

Central Valley Chicken Pâté

You're wine tasting with your friends tomorrow, and it's your turn to bring lunch. I guess you can stop by Subway in the morning and get a bunch of sandwiches. That's wrong on several levels. First, you may not get everyone's favorite meats and toppings. Subs are pretty bland without onions, pickles, and other toppings, but then the sandwiches with those toppings (and their bags and wrappers) may be too pungent to pair well with expensive wine. They also tend to leave a lingering oniony smell on everything around them. Just a really bad idea.

Picture this: your friends ask what's for lunch, and you say "pâté" (pronounced pah-TAY). In France, that would bring smiles. In Lodi, you would probably hear groans. Pâté is French for "paste." It's spreadable and usually made from chicken livers or other parts that we usually throw out--an acquired taste. But you say, "try this," and hand out the sandwiches. Everybody loves them! That's because here in California's Central Valley, we make pâté from chicken breasts. For nearly two decades, William Rolle (pronounced Roll), a native of Lyon (pronounced lee-OWN), had a little French café near Sacramento State University. He made his signature chicken breast pâté every day for his simple but amazing sandwiches. Guy Fieri visited him in 2009 and featured his pâté on [Diners, Drive-ins and Dives](#). Sadly, Chef Rolle closed the restaurant in 2020 to take a job at a grocery store with normal hours. However, with a lot of research and a few trials, I was able to recreate his signature dish.

Fill a small, soft French roll with some mayonnaise, a few lettuce leaves, a slice of chicken pâté, and a couple tomato slices... The perfect wine country sandwich! It's filling, tastes great, and most important, pairs with several Bordeaux wines, particularly a good Merlot or Cabernet franc. The subtle herb flavors in the chicken match the herbaceous character of the wine, the tomatoes add a touch of acidity that brings the sandwich up to the same tartness as the wine, and there are no sharp or pungent aromas from things like onions, dill pickles, or mustard that overwhelm the wine. A winery picnic doesn't get much better.



Ingredients

- 1-1/2 pounds chicken (3 medium-sized skinless, boneless breasts)
- 1/4 tsp salt
- 2 tsp *herbes de Provence* (see my mix below)
- 1/4 pound French baguette slices with crust (about 6 to 8 inches from a loaf)
- 4 ounces plain goat cheese, crumbled
- 4 eggs
- 1 cup half-and-half
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley (or 1 tsp dried parsley)

Preparing the Chicken

Preheat the oven to 350. Put the chicken breasts in a small baking pan. Sprinkle the chicken on both sides with salt and herb mix. Go light when sprinkling the herb mix. Don't cake the herbs on the breasts--just give them a light dusting. Bake at 350 degrees for 30 minutes. Remove the chicken from the oven and allow it to cool on a trivet for about 20 minutes.



Preparing the Filling

When you remove the chicken from the oven, put the bread slices in a shallow bowl and add just enough half and half to cover them. Turn the bread slices to completely coat them with cream. Put the bowl in the refrigerator until the chicken cools (at least 10 minutes).

Making the Loaf

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Cut the chicken breasts in halves or quarters and pulse the chicken in a food processor until it is ground into tiny bits. You may have to run the chicken in batches, depending on how big your food processor is. Put the all the chicken bits in a 4-quart mixing bowl. Pulse the wet bread in a food processor to form a wet, slightly runny paste. Scramble the eggs in a glass.



Thoroughly mix the chicken, bread paste, eggs, crumbled goat cheese, and parsley in a 4-quart mixing bowl until the mixture has a consistency of a tuna salad. Dump the mixture in a nonstick loaf pan (or one coated with vegetable shortening) and press to compact it to the shape of the pan.



Bake in the oven until the loaf reaches an internal temperature of 160 degrees (about 45 minutes). Check the temperature with a digital meat thermometer. The edges around the top should be a little brown, and the top will be brownish yellow. Remove the pan from the oven and set it on a trivet to cool until you can pick it up with your hands (about 20 minutes). Tip the pan upside down over a plate or air tight container, and the loaf will fall out. Cover the loaf with plastic wrap or an air-tight lid and put it the refrigerator for at least an hour before cutting and serving.



Presentation

Use a small individual French roll or cut a long French roll into approximately 10-inch lengths. You want to get bread with a more delicate crust rather than having a crust that's too thick and chewy so that the pâté doesn't squeeze out the sides when you try to bite into the sandwich. Slice each bread roll in half, lengthwise. Rub some mayonnaise on the bottom half and cover with lettuce leaves, a 3/8-inch thick slice of pâté, a couple tomato slices, and top with the other half of the baguette. Cut into either two or four pieces.

My Herbes de Provence Blend

You can buy pre-mixed *herbes de Provence* (pronounced erb-deh-pruh-VAHNCE) in the store, but I find that it can be too floral for our taste in Lodi. Most commercial blends contain lavender, which tends to overwhelm some wine aromas. If you try one and like it, great. If you don't, here is a nice subtle but flavorful French-style herb mix for the chicken in our Central Valley pâté. All the herbs should be dried.

- 1/2 tsp thyme
- 1/2 tsp savory
- 1/2 tsp rosemary
- 1/2 tsp marjoram
- 1/8 tsp ground fennel
- 1/8 tsp basil

Make sure the fennel is ground or pulverize your fennel seeds in a mortar and pestle. Mix everything together.

Tips and Tricks

I talked to Chef Rolle at the grocery store the other day and told him that I had learned to make his famous chicken pâté. He told me to be sure to serve it with Dijon mustard and cornichons. Cornichons are tiny tart and sweet pickles with a briny flavor fortified by whatever herbs and spices are used in the pickling process. They're crispy and crunchy, but less sour than dill pickles. You may want to try his presentation rather than my mayo, lettuce and tomato version and see which one you like best (I think you'll like them both).

I use a food processor for this recipe to make it simple. However, if you have a meat grinder and want your pâté to be a little smoother in consistency, put the chicken slices, eggs, and the *panade* (bread moistened in milk) through the grinder. Then, stir in the crumbled goat cheese and parsley and put the mix into the baking pan.

If you watch the Diners Drive-ins and Dives video, you may notice Chef Rolle putting plastic wrap in the pan before pouring the mix in, then wrapping the top of the mix before putting it into the oven. *Don't try this at home!* This is a restaurant trick that only works with special heavy duty commercial grade plastic wrap and then not always. Your loaf may not turn out quite as moist as his was, but you will not have to throw it out and make another one without using plastic wrap.

This is one of those recipes where I add minimal salt. I don't want to drown out the subtle flavors of the chicken and goat cheese. And that's how they make this type of dish in France. If you find the pâté too bland for your taste, you can add a 1/2 teaspoon of salt to the mixture before putting it in the loaf pan. However, I've found that swiping a very thin layer of Dijon mustard on the bread before spreading the mayonnaise gives the sandwich plenty of zing without having to load the pâté with salt, and it doesn't interfere with the wine pairing.