

A Stop in Marrakesh

One of the most popular meals I used to make at our beach house in Mississippi and even on the boat was a slow cooked stew using chicken thighs, dried apricots, green olives, and a jar of Moroccan sauce from Williams Sonoma. Super easy to make in the crock pot but very exotic. It captured the imagination of everyone who tasted it. One of the downsides of stocking my pantry from Williams Sonoma was that all good things usually came to an end. They stopped selling the sauce, so I had to learn how to make it for real. Chicken tagine with apricots and green olives is a classic sweet and savory Moroccan dish that pairs perfectly with the many of our full-bodied Lodi white wines like Roussanne, Viognier, or a buttery Chardonnay (one that has gone through malolactic fermentation). It's even better when you add a little splash of Lodi to the dish itself.

Ingredients

- 2 lemons
- 2 TBS fresh ginger, peeled (about 1-1/2 inch of a root)
- 3 TBS Lodi olive oil
- 2-1/2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 3 tsp salt
- 1 tsp freshly ground black pepper
- 2 yellow onions, cut small dice
- 6 cloves garlic, cut fine brunoise
- 2 tsp *ras el hanout*
- 2 TBS tomato paste
- 1/2 cup Lodi Roussanne wine
- 3-1/2 cups chicken stock
- 1 cup dried apricots, cut into halves (6 ounce package)
- 2/3 cup green olives, cut into halves
- 1 cup (dry) Basmati rice



Preparing the Flavors

Remove the zest of the lemons (the yellow part of the skin) using a microplane or zester. Take care not to dig into the white flesh of the skin. The white stuff will add off flavors. Cut the zested lemons in half and squeeze the juice into a small container. Grate the peeled ginger into a separate cup (you can also cut it fine brunoise, if you don't want to scrape your fingers on the grate).

Making the Chicken

Heat a 7-quart Dutch oven or large sauteuse pan to just above medium heat. Coat the bottom with 1 tablespoon of olive oil. Add half the chicken, season with salt and pepper and brown all sides (about 5 minutes). Remove the chicken to a separate plate using a slotted spoon or tongs.

Wait about 1-2 minutes to let the pot surface heat back up and allow the excess liquid to boil off. Coat the bottom of the pot with a little more olive oil and brown the remaining chicken, seasoning with salt and pepper. Remove the chicken to the plate with the rest of the browned chicken. You may see some nice brown "crud" form on the bottom of the pot (this is the "fond"). Before the fond burns, quickly add the remaining tablespoon of olive oil and onion to the pot. Season the onions with 1 teaspoon of salt. Cook, stirring frequently until the onion is soft (about 4 to 5 minutes). While stirring the onions, scrape the fond off the bottom of the pot and mix it with the onions.

Add the lemon zest, garlic, ginger, and ras el hanout. Cook, stirring, until the garlic is fragrant (about 30 seconds). Add the tomato paste and stir for about a minute. Add the wine and stir for about a minute. Scrape the remaining crud off the bottom of the pot. Add the chicken stock, lemon juice, apricots, olives, and chicken. Bring the mixture to a boil and reduce to a simmer. In a simmer, steam will be coming off the surface and a few bubbles will be gently popping on the surface. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the sauce reduces and thickens. This will take about 45 minutes to an hour, depending on how thick you want the sauce to be. At 45 minutes, there should be just enough liquid to almost but not quite cover the solid pieces. The mixture should not slosh around when you stir it. After about an hour, there should just be enough liquid to coat the solid pieces. The chicken will start to break down and help thicken the stew. You can tell that the stew is done when you pick some up in your spoon, tilt the spoon, and no liquid runs off it. Remove the pot from the stove to a trivet and cover until ready to serve.

Cook the Basmati rice according to the instructions on the package.

Serving

I make a mound of rice by stuffing it into a 4-ounce metal dipping cup and quickly turning the cup upside down in the center of the plate. I pour the stew around the mound of rice. You can sprinkle some parsley or cilantro flakes on top for color, but sparingly. You don't want to overwhelm the subtle flavors of the sauce. Serves 4 to 6 people.

Tips and Tricks

Mise en place is important for this dish. Have all your ingredients prepared and ready to add to the pot before you turn on the heat. You will need to add them quickly and at the right times.

You should start the rice after the chicken has been simmering for about 45 minutes. That way, it will be ready about the same time as the chicken.

Ras el hanout is a Moroccan spice mix that you should be able to get at any high-end grocery store. If you cannot find it, mix the following spices together:

- 1/2 tsp ground cumin
- 1/2 tsp ground ginger
- 1/4 tsp ground cinnamon
- 1/4 tsp ground coriander
- 1/4 tsp allspice

Most people who make this type of dish grate their ginger. I prefer to chop my ginger to a fine brunoise (about 1/16-inch pieces) so that I don't have to move my fingers so close to the sharp grate. The piece of ginger root is pretty small. I've done it both ways and it doesn't seem to affect the flavor or texture of the dish.

A California Roussanne can be hard to find if you don't live near Lodi. You can substitute Viognier, which is sold most everywhere. You can also order some of the best Roussanne in the nation from Acquiesce winery in Lodi, which ships to most states.