

Bonjour, Provence!

The south of France offers us a wide assortment of “comfort foods” guaranteed to please no matter what your tastes. Each area has its own food styles that also change depending on the season due in large part to the availability of fresh local ingredients. Driving south from Burgundy in France you find that Provence is actually many small provinces that vary a great deal. The sweeping valleys of the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence are soothingly green, tranquil and expansive with a sparse population. It offers a flavor similar to rural Virginia.

As you continue south, foothills change to lower, rolling hills and civilization begins to thicken with much of the newer construction being homes used by city dwellers as summer retreats. On a hot summer day you are assaulted by the heady fragrance of lavender as you drive past acres of its pastel blossoms grown in long rows that seem to go on forever. You are experiencing just one more face of Provence.

Sooner or later your road will end as you reach the blue green waters of the Mediterranean Sea and its long expanses of beach populated by those who have come to enjoy the French Riviera and the “Cuisine of the Sun.”

The foods of southern France are certainly not the complex dishes typical of classic French cuisine that Julia Child first taught us to appreciate. The selections are more typical of the simpler foods we appreciate here in the Midwest and are made from fresh local ingredients simply seasoned and perfect for a family feast.

Two of the common threads that bind these foods together are use of massive quantities of garlic and extra virgin “cold pressed” olive oil. The other staple found in every well-equipped kitchen of the region is a blend of herbs called “Herbs de Provence” which may include thyme, rosemary, sage and parsley to name only a few possibilities in different proportions based mostly on old family recipes. Many versions of these herbs can be had in the U.S.A. at your finer grocery centers in the spice area.

I have two typical dishes from the area I’d like to share with you. Both can be made from our local ingredients and have a styling guaranteed to please many a pallet especially during these colder months. There’s something about garlic cooking in any dish that immediately warms you up when you walk in from a winter storm and my first recipe has enough garlic to handle -20° F!

Chicken with 40 Cloves of Garlic

Poulet Aux Quarante Gousses D’Ail

A classic Provençal method for preparing roast chicken!

1 roasting chicken, about 4 lbs., cut into serving pieces with thighs and legs separated
sea salt & fresh ground black pepper
½ lb. fresh garlic cloves (count of 40), separated and peeled

1 ½ tablespoons Herbs de Provence
½ cup good olive oil
½ cup dry white wine

Season the chicken pieces to personal taste with salt and pepper. Put them in a mixing bowl and add garlic cloves, herbs, olive oil and white wine. Use your hands to mix everything well. Cover and leave to marinate at room temperature for 1 to 2 hours.

Preheat the oven to 300° F. Place the chicken, garlic and remaining marinade into an ovenproof earthenware casserole if available, or any well made casserole with a tight fitting lid. Arrange chicken pieces evenly in dish spreading the garlic out to mix well with the chicken and bake until chicken is tender, about 1 ¾ hours. If you would like, you may add a few sprigs of fresh rosemary to your chicken before serving as a traditional garnish.

Serve directly from the casserole.

The side dishes to compliment the chicken entrée should include a potato dish of your choice and I would use a fresh vegetable as well. An all time favorite is made with cauliflower and allows you to present cauliflower well cooked but not mushy, and falling apart. (Sound familiar?) Here's a simple one even the kids will like.

Cauliflower Gratin

Gratin De Choufleur

This is a Niçois gratin which differs from those made in other parts of Provence because of its dryer style which emphasizes the vegetable flavors more so than a rich sauce. This dish has a great mouth texture and is beautifully simple!

1 unblemished white cauliflower, separated into individual florets with large florets split lengthwise
¼ cup extra virgin cold pressed olive oil
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
fresh ground nutmeg
2/3 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
1/3 cup Italian bread crumbs

Preheat oven to 400° F. Plunge florets into a large pot of boiling salted water and cook until just barely tender. They should still be resistant to a knife tip stuck directly into the stem, about 5 minutes. Drain well and toss the florets in a bowl with olive oil.

Spoon the florets into a gratin dish, arranging them snugly. Sprinkle sparingly with sea salt and add fresh ground black pepper to taste. Give the dish a light dusting of ground nutmeg. Finally, sprinkle with Parmesan cheese and bread crumbs, dribbling the last bit of olive oil from the marinade into the dish.

Place the gratin into the oven and bake long enough to nicely color the surface, about 10 minutes. Serve hot!

I would make sure to serve the meal we have detailed here with a good crusty peasant style bread and one of the delicious traditional wines of the region. One of the neatest aspects of the wines of southern France is the relatively high quality and the surprisingly low costs.

The 2002 Hauterive Vin de Pays de L'Aude is a pleasant and very soft red wine produced from a blend of Grenache, Carignan and Gamay grapes. The flavor style is fruit forward with hints of berry and fresh homemade jam. The wine has substance but with relatively tame tannins. I've been recommending it to friends who are enjoying red wines for the first time and they love it.

If you prefer a good white wine with your garlic and chicken, Importer Robert Kacher brings in a 2001 Chateau de Campuget Blanc that Robert Parker rates an 88. Kacher is one of our favorite buddies when it comes to terrific wines out of the south of France and you'll find that its not only delicious but also inexpensive.

Get some garlic and good wines into your life for their health benefits and you'll also find out who your real friends are! Enjoy!!

You can always reach us for questions and advice at (888) 288-0668.