

Don't chicken out; add basil to poultry

Italy has long had a love affair with basil. The sweet-scented herb of the mint family is as celebrated in the northern part of the country (Basil is the heart of the famous pesto sauce from Genoa) as it is in robustly seasoned tomato dishes of southern Italy and Sicily. Here in America, the popularity of Italian foods has been largely responsible for an increase of 722 percent in the consumption of basil over the past decade.

Below are two Southern Italian specialties using economical and popular chicken — typically seasoned with tomatoes, basil, onion and garlic. In Spezzato di Pollo Piccante (chicken with tomatoes, peppers and capers), the basil is added at the beginning of the simmering for mellow cooked-in taste, and again at the end, for a livelier herb flavor.

Pollo Spezzato e Melanzane (chicken with eggplant) is a favorite in Sicily. Boned chicken breasts and sliced eggplant are coated with a bread crumb mixture seasoned with basil and salt. Then they're sautéed till golden and layered with a tomato-basil sauce and topped with mozzarella before baking.

• SPEZZATO DI POLLO PICCANTE
(Chicken with Tomatoes, Peppers and Capers)

2 olive oil
3 lbs. chicken parts
2 cups diced fresh tomatoes

1 cup green pepper strips
1/2 cup sliced pitted green olives
1/2 cup instant minced onion
2 tsp. capers, drained
3 tsp. basil leaves, divided
1/4 tsp. salt
1/4 tsp. instant minced garlic
Pinch of ground red pepper
1 cup dry white wine

In a large sauce pot heat oil until hot. Add chicken; brown on all sides; drain off drippings. Add tomatoes, green pepper, olives, onion, capers, 1 1/2 teaspoons of the basil, salt, garlic, red pepper and wine. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer, covered, until chicken is partially cooked, about 30 minutes. Crush and add remaining 1 1/2 teaspoons basil.

Simmer, covered, until chicken is tender, about 10 minutes. Note: an additional 1 teaspoon crushed basil may be added during the last 10 minutes of cooking for a livelier herb flavor, if desired. Yield: 4 portions.

POLLO SPEZZATO E MELANZANE
(Chicken with Eggplant)

1 medium-sized eggplant (1 lb.), peeled and cut in 1/4-inch thick slices
4 tsp. salt, divided
1 can (28 oz.) whole tomatoes, broken up
1 cup dry white wine
1 tsp. instant minced onion
3/4 tsp. basil leaves, divided
1/4 tsp. instant minced garlic
1 1/4 cups plain dry bread crumbs
2 chicken breasts, skinned, boned and

flattened (1 lb.)
2 eggs, beaten
4 oz. mozzarella cheese, sliced

Sprinkle both sides of eggplant slices with 3 teaspoons of the salt. Place in a glass or stainless steel bowl. Set aside for 1 hour. Meanwhile, in a medium saucepan place tomatoes, wine, onion, 2 teaspoons of the basil, garlic and 1/4 teaspoon of the salt. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer, covered, for 15 minutes (makes 2 cups sauce); set aside. Crush remaining 1 teaspoon basil; combine with bread crumbs and remaining 1/4 teaspoon salt. Rinse off reserved eggplant and press out liquid.

Dip eggplant and chicken breasts in eggs and coat with bread crumb mixture, shaking off excess. In a large skillet heat 2 tablespoons of the oil until hot. Add a single layer of eggplant; fry until golden, about 1 minute on each side; remove from pan. Repeat with remaining eggplant and the chicken (fry chicken until cooked through, about 5 minutes) adding more oil as needed; set aside. In a 2-quart shallow casserole place 1/2 cup sauce.

Top with half of the eggplant and 1/2 cup sauce. Repeat layers alternating chicken and eggplant with sauce, ending with sauce. Arrange cheese on top. Cover with foil (can be made ahead to this point and refrigerated). Place in a preheated 350 degree oven until hot, about 30 minutes. If desired, broil under a hot broiler for 1 minute. Yield: 4 to 6 portions.

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Noodles 'n nuts: lots of nutrition

Culinary creativity need not mean hours in the kitchen when you serve California Almond Fettuccini. Combined with a robust red wine and crisp green salad, your family and friends will love this lunch or dinner-time treat.

It's gloriously easy to make: just toss cooked noodles with the rest of the ingredients and season. Although there's no meat in this dish, there's plenty of protein from almonds, cream and cheese. Roasted slivered almonds add extra good flavor, crunchy texture and gourmet flair, as well as making an important nutritional contribution.

CALIFORNIA ALMOND FETTUCINI
8 oz. very thin egg noodles
1/4 cup butter or margarine
1 cup grated Parmesan cheese
1/4 cup blanched slivered almonds, toasted
1/2 cup whipping cream, whipped
2 tsp. sliced green onions
Salt to taste
Pepper to taste

Cook noodles in boiling salted water in large saucepan as package directs. Turn into colander to drain. In same pan, melt butter; stir in noodles. Heat and gently toss for 2 minutes. Add remaining ingredients. Toss slightly to mix. Serve at once. Makes 3 main dish servings.

Raisins, apple juice sweeten sauerkraut

As spring's balmy breezes blow, how comforting to serve a hearty traditional family favorite — Sausage 'n Sauerkraut.

This economical dish has the flavorful zest of plump juicy raisins and apple juice added to the sauerkraut plus a tangy sauce that can be conveniently prepared and served alongside this tasty entree.

Since the sausage is fully-cooked, it will take only minutes to heat. Then combine the sauerkraut, raisins and the apple juice and mix together the apple jelly and chili sauce to create a piquant sauce for that added touch.

Remember also that smoked sausage is a good buy — it's convenient, nutritional and economical. As an important source of high-quality protein, essential B-vitamins and minerals, it offers a good nutritional return for your food dollar. Remember, with sausage there is no waste, so you can count on one pound to yield four satisfying servings.

SAUSAGE 'N SAUERKRAUT DELUXE
1 lb. "fully-cooked" smoked pork link sausage
1/2 cup apple juice
1/2 cup apple jelly
1/2 cup prepared chili sauce
1 can (16 oz.) sauerkraut, drained
1/4 cup raisins, plumped

Cut sausage into 4 equal pieces. Place sausage and 1/2 cup apple juice in large skillet, cover tightly and cook slowly 5 to 7 minutes. Remove cover and continue cooking 5 minutes. Meanwhile combine apple jelly and chili sauce in small saucepan and cook slowly until jelly is melted and sauce is thick and bubbly. Remove sausage to warm platter. Place sauerkraut, raisins and remaining 1/2 cup apple juice into skillet and cook over medium heat 4 minutes, stirring occasionally. Serve sausage with sauerkraut and pass the sauce. 4 servings.

To plump raisins, cover with very hot tap water and soak 2 to 5 minutes; drain.

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