

Outside of Piemonte, Chicken Marengo became a staple at French bistros. The bistro version typically substitutes Cognac for wine and includes mushrooms and tomatoes. The more extreme versions top it off with crayfish and a fried egg. One version of the Marengo legend is that Napoleon's chef, Dunand, had to improvise a meal with what he could scrounge after the battle. The ingredients that came into the hands of this prototypical Iron Chef were a chicken, some mushrooms, tomatoes, eggs, crayfish and Cognac from Napoleon's flask. I have trouble imagining a chef splashing around in a stream looking for crayfish after a battle, but Napoleonic legends, like Italian grandmothers, probably are not meant to be questioned.

THE BAY AREA: LA MATERIA PRIMA

Back in the Bay Area, I asked the chefs at Rìvoli and the Bay Wolf about their sources for chickens. Both use Fulton Valley Farms chickens from Sonoma County (www.fultonvalley.com). Wendy Brucker described these chickens as "natural but not organic; they aren't given growth hormones or antibiotics." (Fulton Valley Farms does offer organic whole chickens and parts as well.)

My local butcher, Enzo's Meat & Poultry in the Rockridge Market Hall (www.rockridgemarkethall.com), carries Rocky Range chickens and Rosie Organic Free Range chickens, both from Petaluma Poultry (www.petalumapoultry.com). Rocky is free-range, while Rosie is free-range and certified organic. Both are sustainably farmed. I got together with a group of friends one night and made two renditions of chicken Marengo from Armando's recipe, one using a Rocky and the other a Rosie. The first thing I noticed was how large both of these birds are: over five pounds each. I ended up cutting the breasts in half in order to make manageable braising- and serving-sized pieces out of them. The results from both chickens were tasty, but most of us at the table preferred Rosie, who seemed more toothsome and flavorful, with a hint of gaminess in the dark meat.

To be fair, the one Italian guest at the table thought that Rocky "tasted more like real chicken." Also, Michael Wild prefers Rocky, because he finds Rosie too tender and lacking in "bite." I preferred Rosie precisely because it retained more of a "bite" in our comparison. Perhaps there's variability in individual birds that's as important as any categorical difference between the two types of birds.

The other chickens that came up in several conversations but that I haven't tried yet are from Hoffman Game Birds (http://www.cuesa.org/markets/farmers/farm_46.php). Wendy Brucker mentioned that she buys them at Magnani Poultry, 1576 Hopkins Street, Berkeley. She also pointed out that she notices more of a difference among different types of chickens when she roasts them than when she's doing other types of preparations, such as braising.

I'm still experimenting. Carolina's chicken remains the

benchmark, but I've been pretty happy with some of the chicken dishes that I'm making at home and eating in East Bay restaurants. Like Louis Le Gassic, I'm starting to wonder whether I shouldn't have a few chickens scratching around in my backyard.

CHICKEN ALLA MARENGO

Based on the recipe Pollo alla Marengo in Armando Gambra's *La cucina delle Langhe del Barolo: I menù della memoria*, published in 2000 by the Cantina Comunale di La Morra. Armando doesn't give exact quantities for most ingredients. I've added the quantities that I used in [brackets] in the body of the recipe, but feel free to adjust.

For 4 people:

A free-range or barnyard chicken
Some chicken or meat stock
Some white wine
Extra-virgin olive oil and butter
One or two tablespoons flour
Juice of one lemon
A few cloves of garlic
Salt, pepper, and nutmeg

Preparation time: One half hour.

Cooking time: 50-60 minutes.

Other required items:

A sauté pan with lid and a sieve.

Cut the chicken into 8 pieces and brown them in a pan with olive oil [3 tablespoons], butter [1 tablespoon], and a few garlic cloves [3 minced]. Let the meat sauté over fairly high heat. Add salt [2 teaspoons], pepper [1 teaspoon], and a dusting of nutmeg [$\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon]. When the chicken pieces have reached a golden-brown color, bathe them well in dry white wine [$1\frac{1}{4}$ cups] and continue cooking until the wine has evaporated. Lower the flame and add the stock (around two or three cups). Cover the pan and let everything cook slowly for several minutes. Then increase the flame, remove the cover, and continue cooking until the meat is done. If necessary, add more stock during the cooking. At the end, the liquid should be reduced to a good consistency.

Remove the chicken pieces from the pan. [I cook the sauce down a little more after removing the chicken.] Add the lemon juice and flour to the sauce in the pan, and then strain it through a sieve. Dress the chicken with the sauce and serve it hot.

Wine recommendations:

Barbera, Arneis, or young Nebbiolo.