onion altogether in favour of copious quantities of garlic. Hartnett uses two heads, cut in half horizontally, cooking to a gooey softness in the sauce, which perfumes the whole dish with a wonderfully sweet, mellow flavour.

Hartnett, Oliver and Smith also use aromatic rosemary, which I much prefer to the Silver Spoon's workaday flat-leaf parsley. I don't think Oliver's copious bay leaves add much, especially given the other ingredients he adds to his sauce. Neither anchovy nor olive are what one would call subtle flavours, and here they're far too strident, lending the dish a briney, Mediterranean character that seems out of place in a country stew.

The Silver Spoon and Hazan add celery and carrot to their stews, which I like: they make it more of a whole meal in a pot, rather than just chicken in a sauce. Hazan also includes sliced peppers, which are fairly common, but I find their sweetness at odds with the savoury flavours of the rest of the dish.

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## Cooking

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Jamie Oliver's chicken cacciatora.

Oliver is the only one to bake, rather than simmer, his stew, and that for a whopping hour and a half. It's very nice, but completely unnecessary, and a colossal waste of fuel, given the chicken cooks very nicely in half that time over a low flame.

Although cacciatora makes a pretty good dinner on its own, it's also nice with a salad at this time of year, or polenta or rice to make it into a more substantial meal. Hunting

stories strictly optional.

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## The perfect chicken cacciatora

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*(Serves 4)*

**Knob of butter**

**2 tbsp olive oil**

**4 chicken legs, divided into thighs and drumsticks (skin removed if desired)**

**Seasoned flour, to dust**

**2 heads of garlic, cut horizontally**

**Small bunch of rosemary**

**1 carrot, peeled and diced**

**1 stick of celery, diced**

**Half a glass of white wine**

**250ml decent chicken stock**

**100g tinned plum tomatoes in juice, roughly chopped (or 100g really ripe fresh tomatoes, skinned and chopped)**

Heat the butter and oil in a large, heavy-based casserole dish over a medium-high heat. Dust the chicken pieces in seasoned flour, then fry them in batches until golden brown on all sides. Remove the chicken from the pan and set aside.

Fry the garlic, rosemary, carrot and celery, with a little more oil if necessary, for a few minutes until slightly golden.

Pour in the wine and scrape the bottom of the pan to dislodge any crusty bits, then simmer until well reduced.

Tip in the stock and tomatoes, and replace the chicken. Bring to a simmer, cover, turn down the heat and cook gently for 45 minutes, until the meat is falling from the bone.

Season to taste and serve with a green salad, rice or polenta.

**Cacciatora: best with chicken, or do you prefer a game version? Tomatoes or no tomatoes? And which other classics of the traditional Italian restaurant menu would you like to see revived? My vote, for what it's worth, goes for a properly buttery saltimbocca alla romana.**

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