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Metcalf Family Goose & Cabbage

(After Julia Child)

The Metcalf Family traditionally enjoys a goose with meat and chestnut dressing served with cabbage as the main complimentary dish. We prepare the goose and the cabbage according to a very old French braising method. Cabbage is braised separately and alongside. Side dishes of potato mash and green beans (or Brussels sprouts) complete the fare. Served with an abundance of Pinotage (a French Bordeaux), it is a terrific feast ... especially with family and good friends.

The meal requires a number of distinct operations, which we start on Christmas Eve, and extend throughout Christmas Day. Sharon and I work as a team and share the work at a leisurely pace. The major steps:

Chestnuts

2 lbs whole unpeeled chestnuts divided

Incise a gash across the back of each chestnut, about ¼-inch wide. Place in pot of cold water. Bring water to boil and remove from heat. Remove chestnuts one at a time and peel off the now-softened shell. Best to use a special peeling knife with a short hooked blade (available at good culinary shops). Take your time and enjoy a little wine as you work. Make sure the dark skin within the peel is removed (since it is quite bitter). Segregate about 20 whole chestnuts for the cabbage; the rest are for the goose. Set aside all the chestnuts in the refrigerator overnight.

Pork and Veal Stuffing

Known by the French as farce, this dressing of ground meats with chestnuts combine with the flavors of the goose in ways un-imaginable.

½ cup very finely minced onions

2 tablespoons butter

A large mixing bowl

Cook onions slowly with the butter in a small skillet for 10 minutes. Scrape them into the mixing bowl.

½ cup port or Madeira

¾ lb (1 1/2 cup) each ground pork and veal

1 cup ground pork sausage

1 cup ground veal

½ lb (1 cup) pork fat (can use fat trimmed from thick bacon)

2 lightly beaten eggs

1 ½ teaspoons salt

1/8 teaspoon pepper

big pinch allspice

½ teaspoon thyme

1 clove minced garlic

If you can get your butcher to grind the pork, veal and fat together, do it. Otherwise, chop the pork fat into very small pieces and combine with the ground pork and veal.

Pour the wine into a skillet and reduce by half. Scrape into mixing bowl. Add all the ingredients and beat vigorously with a wooden spoon until the mixture has lightened in texture and is thoroughly blended. Set aside.

The Goose

9 pound goose
1 ½ pounds of fresh chestnuts
4 cups stuffing

Preheat oven to 450 degrees.

Remove the liver, neck, heart, and other bits from within the cavity. Chop the liver into small pieces and sauté in butter. Combine the sautéed liver with the meat mixture.

Remove any globs of fat from within the cavity (there will be lots). Place fat in a small skillet over low heat. This will render the fat and result in a small amount of crackling. Some of the rendered fat will be used later. The rest can be a gift for a favorite German friend ... who might love the pure fat.

Season the cavity of the goose with salt. Starting with the meat stuffing, loosely place alternate layers of stuffing and of chestnuts into the goose, leaving a good inch of unfilled space at the vent. (It is important NOT to pack the stuffing, as it will result in a brick-like mass, which you will not enjoy later.) Sew or skewer the vent, truss the goose and liberally prick the skin. Dry the stuffed bird thoroughly, and set breast side up in the braising pan. (For years we have used an old roasting pan, which I probably inherited from my mother.)

Brown the goose lightly in the hot oven for 20 minutes, turning it four times so it will color evenly. This operation results in a lot of hot grease splatter, so be careful!

Turn oven down to 325 degrees.

Salt the goose and place it breast up in the roaster.

Now, help yourself to some wine.

The Braise

Goose bits
1 ½ sliced onions
½ cup sliced carrots
4 tablespoons goose fat
6 tablespoons flour
4 cups boiling stock (beef, chicken, or turkey)
3 cups dry white wine (Sauvignon Blanc)

Stir flour into very large skillet with rendered goose fat and brown slowly for several minutes. Brown all goose bits and vegetables in the skillet, ensuring that everything is coated with the browned flour.

Off heat, blend the wine into the hot stock. Simmer for a moment to drive off the alcohol. Pour the contents of the skillet into the roaster around the goose. Add the stock and wine so that the liquid reaches about one third way up the goose. Bring to a simmer on top of the stove.

Make a tent of parchment paper to cover the goose. This tent should set about an inch above the goose and extend over the edges of the braising pan. Cover the braising pan and ensure that the lid presses the tent to the braising pan rim. Set in the middle level of the preheated oven.

Braise for about 2 ½ hours.

Have some more wine for yourself.

Finishing

Remove goose from the braising pan and set on platter. Cover with foil and let rest. After resting (about 30 minutes), remove the meat and chestnut stuffing, and set aside in serving bowl.

Allow braising liquid in the roasting pan to cool so fat will rise to surface. Remove the solids from the braise and discard. Skim the fat with a ladle, or decant with jars. It's a messy job. (Save the fat for your German friend.) Boil down the liquid rapidly until it is thick enough to coat a spoon. Stir in ½ cup port and simmer the reduced liquid for 2 minutes. Strain the sauce into a bowl. Spoon over sliced goose when serving.

The Cabbage (Braised Red Cabbage with Red Wine and Chestnuts)

¼ lb chunk bacon
½ cup thinly sliced carrots
1 cup sliced onions
3 tablespoons rendered fresh goose fat
2 lbs red cabbage leaves cut into ½ inch slices
5 to 6 quart, covered, fireproof casserole

Preheat oven to 325 degrees (can be same oven as for goose).

Remove rind and cut bacon into strips 1 ½ inches long and ¼ inch across. Simmer for 10 minutes in a quart of water. Drain. Cook the bacon, carrots, and onions, in rendered goose fat, about 10 minutes without browning. Stir in the cabbage leaves and when well covered with fat, cover and cook slowly for 10 minutes.

2 cups diced tart apples
2 cloves mashed garlic
¼ teaspoon ground bay leaf
1/8 teaspoon clove
1/8 teaspoon nutmeg
½ teaspoon salt
1/8 teaspoon pepper
2 cups Chianti
2 cups beef bouillon (stock)

Stir in all ingredients listed above, bring to simmer on top of the stove. Cover and place in middle level of preheated oven. A parchment tent (same as for the goose) will help ensure circulation of trapped vapor during braising. Regulate heat so cabbage bubbles slowly for 3 to 3 1/2 hours.

24 whole, peeled chestnuts

Add the chestnuts to the cabbage, cover and return casserole to oven for 1 to 1 ½ hours more, or until the chestnuts are tender and all the liquid has been absorbed.

Serve alongside sliced goose, meat and chestnut dressing, and other side dishes.

And have some Pinotage.

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