Big Flavor from a Small Bird

Cornish game hens are delicious, versatile, and right for any seasonal menu

BY LUCIA WATSON

Simply delicious. Cornish game hen roasted with seasonal vegetables and served with a lemony sauce makes an easy and appealing main course for a spring menu.
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A SPRING MENU
In this spring menu, I treat the game hens with a very light hand, cooking them simply with lots of fresh herbs, some early root vegetables, and serving them with a light lemony sauce that's made right in the pan as I roast. My roasting technique is a little different from the way you’d roast a chicken. I cook the birds covered for part of the time, in a very deep sauté pan or a Dutch oven. I layer the bottom of the pan with the wing tips, vegetables, and seasonings, and then I arrange the birds (breast side down) on top. I pour over some chicken stock and lemon juice, cover the pan, and put them in the oven for about twenty minutes. I finish cooking them uncovered so they can turn golden and the liquid in the pan can reduce slightly.

This dish is simple enough to cook for a spur of the moment dinner, but I think it’s so pretty and flavorful that it feels special enough for a dinner party. I’d begin the meal with a salad; since the game hen is light, the salad can have richer components, like toasted goat cheese croutons. The game hen recipe itself contains all the side dishes you’ll need, so all that’s left is a dessert. I’ve chosen a moist poppy seed cake that’s great to bake ahead. I serve slices of the cake with sweet-tart lemon curd that I mellow a little by folding in whipped cream.

GAME HEN BASICS
Rock Cornish game hens are the result of cross-breeding Cornish gamecocks and Plymouth Rock hens; don’t confuse them with poussins, which are young chickens. Each plump bird is a generous single serving, making game hens ideal for households of one or two people. Weighing about a pound, Cornish game hens roast in an hour, and they cook even more quickly if split and grilled or broiled.

Cornish game hens are sold fresh or frozen. Frozen hens are more common, but I prefer fresh hens. They’re more tender, have a cleaner flavor, and tend to become crispier when roasted. If you can find them, fresh ones cost a bit more, but they’re worth the extra expense.

As with all poultry, you should use good handling techniques to minimize any risk of salmonella. I suggest thawing frozen hens in the refrigerator overnight. You can also safely thaw them in a microwave set on low at about six minutes per pound, or in a cold water bath no longer than two hours, changing the water every thirty minutes. Never let a Cornish game hen thaw, or sit, at room temperature, and don’t try to speed up thawing by running the bird under hot water. Fresh or thawed hens will keep up to three days in the refrigerator; cooked meat will keep up to two days.

BONING IS EASY
Removing the backbone of a Cornish hen is a trick well worth mastering. A boned hen lies flat, exposing more of the bird to the heat source and allowing the natural juices and any marinade to permeate the meat rather than running off. Boned birds also are easily divided in half for serving. An under-the-skin stuffing plumps up a boned bird for an appealing presentation.

To bone a Cornish hen (or any bird, really), begin by trimming the wings with a sharp knife or poultry shears. I do this whether I’m boning the game hen or using it whole, cutting the wings at the second joint (see bottom photo at right). Add the trimmings to the roasting pan, or save them for stock; they’re a great source of flavor.

Next, prop up the game hen so it’s vertical, with its back toward you (see top photo on p. 33). With a sharp knife, cut through the skin and flesh along the entire length of one side of the spine. Flip the bird around and repeat on the other side of the spine. Remove the backbone. (This can also be added to the roasting pan or saved for stock.) Use the tip of the knife to remove the little wishbone at the neck end, and spread open the bird with the inside facing you. Find the whitish triangle of cartilage at the tip of the breastbone and nick it with the knife (see middle photo on p. 33). Now pick up the bird and bend it backward along the breastbone to crack it. Slide the tip of the knife or your finger under each side of the breastbone to loosen it, and then yank it out. Leave the ribs in place.

THE WELL-DRESSED HEN
Plump Cornish hens take well to almost any dressing or stuffing. You can use your favorite bread or cornbread stuffing to fill the cavity, or try making a wonderful stuffing from odd pieces of homemade bread, leftover rice pilaf, or new potatoes. Tess the starch you choose with chopped mushrooms and a root

MENU

Tossed Greens with Baked Goat Cheese Croutons & Shallot Vinaigrette

Cornish Game Hens Roasted with Spring Vegetables

Poppy Seed Cake with Lemon Curd

Preparing Cornish game hens couldn't be easier. Scatter the vegetables and herbs in the bottom of a deep sauté pan, arrange the seasoned hens (breast side down) on the vegetables, add a little stock and lemon juice to the pan, and slide it into the oven.

To trim the wings, find the joint and slice right through. Extending the wing will help you see the right place to cut. Save the wing tips and add them to the roasting pan for more flavor.
MAKING IT EASY

No need to rush with this menu—lots can be prepared ahead, and the last-minute tasks are “low-stress.”

Two days ahead:
• Soak the poppy seeds for the cake.

One day ahead:
• Bake the cake and make the lemon curd base.

In the afternoon:
• Wash the greens.
• Make the vinaigrette.
• Marinate the goat cheese.
• Prepare the vegetables.
• Trim and season the Cornish hens.

As the evening begins:
• Roast the Cornish hens and make the sauce.
• Bake the goat cheese croutons and assemble the salad.
• Whip the cream and fold it into the lemon curd.

Warm goat cheese on croutons gives this spring salad special appeal. Make some extra shallot vinaigrette to use later.

Poppy seeds look dramatic and taste delicious in this cake. A big spoonful of creamy lemon curd is the sharp-but-sweet accent.
vegetable sautéed in butter or olive oil. You'll need a little less than a cup of stuffing for each bird.

I find an “under-the-skin” stuffing more interesting than a stuffing in the cavity. The flavoring in the stuffing really permeates the meat, and with this method you can stuff boned and split birds that you plan to grill (see boning instructions on p. 31). The stuffing can be as simple as butter and fresh herbs or more complex, like the cheese, herb, and prosciutto stuffing I suggest for a winter game-hen dish (see recipe p. 35).

To prepare a game hen for an under-the-skin stuffing, begin at the top of the breast, and gently lift and pull the skin away from the flesh of the bird. Be very careful and very patient; game hen skin is delicate. Once you've separated the skin from the meat, use your fingers to gently force the stuffing between the meat and skin, pushing it back and around the breast, and even down the thighs and legs, as you go. Try to keep the layer of stuffing as even as possible for a better shape and even cooking. Don’t force too much under the skin, or fill the cavity with too much if you’re using that method, since stuffing expands as it cooks.

**TOSSED GREENS WITH BAKED GOAT CHEESE CROUTONS & SHALLOT VINAIGRETTE**

This salad is simple but the flavors work beautifully together. Serves four.

4 oz. soft goat cheese
1⁄2 cup good-quality olive oil
1 clove garlic, crushed
1 Tbs. chopped fresh mixed herbs (such as basil, tarragon, thyme, parsley)
4 slices French bread, about ¼ in. thick
About 6 cups mixed salad greens

FOR THE SHALLOT VINAIGRETTE:
2 medium shallots, sliced
1⁄4 cup good-quality white-wine vinegar
1 tsp. Dijon mustard
1⁄4 cup plus 1 Tbs. good-quality olive oil
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Marinate the goat cheese in the oil, garlic, and herbs at least 1 hour, longer if you have time.

At least 2 hours before serving, combine the shallots and vinegar in a medium bowl and let sit at room temperature for about 2 hours. Whisk in the mustard, and then whisk in the oil in a slow, steady stream. Season with salt and pepper.

Just before serving, heat the oven to 450°F. In a deep sauté pan or a Dutch oven, toss the reserved wing tips, carrots, potatoes, and any remaining herbs. Arrange the eens, breast side down, on top of the vegetables and bones. They can fit snugly, but they shouldn’t be squeezed together. Sprinkle with salt and pepper, pour in the stock and lemon juice. Cover the pan and cook in the hot oven for about 20 min. Remove the lid, turn the birds so they’re breast side up, baste them with a little pan juice and continue roasting (uncovered), basting a few more times, until they’re golden brown and the juices run clear from their cavities or from their thighs when pricked with a knife. This should take about 45 to 55 min. more. About

**CORNISH GAME HENS ROASTED WITH SPRING VEGETABLES**

Use whatever vegetables you like, just make sure to add softer, quicker-cooking ones later. Exact amounts aren’t important in this dish, but don’t crowd the stuffing. Use more than one pan if your ingredients are mounded too high. Serves four.
10 min. before you think the birds will be done, arrange the asparagus over the top of the birds to cook it. If you’re not sure about the timing, or if your pan is too full, simply steam the asparagus separately for about 5 min. in salted water.

Remove the birds and vegetables and keep them warm. Strain the pan juices, skim off as much fat as possible, and taste. If they’re a little thin, boil them for a few minutes to concentrate the flavor; season with salt and pepper. If the sauce tastes too lemony, whisk in 1 or 2 Tbs. cold butter.

To serve, arrange one hen on each plate and arrange the vegetables around it. Pour over a few spoonfuls of sauce and decorate with shreds of lemon zest and some fresh herbs.

POPPY SEED CAKE WITH LEMON CURD

I use lots of poppy seeds in this cake for a striking look and delicious flavor. Yields one bundt cake and about 1 1/2 cups creamy lemon curd.

FOR THE CAKE:
1 cup poppy seeds
3/4 cup milk
12 Tbs. unsalted butter
1 1/2 cups sugar
3 eggs
1 tsp. vanilla extract
2 cups unbleached all-purpose flour
2 tsp. baking powder
1/2 tsp. salt
1 Tbs. grated orange zest

FOR THE LEMON CURD:
Grated zest of 4 lemons
1/2 cup lemon juice
2 eggs
2 egg yolks
1 cup sugar
6 Tbs. unsalted butter
1/2 cup heavy cream, chilled
Fresh berries and mint sprigs for decoration

For the cake—Soak the poppy seeds in the milk overnight. Heat the oven to 375° and generously butter and flour a 9-in. (10-cup) bundt pan. With an electric mixer, cream the butter and sugar in a large bowl. Add the eggs one at a time, beating well after each addition. Add the vanilla and the milk with the poppy seeds. Sift together the flour, baking powder, salt, and orange zest; add this to the butter and sugar mixture, blending well. Pour the batter into the prepared pan and bake until the cake springs back when you press it lightly, 30 to 40 min. Cool on a rack about 10 min., and then take the cake out of the pan and cool completely on the rack.

For the lemon curd—in a stainless-steel bowl, whisk together the lemon zest, juice, eggs, egg yolks, and sugar. Put the bowl over a pot of simmering—not boiling—water to form a double boiler and cook, whisking constantly, until the mixture becomes thick, translucent, and a little “wobbly.” Remove the pan from the heat and strain the mixture into a bowl. Whisk in the butter until completely incorporated. Chill thoroughly.

Just before serving—Whip the cream until it forms soft peaks. Fold a little of the whipped cream into the lemon curd to lighten it, and then gently fold in the rest.

To serve—Slice the cake and top each slice with a generous spoonful of lemon curd. Decorate with fresh berries and a mint sprig, if you like.

Lucia Watson is a native of Minneapolis. She opened her restaurant ten years ago, and even though she’s expanded twice, it’s still difficult to get a reservation. Lucia was assisted on this article by Beth Dooley, a Minneapolis food writer who is Lucia’s co-author of Savoring the Seasons of the Northern Heartland, Knopf Cooks American Series, 1994.
Cornish game hens are delicious any time of year

Cornish game hens form easy partnerships with many ingredients, making them good candidates for a menu no matter what the season. Roast them whole with sage, acorn squash, and a sprinkling of toasted pumpkin seeds for a warming autumn meal. For winter, dress up the birds by boning and stuffing them under the skin a thin slice of prosciutto and a savory ricotta and Parmesan filling. Cornish hens are great for grilling, too, so build a summer menu around birds that are marinated in spiced yogurt, grilled, and served on a bed of mixed greens with a tangy cilantro dressing.

**GRILLED GAME HEN SALAD FOR SUMMER**

Serves four.

2 Cornish hens (about 1 lb. each)  
About 6 cups mixed salad greens

**FOR THE MARINADE:**

1 cup plain yogurt  
1 1/2 tsp. ground cumin  
Grated zest and juice of 1/2 lemon  
1 1/2 tsp. chopped cilantro  
1 1/2 tsp. chopped fresh parsley  
1/2 tsp. cayenne  
1/2 tsp. paprika  
Salt to taste

Rinse the hens and pat them dry. Bone and flatten them (see instructions on p. 31). Mix together the marinade ingredients and rub all over the hens, including under the skin. Refrigerate the hens in the marinade, covered, overnight.

Prepare a charcoal or gas grill and heat to medium. Remove the hens from the marinade and let some of the excess drip off. Place each hen skin side down, on the grill and cook for 1 to 2 min.; repeat on the other side. Cover the grill and cook the hens about 15 min. on each side. Grill temperatures vary, so check for doneness carefully. The hens are done when the thigh juices run clear when pricked with a fork.

Let the hens rest for a few minutes until they're cool enough to handle. Cut into quarters, or with a paring knife and your fingers, remove all the meat. You can serve the salad while the meat is still warm, or you can chill it first.

To serve, make a mound of greens on each plate, arrange the grilled meat on top and drizzle with your favorite vinaigrette or charmoula (see recipe below).

**CHARMLOULA**

Yields about 1 1/4 cups.

1/2 cup olive oil  
1/4 cup fresh lemon juice  
1/4 cup chopped parsley  
1/4 cup chopped cilantro  
2 cloves garlic, minced fine  
1 1/2 tsp. paprika  
1 tsp. ground cumin  
1/4 tsp. cayenne  
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Whisk all ingredients together in a mixing bowl. Taste and adjust seasoning. Any leftover charmoula can be stored in the refrigerator for up to three days.

**GAME HENS WITH SQUASH & SAGE FOR AUTUMN**

Serves four.

4 Cornish hens (about 1 lb. each)  
1 tsp. dried sage  
4 Tbs. unsalted butter, softened  
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste  
8 cloves garlic, peeled  
12 sprigs fresh sage (or 1 Tbs. dried)  
1 Tbs. oil  
2 cups coarsely chopped onion  
4 cups peeled, cubed acorn squash  
1/2 cup dry white wine  
1/2 cup homemade or low-salt canned chicken stock  
1/2 cup toasted pumpkin seeds or walnut pieces

Heat the oven to 400°F. Remove any fat from the hen cavities; rinse and pat them dry. Gently loosen the skin from the breast meat and sprinkle about 1/2 tsp. dried sage over the breasts. Rub each hen with the butter, season generously with salt and pepper, and put 2 cloves of garlic and 1 sage sprig (or a pinch of dried) in each cavity. Truss the legs if you like.

Heat the oil in a roasting pan. Cook the onion over medium heat until lightly browned, about 8 min. Off the heat, arrange the squash in the pan. Scatter the remaining fresh sage over the vegetables. Add the wine and stock. Arrange the hens, breast side down, on the vegetables and roast. (See roasting directions on p. 33.)

When done, remove the hens and vegetables. Keep warm. Strain the pan juices and taste. If thin, boil for a few minutes to concentrate. If you like, swirl in 1 Tbs. butter. Adjust the seasoning. Serve the hens on top of the onions and squash, drizzled with sauce, and garnished with pumpkin seeds or walnuts.

**PARMESAN-PROSCIUTTO GAME HENS FOR WINTER**

Serves four.

2 Cornish hens (about 1 lb. each)  
4 large, thin slices prosciutto or good-quality country ham, cut in half  
Oil or butter for cooking  
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

**FOR THE CHEESE FILLING:**

1 small onion, diced fine and sautéed in a little oil  
2 Tbs. chopped parsley  
1 Tbs. chopped fresh basil leaves  
2 Tbs. grated Parmesan cheese  
1/4 cup fresh bread crumbs  
1 egg yolk  
1 egg  
1/4 cup ricotta cheese  
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Mix all the cheese filling ingredients together until well blended.

Rinse the hens and pat them dry. Remove the backbone and flatten them, and then carefully work a half slice of prosciutto under the skin of each side of each bird (see photos on p. 33). With a spoon or a pastry bag, spread some cheese filling on top of the ham, working it down evenly toward the thigh. Press the edge of the skin to close.

Heat the oven to 400°F. Rub a little butter or oil on the top of each bird, season with salt and pepper, and arrange on a shallow baking sheet. Roast until the thighs run clear, about 45 min. Let rest a few minutes, then and cut each hen in half through the breast.

Serve half a hen per person with a wintery accompaniment, such as spätzle or puréed winter squash.

Feature game hens at a special winter meal. Stuffed with Parmesan and prosciutto, a split bird makes an elegant main course.