

Chicken in sun-dried tomato sauce

(serves 4)

4 boneless chicken breast halves, skinned
4 tablespoons prepared pesto
½ cup fresh mozzarella cheese, shredded
½ cup quartered artichoke hearts, chopped
salt and pepper to taste
1 egg, beaten to blend
½ cup dry breadcrumbs
2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted

1 tablespoon olive oil
4 garlic cloves, minced
¼- cup drained sun-dried tomatoes (packed in oil), patted dry and coarsely chopped
¾ cup teaspoon dried hot red pepper flakes
¼ cup dry white wine
¾ cup chicken broth
¼ cup heavy cream
¼ cup thinly sliced fresh basil

FOR CHICKEN: Preheat oven to 350°F. Pound chicken between sheets of waxed paper to thickness of ¼ inch using meat mallet. Pat chicken dry. Combine cheese and artichokes in small bowl. Season with salt and pepper. Spread 1 tablespoon pesto over each chicken piece. Do the same with 1 ½ - 2 tablespoons of cheese-artichoke mixture and press lightly into the chicken. Tuck short ends in. Roll chicken up, starting at one short side, into tight cylinders and press together. (Tie ends with string or secure with toothpicks, if you like but it's not necessary.) Dip chicken in egg, allowing excess to drip into bowl. Roll in breadcrumbs, shaking off excess.

Place chicken in 8-inch square baking dish. Pour 2 tablespoons melted butter over. Bake until cooked through, about 20 minutes.

FOR SAUCE: Sauté garlic, tomatoes, and red pepper flakes in a medium skillet, stirring, until garlic is pale golden, about 1 minute. Add wine and boil, stirring and scraping up brown bits, until reduced by half, about 1 minute. Add chicken broth and bring to a boil, covered. Stir cream and 2 tablespoons basil into sauce in skillet and bring just to a simmer. Purée with an immersion blender or in a standing blender until almost smooth. (Use caution when blending hot liquids.) If necessary, add water to thin to desired consistency, then season with salt and pepper.

TO FINISH: Slice cooked chicken breasts into rounds and place on 4 plates. Serve sauce over chicken and garnish with the remaining 2 tablespoons basil.

Polenta with mushroom ragú

(Serves 4)

1 tablespoon olive oil
1 large onion
3 cloves garlic
1 tablespoon fresh or 1 teaspoon dried rosemary
¾ lb. white mushrooms
¾ lb. baby bellas or criminis or a combination
2 tablespoons tomato paste
1 cup red wine
salt & pepper

1 tube prepared polenta, unflavored*
1 tablespoon olive oil
1/2 cup shredded Parmesan or Romano cheese

1/2 lb. fresh mozzarella
¼ cup fresh parsley, chopped

FOR THE MUSHROOM RAGOUT: In a large deep skillet cook the onion, the garlic, and the rosemary in the oil over moderate heat, stirring, until the onion is softened, add the mushrooms and salt to taste, and cook the mixture over moderately high heat, stirring, for about 10 minutes, or until the liquid the mushrooms give off is evaporated. Stir in the tomato paste and the wine and boil the mushroom mixture until most of the liquid is evaporated, which will take another 10 minutes or more.

FOR THE POLENTA: Set the oven to 375. Slice tube of polenta into 16 pieces, about 1/4" each. Brush both sides of the polenta very lightly with olive oil and place them on a cookie sheet. Bake for 5 minutes then turn the polenta slices. Bake for 5 additional minutes and remove from the oven. Keep the oven running. Sprinkle the top of each polenta round with the Parmesan cheese (about 1 tbl. per round) so that each has an even layer of cheese. Return to the oven for an additional 3-5 minutes, or until the cheese is just melted (it needn't get bubbly). Remove from the oven but leave polenta rounds on the cookie sheet.

TO FINISH: Preheat the broiler. Chop the mozzarella into small sticks or cubes. Mound 2 tablespoons mushroom ragout on each polenta round. Sprinkle mozzarella pieces evenly over the rounds. Briefly broil the polenta rounds until the mozzarella begins to melt. Garnish with fresh parsley.

Note: If you have any leftover mushroom ragout, it freezes well and makes an excellent omelet filling or pizza topping!

Tuscan orzo

Serves 6

1 1/2 cups orzo (rice-shaped pasta; about 10 ounces)
5 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1/4 cup balsamic vinegar
1/4 cup (packed) chopped Kalamata olives or other brine-cured black olives
1 cup finely chopped radicchio (about 1 small head)
1/2 cup pine nuts, toasted
1/2 cup chopped fresh basil
1/2 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
2 large garlic cloves, minced

Cook orzo in pot of boiling salted water until just tender but still firm to bite. Drain well. Transfer to large bowl. Add oil, vinegar and olives and toss to blend. Let stand until cool. (Can be prepared 6 hours ahead. Cover and refrigerate. Bring to room temperature before continuing.) Mix chopped radicchio, pine nuts, chopped basil, Parmesan and garlic into orzo mixture. Season salad to taste with salt and pepper and serve.

White bean salad

Serves 8 - 10

1 lb. dry cannellini or other white beans

2 fresh sage sprigs
1 Turkish bay leaf
1 head of garlic
1 tablespoon coarse sea salt
1/3 cup fresh lemon juice
1 clove garlic, finely minced
1/2 tablespoon Dijon mustard
salt and pepper to taste
1/2 cup olive oil
1/2 red onion, thinly sliced, then chopped
1/4 cup fresh parsley, chopped fine

Soak beans in water to cover overnight.

Place the beans in a large pot and add enough water to cover by 3 to 4 inches. Bring to a boil, lower heat, and simmer, uncovered, 45 minutes to 1 hour, or until beans are tender but still firm. Drain and rinse the beans with cold water. Set aside to cool.

While the beans are cooking, make the vinaigrette. Combine the lemon juice, garlic, Dijon, salt & pepper. Whisking, add the olive oil in a slow steady stream. When the beans are cool, combine the beans, dressing, red onions and parsley.

Roasted asparagus with lemon vinaigrette

Serves 6

2 lb. asparagus
1 tablespoon olive oil
¼ cup red wine vinegar
1 shallot, finely chopped
1 clove garlic, finely chopped
1 tablespoon fresh parsley, chopped
1 tablespoon fresh chives, chopped
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
salt & pepper to taste
1 cup olive oil

Put oven rack in lower third of oven and preheat oven to 500°F.

Toss asparagus with enough oil to coat and sprinkle generously with salt & pepper. Place in a large shallow baking pan and arrange in 1 layer. Roast, shaking pan once about halfway through roasting, until asparagus is just tender when pierced with a fork, 8 to 14 minutes total for medium-thick asparagus.

Combine the vinegar, shallot, garlic, parsley, chives, mustard and lemon juice, plus salt and pepper to taste. In a slow steady stream, add the olive oil whisking until well combined. Pour about half the vinaigrette over the asparagus and pass additional vinaigrette separately.