

Vermentino • Chicken Key West

Vermentino (pronounced vur-men-TEE-no) is an Italian grape grown mostly in Sardinia with some grown in Corsica and Southern France. As of 2008, there were only 20 acres planted in California, almost all of it in--guess where--Lodi. Ten years ago, a few die-hard Vermentino lovers predicted that this grape would become the next big thing in American white wine, but it's been slow to catch on. It was only this year (2018) that Vermentino finally earned its own varietal category in the San Francisco Chronicle wine judging competition. Incidentally, this year's top Vermentino also took the white wine sweepstakes, being judged the top white wine in America. California Vermentino can be hard to find--unless you're in Lodi. My middle school classmate, Kevin Delu, grows most of Lodi's Vermentino grapes. Woodbridge by Robert Mondavi makes a Vermentino wine, but they only sell it at their tasting room on Woodbridge Road. Peltier winery makes a great Vermentino with lots of tart. Prie Winery just released their first Vermentino (also from Kevin's grapes). Look for Vermentino to steadily grow in popularity as more people taste it.

Origin: No one is exactly sure where Vermentino came from. It could be Greek, or the Romans may have brought it to Sardinia. So little of it is planted in California that there are no published historical records of how it got here.

Tasting and Serving: There are two different styles of Vermentino wine based on winemaker's taste: a buttery style (from malolactic fermentation) and a lighter, more floral and zestier style (with no MLF). Most California Vermentinos skip the MLF and emphasize the wine's crisp, light, floral characteristics. These wines have almost no color--the liquid looks like a glass of water. A Lodi Vermentino has aromas of apple, pear, and citrus. In your mouth, the ample phenolics make it taste slightly bitter and tart with a relatively long finish for a white wine. The aftertaste often reminds you of almonds. Serve Vermentino at 50 degrees (30 minutes in a refrigerator).

Pairing: Vermentino goes best with medium-weight dishes that are rich in herbs and spices, like fish or chicken tacos. It's also a great wine to pair with garlicky dishes like Pesto. Make sure that the acidity level of the dish does not overwhelm the light acidity of the wine. Extremely tart dishes or those with pickled elements may not work well. I chose Peltier Winery 2017 Vermentino to pair with my Chicken Key West. I was at the Peltier tasting room picking up some Pinot grigio, and Nina talked me into buying a bottle. I tried a couple foods with it, but they didn't work because of the wine's tart aftertaste. About that same time, my old Florida neighbor, Mike DeRoy, called me during a visit to Southern California. I told him about this book project, and he asked if I included my Chicken Key West recipe. I told him that it didn't really fit. "That's the best thing you make! We've been making it for thirty years, ever since you showed us how." A couple weeks later, John at Prie Winery poured me a glass of his new Vermentino, and we started brainstorming food pairings for it. Then the light bulb finally went off. The subtle tartness and buttery texture of the Key lime pan gravy tamed the tartness of the wine just enough to bring out the wine's fruit and create a perfect blend of flavors that took me back to the Florida Keys, if only for a few moments.

Chicken Key West

Who hasn't heard the song, Margaritaville? I had heard the name, Jimmy Buffett, but it wasn't until 1980, when I moved to Florida for college, that I fully embraced the Jimmy Buffett Caribbean Rock and Roll lifestyle. One of the rituals was to visit Key West. Before he really hit it big in the late 1980's, Buffett enjoyed moderate success in the 1970's and settled into semi-retirement in the early 1980's. He opened a tiny one-room T-shirt shop in Key West called "The Margaritaville Store." One of the gems he sold there was the Margaritaville Cookbook. Not the fancy corporate celebrity chef publication you see today, but a binder with local recipes collected by Key West residents Ruth Perez and Brenda Vidal and illustrated by their family and friends. Brenda created this chicken dish using "Key" limes. A Key lime is a tiny yellowish fruit with a distinctive tart flavor. Back then, I had to travel to the Florida Keys to find bottles of Nellie and Joe's Key West lime juice. After moving back to Lodi in the late 1980's, I had to bring several bottles home with me whenever I visited Florida. Today, it's available in just about every grocery store. The only problem with Brenda's recipe was that all the incredible flavor left behind in the pan got thrown away. I harnessed it for a pan gravy that's off the nautical charts.

Ingredients

- 1 whole fryer chicken cut into quarters
- 6 ounces unsalted butter (1-1/2 sticks)
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 tsp freshly ground pepper
- 1/2 tsp paprika
- 1 large yellow onion, peeled and sliced thin
- 4 cloves garlic, cut fine brunoise
- 1/3 cup Nellie and Joe's Key West lime juice
- 1 cup chicken stock
- 2-1/2 tsp Gold Medal Wondra flour



Cooking the Chicken

We use a whole chicken cut into quarters for this recipe rather than boneless, skinless breasts. The Official Hungry has a good video on how to cut up the whole chicken into quarters. You can use four boneless, skinless breasts (see the "Tips and Tricks" section), but the whole chicken leaves more drippings to make the pan sauce and creates more flavor. Heat a 4-quart sauté pan with a tight-fitting lid to medium heat. Add the butter. Once the butter is melted, gently put the chicken in, smooth side down. Cook, uncovered, until the chicken parts turn golden brown, and turn them over to brown the other side (about 5 minutes each side). Lift each piece once or twice on each side to keep butter between the chicken and pan and slide the pieces to different spots on the pan to brown more evenly. When both sides have been browned, sprinkle with salt, pepper, and paprika. Add the onion and garlic to the pan and cook for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally and turning the pieces over once. Baste the chicken parts with the pan juices.

Pour the lime juice over the chicken, stir, cover the pan, and reduce heat to low and simmer for 25 minutes. Check after 5 minutes to make sure the liquid is simmering (steam rising and a few bubbles popping at the surface every second). Make sure the liquid is not boiling off. Adjust the heat as needed. Baste the chicken with the juice and turn the pieces over. Replace the cover. Turn and baste after 15 minutes and replace the cover. After a total of 25 minutes covered, remove the cover, increase heat to medium, and continue to cook, uncovered, turning and basting the parts until they are a golden color (about 5 minutes). Turn the stove off and remove the chicken to a serving bowl. Cover the chicken pieces to keep them warm.

Making the Sauce

Pour the pan drippings through a fine mesh stainless steel strainer into a bowl and discard the solids. Pour the liquid into a gravy fat separator (page 96). Allow the clear fat to accumulate at the top (about 2 minutes). If the level of non-fat juices (cloudy part on the bottom) is below 16 ounces, add enough chicken stock to make at least 16 ounces of juice. Allow to sit another minute and check the level. Release the non-fat juices back into the sauté pan that you cooked the chicken in. Stop releasing the liquid when it changes color. Discard the clear liquid fat.



Turn the heat back up to medium and bring the liquid to a simmer. Add the Wondra flour, a half teaspoon every 30 seconds or so while stirring continuously until the sauce begins to thicken. The sauce is ready when you run your spoon across the bottom of the pan and the liquid *slowly* backfills where you scraped the spoon (see photo to the right). You want the sauce to be just thick enough so that the liquid coats a wooden spoon, but you don't want it to get like mayonnaise, where big globs hang on the spoon. Stop cooking when the sauce is a little thinner than you want it. The thickening process goes very quickly and it will thicken some as it cools. When the sauce is ready, immediately remove the pan from the stove and pour the sauce into a cup to stop the cooking process. This should make at least 1/2 cup.



Presentation

Spoon about 2 to 3 tablespoons of sauce on the plate and set a piece of chicken on it. Serve a half cup of my Easy Rice Pilaf-Wild Rice Style on the side. I like to press the rice into a 6-ounce sauce cup, turn it upside down on the plate, and lift it off to make a cone of rice. Serves 4 people. If you have 5 or 6 people with smaller appetites, you can cut the breasts in half.

The California Ingredient

Since the passage of Prevention of Farm Animal Cruelty Act (Proposition 2) in 2008, there has been radical change in the California poultry industry, with many commercial farmers moving quickly to pastured, cage-free systems. Proposition 2, which passed with 83% of the vote, ended the cruel and inhumane confinement of chickens on factory farms in California, requiring their living spaces to be big enough for them to turn around, lie down, and fully extend their legs and wings. It makes the chickens healthier and more disease resistant. It also helps small family farms compete with large factory farms, which makes the "cage-free" option more affordable. I know we end up eating these birds, but we want them to have a decent life while they're around.

Tips and Tricks

The best way to make this meal is to do your *mise en place* for both the chicken and the rice before turning on the stove. Sauté the rice first and put it in the oven. The 35-minute oven time will give you plenty of time to sauté and steam the chicken. Make the pan gravy while the rice is cooling. The rice should stay warm in a covered pot setting on a trivet for a half hour after taking it out of the oven. The chicken and the rice will both be ready at about the same time.

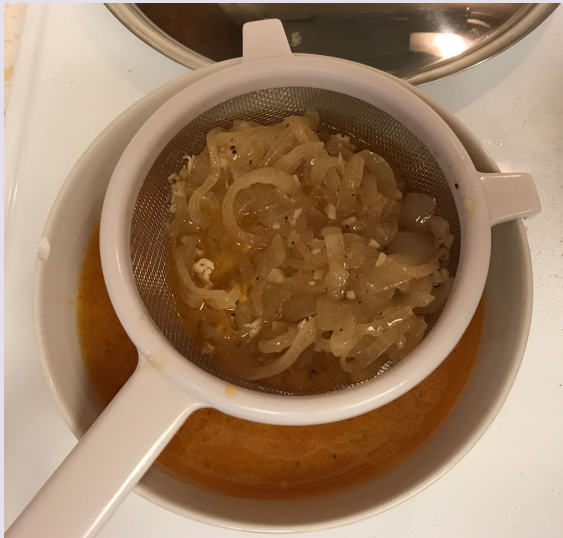
If you want to use boneless, skinless chicken breasts, reduce the cooking time or they will be really over-cooked (dry and tough). Boneless breast cooking times should be 3 minutes per side for browning, 10 minutes simmering covered, and omit the extra 5 minutes uncovered. Check the internal temperature of each breast with a meat thermometer to make sure it is between 160 and 165 degrees. If it is too low, leave it in the pan a little longer.



The author relaxing on the porch of the original Margaritaville T-shirt shop in Key West, Florida (1985)

Cool Gadget: The Gravy Fat Separator

The best gravy is made from the drippings of the meat that you are cooking, combined with whatever butter or oils you use in the cooking process. Unfortunately, oil and water don't mix. Over time, the fat tends to separate from the rest of the liquid and float on top of it, creating a nasty looking, two-phase puddle of stuff. To make a smooth, consistent gravy that will hold up through the meal service, you need to remove the fat and use only the lean juices. The one gadget I always have on hand when making a Thanksgiving dinner is my Swing Away 4-Cup Easy Release Fat/Gravy Separator. Its lid is a strainer to keep large chunkies out (though I run all my drippings through a stainless steel fine mesh strainer first). The chamber holds a quart of liquid, its markings show you how much liquid it's holding, and it has a pull handle that releases the non-fat drippings from the bottom. Dishwasher safe, too.



Run the pan drippings through a stainless steel fine mesh strainer and press remaining liquid from the solids



Pour the liquid into the fat separator through the strainer on the top. Let it sit for 2 minutes



Pull the handle open slightly to release the juice into the sauté pan



Release the handle to close the drain when the non-fat juices have drained out