

The designer Steven Stolman, who is 57, first tasted chicken Provençal as a college student, on a visit to New York with a friend, sitting on bentwood chairs in the family kitchen of a townhouse on the Upper East Side. There were cloth napkins, good china, a Tiffany lamp and portraits on the walls. The whole place was done up in what Stolman calls "classic late-'70s Bloomingdale's style."

The chicken was seasoned with spices meant to evoke the flavors of southern France: rosemary, thyme, bay leaf, lavender, marjoram, chervil, sage. It all seemed exotic and wonderful to Stolman, a child of the Hartford suburbs and new to Manhattan. "I thought it was the coolest thing," he said. The dish and the evening left an impression on him that has lasted for almost 40 years.

Stolman would go on to become a clothing designer, and until a few years ago, the president of Scalomandré, the decorative fabric company. Along the way he became a first-class entertainer himself, a "prince of preppy," as the website New York Social Diary called him, in blue blazers and expensive shoes.

He also became a skilled and accomplished cook in Palm Beach and New York and, lately, in the home he shares outside Milwaukee with his husband, Rich Wilkie, an Oracle executive. Chicken Provençal has accompanied him everywhere, and takes pride of place in his new cookbook, "Confessions of a Serial Entertainer," published last month.

It is still the coolest thing: chicken dusted in flour and roasted with shallots and lemons and vermouth under a shower of herbes de Provence until it has gone crisp above the fat and wine and lemon juice, and the shallots are melted and sweet.

Herbes de Provence had their heyday in the 1970s, offered as hostess gifts in hand-lettered clay pots, but the mixture of herbs continues to pay dividends today as a simple route to big flavor. It may have been a while since you secured a jar of the stuff. But it's still there at the spice market, or on the shelf in the rack at Kroger or Whole Foods or Publix. Penzeys has a nice version, too.

The preparation of the dish is a breeze. Stolman cooks chicken thighs — bone-in for family and close friends, but bone-out for larger groups. "It's easier for them," he said. For those who like a mixture of dark

and white meat, you could cook a whole bird broken down into component parts. (If you do, keep an eye on the breasts, which are prone to overcooking.)

About halfway through the cooking, ladle some of the roasting juices over the top of the chicken, which helps keep it moist and, thanks to the chicken fat, also crisps it. When the skin has gone tight and golden and the chicken has cooked entirely through, you're done.

When you serve the meal, Stolman said, take care to think how the food will look. He used to serve his chicken on a big blue-willow platter that he had in his early days in New York, then later on a green ersatz majolica platter at his home in Florida, where it emphasized the golden crust of the chicken and the pale yellow of the wilted lemons. Lately, in keeping with the plain-spoken tastes of his neighbors in Wisconsin, he has used simple white china instead.

"It depends where you are, of course," Stolman said. "But I'm a designer. It's all about the accouterments."

So get out your best platter — perhaps an oval Rosenthal in the Bloomsbury pattern, or a big plate from the big-box store — and warm it. Put the chicken on top of that. You might serve some white rice on the side, even a pilaf. But I prefer a lot of baguette to mop up the sauce, along with a green salad.

Stolman has us covered there as well, he said. He has a simple shallot vinaigrette that he uses to dress butter lettuce: a single chopped shallot combined with a tablespoon of Dijon mustard, a quarter-cup of cider vinegar and three-quarters of a cup of olive oil. Whisk to emulsify, and then season to taste. Stolman serves the salad, he says, at almost every meal. (You may well join him in the practice.)

And there are a lot of meals. Stolman and his husband travel a great deal, for work and pleasure. "We're like gypsies," Stolman said. When you are heavy travelers, he added, "you have to work very hard at maintaining friendships, or you turn into shadow people." So when he is in Wisconsin or Palm Beach or New York, there is inevitably a dinner or drinks gathering at his place.

Chicken Provençal is a perfect meal for a night like that. Put the chicken into the oven, and pour everyone a drink. Set a nice table. Serve the food. Be nice. That's entertainment.

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Solent!

Roasted Chicken Provençal

Time: 1 hour, 15 minutes

- 4 chicken legs or 8 bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- ½-¾ cup all-purpose flour
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 tablespoons herbes de Provence
- 1 lemon, quartered
- 8-10 cloves garlic, peeled
- 4-6 medium-size shallots, peeled and halved
- ½ cup dry vermouth
- 4 sprigs of thyme, for serving

1. Preheat oven to 400. Season the chicken with salt and pepper. Put the flour in a shallow pan, and lightly dredge the chicken in it, shaking the pieces to remove excess flour.

2. Swirl the oil in a large roasting pan, and place the floured chicken in it. Season the chicken with the herbes de Provence. Arrange the lemons, garlic cloves and shallots around the chicken, and then add the vermouth to the pan.

3. Put the pan in the oven, and roast for 25 to 30 minutes, then baste it with the pan juices. Continue roasting for an additional 25 to 30 minutes, or until the chicken is very crisp and the meat cooked through.

4. Serve in the pan or on a warmed platter, garnished with the thyme.

Yield: 4 servings.

Adapted from Steven Stolman. ♦