
COOKING FRESH

The arrival of fall is heralded by perfumed apples, red and yellow falling leaves, slow-moving out-of-state cars and the creamy, delicately flavored chicken pie served at church suppers across the state.

Why this combination of events? The answer lies in the warm days and cool nights, which ripen the apples, promise snow and turn the leaves from green to scarlet. This in turn leads to multitudes of leaf peepers. But the chicken pie suppers? A way to take advantage of the tourists?

No, the chicken pies are part of a rural agricultural tradition. After a few years of laying, with its future egg production expected to decline, a chicken might not be worth the cost of grain to feed it through the winter. It is time to slaughter the chicken. And what better way to prepare an old hen than by gently stewing it and then baking it under a buttery crust of billowy biscuits?

Baking meat or fowl in a pie has a history that goes back to medieval times, when the filling could be anything, including four and 20 black-birds. The word pie may derive from magpie, a bird notorious for collecting a variety of things, just as a pie might encase a variety of ingredients in a crust. Generally, pies are made with top and bottom crusts, which requires baking in an oven. In colonial America, where much of the cooking was done in a hearth in a pot suspended over a fire, only a top crust was used, and the pie was actually steamed.

Vermont potpies are distinguished by their biscuit, rather than pastry, topping, but the dish itself, creamed chicken and vegetables with a biscuit topping, is not distinctively a Vermont dish, or even a New England dish. In many parts of the country, particularly in the South, what we call a chicken potpie would be called chicken and biscuits. If that same creamed chicken and baking-soda topping were steamed on top of the

stove under a lid, it would become chicken and dumplings, a specialty of the Amish in Pennsylvania. In a sophisticated kitchen (not hardscrabble Vermont, nor pious Dutch country), the creamed filling was sometimes enhanced with sherry or wine. Mention chicken potpie to most Americans, however, and they think of the microwavable single-serving pie, which was introduced in 1951 by the C. A. Swanson Company. This frozen pie with its scarce but perfectly cubed chicken and carrots and a handful of peas is nothing like the Vermont chicken potpie.

Not that there is a quintessential recipe for a chicken potpie. All agree it is best to start with an old stewing hen. Short of the stewing hen, then a roasting chicken will work, something with a little more meat on its bones than a “broiler.” Poach it gently in water with onion and celery, maybe a carrot or two. Then take the chicken off the bone and thicken the cooking liquid. Skin or gristle from the chicken in your pie shows that the cook wasn’t paying attention. Lumps in the gravy defy comprehension. Some will add vegetables—peas from the freezer, carrots diced into tiny jewels. Some will bake the chicken under the biscuits. Some will serve the chicken and gravy from one pot and the biscuits from a baking sheet and still call it pie.

Later, these same thrifty cooks will turn Thanksgiving leftovers into a turkey potpie. But that’s another story all together.

—Andrea Chesman

Andrea Chesman is a noted cookbook author whose titles include *The Vegetarian Grill*, *The Roasted Vegetable*, *Mom’s Best Desserts* and most recently, *Serving Up the Harvest*.

GROWN, RAISED AND FORAGED IN VERMONT THIS SEASON...

PRODUCE

Apples, Beets, Brussel Sprouts, Cabbage, Carrots, Cauliflower, Celery, Chard, Chinese Cabbage, Cranberries, Daikon Radish, Escarole, Fennel Bulbs, Jerusalem Artichokes, Kohlrabi, Onions, Parsnips, Potatoes, Pumpkins, Radishes, Rutabaga, Spinach, Sprouts, Turnips, Winter Squash

DAIRY

Milk, Yogurt, Cheese, Butter, Ice Cream, Eggs

MEAT & POULTRY

Bacon, Beef, Chicken, Lamb, Pheasant, Pork, Quail, Sausage, Turkey

AND...

Cornmeal, Dried Legumes, Dried Mushrooms, Wheat Berries, Wheat Flour, Beer, Cider, Tea, Wine



Photograph: Carole Topalian

CHICKEN POTPIE

by Andrea Chesman

You won't find this particular recipe at a church supper. This potpie is rich in leeks and rutabagas, two favorite fall vegetables. Feel free to substitute whatever vegetables you have on hand.

1 large roasting chicken, cut into pieces or five split chicken breasts (about 4 pounds)

Water

1 onion, quartered

2 garlic cloves, peeled and left whole

1 bunch flat-leaf parsley

1 tsp. black peppercorns

1 medium rutabaga, peeled and diced

6 Tbsp. butter or extra virgin olive oil

6 medium leeks, white and tender green parts only, sliced

6 Tbsp. flour

1 Tbsp. chopped fresh dill or 1 tsp. dried thyme

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Topping

3 cups unbleached all-purpose flour

2 Tbsp. baking powder

1½ tsp. salt

2/3 cup butter, cut into pieces

1 cup buttermilk

Place the chicken in a large pot. Cover with water (6 to 8 cups). Add the onion, garlic, parsley and peppercorns. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to maintain a slow simmer, and simmer for 45 to 60 minutes, until the chicken is tender. Turn off the heat and allow the chicken to cool in the cooking liquid.

Cook the rutabaga in boiling salted water to cover until just tender, 5 to 8 minutes. Drain.

When the chicken is cool enough to handle, remove the chicken from the broth. Discard the skin and bones. Chop the meat into bite-size pieces.

Strain the broth and discard the solids. Skim off any fat that rises to the top. Reserve 3 cups liquid for the potpie and refrigerate or freeze the remainder to use in another dish.

In a large saucepan, melt the butter over medium heat. Add the leeks and sauté until tender, about 5 minutes. Sprinkle in the flour and stir until all the flour is absorbed into the oil. Whisk in the 3 cups reserved broth and stir until thickened and smooth. Stir in the chicken, rutabagas and dill. Taste and adjust seasoning with salt and pepper. Bring to a boil. Keep hot while you prepare the biscuits.

Preheat the oven to 450 degrees. Set out a 9- by 13-inch baking pan.

Combine the flour, baking powder and salt in a food processor. Add the butter and process until the mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Pour in the buttermilk and process to make a soft dough. Knead a few times on a lightly floured board. Pat out the dough to a thickness of about ½ inch. Cut into 3-inch rounds. By gathering the scraps and patting out again, you should get 12 biscuits.

Pour the chicken mixture into the baking pan. Place the biscuit rounds on top. Bake for 15 to 18 minutes, until the biscuits are golden and the chicken mixture is bubbling.

Let stand for a few minutes before serving. Serves six.

COLCANNON

by Andrea Chesman

Some combinations are just so inevitable that it hardly seems necessary to provide a recipe. Still, colcannon, an Irish dish, isn't served that often, considering its terrific flavor and the healthy way it upgrades mashed potatoes. This is a hearty fall dish that makes a wonderful accompaniment to meatloaf or baked chicken. It can also be served as a vegetarian main dish. It is important to cook the cabbage slowly to coax all the sweetness out of the vegetable. If you like, grate a large carrot and add it to the cabbage mixture for color and more vegetable goodness.

6 Tbsp. butter

½ head green cabbage, shredded

2 medium leeks, trimmed and sliced, or 1 large onion, halved and thinly sliced

2 pounds baking or russet potatoes, peeled and cut into large pieces

½ cup milk or cream, warmed

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

In a large skillet, melt 3 Tbsp. of the butter over medium heat. Add the cabbage and leeks and sauté until very tender and sweet, about 30 minutes, stirring frequently.

Meanwhile, combine the potatoes with salted water to cover in a small saucepan. Cover and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat and boil gently until completely tender, 15 to 25 minutes.

Drain the potatoes well. Mash the potatoes with a potato masher, press through a ricer or whip in a standing mixer until you have a light texture. Beat in the remaining 3 Tbsp. butter and milk. Fold in the cabbage mixture. Season to taste generously with salt and pepper. Serve hot.

Recipe adapted from *Serving Up the Harvest* by Andrea Chesman (Storey Publishing). Copyright 2005, 2007 Andrea Chesman.