

Cassoulet American

I have a theory. We as Americans have taken an awful lot of criticism over the last several years on the world front for things we have done, particularly from the French. I know from experience that some Americans have responded by boycotting French products, such as wine, to show our Gallic neighbors that we don't appreciate what they are saying about us. I contend, however, that if you want to really tick off the French mess with their recipes!

Cassoulet is not only a famous casserole produced originally in the Southwest region of France, it is cultural and a passion with most serious French diners. There are specific versions of the dish depending on what town you are from and most French dismiss anything but their own traditional style as a culinary abomination not to be taken seriously, much less eaten!

Ariane Daguin, proprietor of D'Artagnan specialty French foods where I acquire products like domestic foie gras says, "I am from Auch, and ours is the best (Cassoulet). Everyone thinks theirs is the greatest – except in my case, it's true." If you know someone who is French, ask them about Cassoulet. You'll see exactly what we're talking about.

But back to our original premise...as Americans we have enjoyed French Fries, French toast, French cut green beans, French bread, French silk pie and on and on. I would say it's time to give a little of that back. If French President Jacques Chirac can't take the heat, well you know how that goes.

Here is a "terrific" Americanized recipe version of the traditional French dish, Cassoulet. It calls for ingredients that are readily available and holds true to the spirit of the dish, which is literally translated as "meat and bean stew."

Cassoulet American

(serves 12)

1 pound white beans, uncooked (may use great northern or navy)
½ pound regular bacon or jowl bacon in medium thick slices
1 pound kielbasa sausage
1 pound chicken pieces, skin removed
1 pound pork country ribs, roughly cubed
2 cups sweet onion, chopped
1 cup celery, chopped
1 cup carrots, coarsely chopped
5 cloves minced garlic
¼ cup thin julienne sliced sun dried tomatoes in oil
1 tablespoon thyme
2 1/2 cups chicken broth
1 cup dry white wine
2 cups bread crumbs

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
Fresh parsley, chopped

Rinse your beans and remove any that are broken or discolored. Place them in a heavy bottomed pot with 6 cups water and cover. Bring your beans to a boil and cook for 5 minutes. Remove them from the heat and allow them to soak in the pot for two hours.

In a large “Dutch” oven on the stove, cook your bacon at medium heat until crisp and transfer to a plate to drain into paper towels. Using the bacon drippings, place the Kielbasa, which has been cut into $\frac{3}{4}$ inch chunks into the Dutch oven and cook until brown. Place the browned Kielbasa with the bacon to drain.

Place cubed country ribs into the pot and brown on all sides followed by the chicken pieces. Add onion, celery, garlic and carrots to the pot. Stir and cook until the vegetables are tender then return the bacon and Kielbasa to the pot. Add in the chicken broth, sun dried tomatoes and thyme along with your beans, which have been drained. Cover and reduce your heat to simmer. Cook for 20 minutes.

Preheat your oven to 325°F. Stir your white wine and fresh parsley into the Dutch oven and place it into your oven with the lid on for 1 hour. Carefully remove the Cassoulet from the oven, remove the lid and spread the breadcrumbs over the top. Drizzle in the olive oil and return the dish to the oven without the lid. Cook for an additional 10 minutes until the breadcrumbs are brown and have formed a crust of sorts over the top.

Serve immediately right out of the Dutch oven with a fresh green salad and hot crusty bread.

I would remind you that some recipes turn out to be much more than their individual parts and this one certainly fits that category. The French have an intense passion for Cassoulet, with many restaurants specializing in only that one dish on their menu. I hope you’ll try it and see what all the fuss is about!

The area this dish comes from in Southwestern France is what we would describe as “country.” In keeping with the style of wines “traditionally” served with Cassoulet, I have a couple choices that I think would support the flavors really well.

If you are still drinking French wines even after the comments I made earlier, you’ll find that the 2002 Hauterive Vin de Pays de L’Aude from Dufouleur is a fun and easy to enjoy red wine from the area we’ve been focused on. Vin de Pays translates to “country wine” in French wine jargon and L’Aude is a designation of the area it is coming from.

The wine is produced from a blend of red grapes that include Carignan, Grenache, and Syrah giving the wine a decidedly fruity style without tons of residual sweetness. This is a simple red that is perfect for enjoyment anytime but particularly during the warmer months.

If you'd like the same type of wine experience but are not crazy about French, look no further than the 2003 Jacob's Creek Grenache – Shiraz from South Eastern Australia. The winery was recognized as Wine & Spirits Magazine's 2003 International Value Winery of the Year. I think they made a great choice.

This red has what is called "fruit driven" styling, meaning that you will find the flavor is focused on characteristics allowed to come through from grapes taken from a particularly good harvest. What you won't experience is over use of oak, which sometimes tastes like you've got a piece of the barrel clenched between your teeth. I believe this type of red wine is a great place for people to go for a red wine experience when most reds fail to satisfy their taste needs.

Let us know if you have any questions or comments. You can always reach us at 888-288-0668 or on the Internet at www.winedog.com. Cheers!