



# Slow Cooker Chicken Cacciatore

**Tender chicken and robust tomato sauce are the heart and soul of chicken cacciatore. The slow cooker just didn't understand.** BY LYNN CLARK



A combination of dark and white meat gives this cacciatore broad appeal.

NESTLE BONE-IN CHICKEN pieces into garlicky tomato sauce. Stud the sauce with onions and woodsy mushrooms, enliven it with a splash of red wine, and season liberally with gutsy herbs. Simmer the stew on the stovetop until the sauce is hearty and luscious and the chicken is falling off the bone. That's chicken cacciatore, "hunter's chicken" in Italian. I love the dish and hoped to adapt it for the slow cooker.

But my first round of testing was a washout, literally. Most of the recipes I'd gathered suggested I dump all the ingredients into the slow cooker at once, turn it on, and wait. Predictably, the sauce was weak and watery, the long-cooked chicken dry and stringy. On the stovetop, the liquids would have evaporated as the sauce bubbled away, reducing and concentrating in flavor—but that's not possible in a steamy, covered slow cooker. The best of these imperfect recipes wasn't bad, but it thickened the cacciatore with flour, which muted the vibrant sauce and turned it pasty. When I omitted the flour, the sauce became too watery—but at least I had a better place to start.

This recipe called for 2 cups of chicken

broth and  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup red wine, plus canned tomatoes. In a series of tests, I decreased the broth little by little, ultimately jettisoning it entirely. Amazingly, the sauce was still too loose. I'd been using diced tomatoes, and draining them helped; sautéing the drained tomatoes dried them further and deepened their flavor. But now I'd gone too far and ended up with chunks of tomato instead of sauce. Pureeing the drained, sautéed tomatoes in the food processor fixed the problem, producing a sauce that was full-bodied and thick.

Turning to the flavorings, mushrooms are essential to cacciatore. In a taste test, cremini beat out button mushrooms. They were even better in combination with dried porcini mushrooms, which added complexity and depth (I pureed the porcini with the tomatoes for added body). I tested various dried herbs (dried hold up better than fresh in long cooking) before settling on oregano and red pepper flakes, which paired well with the garlic and mushrooms.

The test kitchen is divided on the question of white versus dark meat, and so I tried to please everyone by including both chicken thighs and chicken breasts. I began by browning the chicken parts; the skin provided some flavorful fat in which to sauté the mushrooms and onions. Then everything went into the slow cooker. Four hours later, the thighs emerged moist and tender, but the delicate breasts had dried out. This is familiar territory for the test kitchen, so I knew what to do: I wrapped the raw breasts in foil to insulate them from the heat and slow their cooking—I didn't sear them first, as they were already overcooking. When we've used this technique before, we've subsequently shredded or cubed the breasts to stir into soups or stews. Unfortunately, with chicken cacciatore, the breasts are served whole, so there was no disguising their utter lack of flavor. On a hunch, I dribbled some sauce into the foil packet before cooking the breasts, hoping the herb, mushroom, and tomato flavors would seep in. This did the trick.

My slow-cooker cacciatore finally tasted pretty good, but after 4 hours of cooking, the sauce had dulled, and tasters missed the fresh, lively punch of uncooked tomatoes. I tried again. This

time, I reserved half of the diced canned tomatoes at the outset, neither browning nor pureeing them. In the final minute of cooking, I stirred them into the cacciatore, along with  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup chopped fresh basil and 1 tablespoon of vinegar. It made all the difference.

## SLOW-COOKER CHICKEN CACCIATORE

Serves 6

- 4 bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs (about 2 pounds), excess fat trimmed
- Salt and pepper
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1 pound cremini mushrooms, quartered
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 teaspoons dried oregano
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon red pepper flakes
- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup tomato paste
- 1 (28-ounce) can diced tomatoes, drained
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup red wine
- $\frac{1}{4}$  ounce dried porcini mushrooms, rinsed and patted dry
- 4 bone-in, split chicken breasts (about 3 pounds), skin discarded
- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup finely chopped fresh basil
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar

**1. BROWN THIGHS** Pat chicken thighs dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Heat oil in large skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Brown thighs, about 5 minutes

### STEP-BY-STEP Puree Power

Watery sauce and bland, overcooked chicken plague most slow-cooker cacciatore recipes. Here's how we solved these problems:



**1. Pureeing the sautéed tomatoes with wine and porcini mushrooms helps thicken the sauce before it goes into the cooker insert.**

per side, then transfer to plate. Let 5 minutes, then discard skin and transfer thighs to slow cooker.

**2. COOK AROMATICS** Pour oil into a large skillet and heat over medium heat. Discard all but 1 tablespoon fat from skillet. Cook cremini mushrooms, onion, and garlic until golden brown, about 10 minutes. Add oregano, red pepper flakes, and vinegar. Cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Transfer to slow cooker.

**3. PROCESS TOMATOES** Add tomatoes and half of diced tomatoes to a food processor. Pulse until smooth. Transfer  $\frac{1}{3}$  cup tomato mixture to slow cooker.

**4. PREPARE BREASTS** Place chicken breasts on one side of large piece of heavy-duty aluminum foil. Spoon remaining tomato mixture over chicken, then fold foil over chicken to form packet that fits in slow cooker; crimp edges. Place packet in slow cooker. Cook on low until chicken is tender and cooked through, about 4 hours.

**5. FINISH** Carefully remove chicken from slow cooker. Transfer breasts to serving platter and pat dry. Discard accumulated juices from packet. Stir remaining sauce, basil, and vinegar into sauce. Spoon sauce over chicken and serve.



**2. Wrapping the chicken breasts in an insulating foil packet ensures moist chicken. A bit of the tomato mixture flavors the chicken as it cooks.**