

IN PRAISE OF CHICKEN THIGHS

This cut is juicier and tastier than breasts—and it's easier on the wallet, too.

BY JOANNE SMART

THE FIRST TIME I SWOONED OVER A CHICKEN THIGH, I was at The Purple Pig in Chicago. The restaurant's name makes it obvious that it specializes in pork dishes, but someone at our communal table recommended the chicken-thigh skewers served with tzatziki and fried smashed potatoes. As promised, they were a standout—pieces of boneless, skin-on chicken fried to crisp perfection. What made them so good was the choice of the thigh.

As someone who used to mindlessly reach for skinless, boneless breasts when it came to cooking chicken for dinner, I became a fan of the thigh, and now I use it for most of my chicken dishes. Thinner than the breast, the more deeply flavored dark cut provides a perfect ratio of skin to meat, and it stays tender and moist even when cooked over high heat. Aside from having more flavor than breast meat, thighs are also cheaper—a bonus.

Here, I've collected a few of my favorite chicken thigh recipes and included why the thigh beats the breast. To try to replicate those Purple Pig skewers, I painstakingly boned some chicken thighs but left the skin on. While the result was tasty, removing the bones from chicken thighs was a thankless task. I decided instead to roast bone-in thighs in very

high heat until the skin is crackly, and the meat, rubbed with lots of garlic and some paprika, falls off the bone anyway. Yum.

Another great way to use chicken thighs is in soup. The recipe on p. 72 is loosely based on one by Boston chef Barbara Lynch. She uses a whole bird for hers, but thighs are easier to maneuver in the pot. On their own, they add plenty of body and rich flavor. After long cooking, thighs, unlike breasts, retain flavor, so the meat is delicious shredded and used in the soup.

I've seen recipes that say to use chicken breast because it's so bland that it acts as a canvas for other flavors. With thighs, though, you can always taste true chicken flavor, even in highly spiced dishes like the saag on p. 73 or the spicy chicken on p. 74. So the next time you're thinking of chicken for dinner, reach past those pricey breasts and grab the more humble thighs; your dish may just be better for it.

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How to choose

Though I'll cheer the day when supermarkets sell boneless, skin-on chicken thighs, they now come basically two ways: with skin and bone intact or without.

Boneless thighs cook up quickly and can be used in just about any recipe calling for chicken breasts. They usually need very little in the way of trimming. If searing boneless thighs, they will look best if you start them smooth side down. As with breasts, they can range in size from brand to brand, so know that the number of thighs in packages of the same weight may vary.

Bone-in thighs take more time to cook. Some people like to trim away excess skin before roasting, but not me; those bits that stick to the pan are a treat.

As noted elsewhere, you can also bone thighs yourself; for the best method to do that, see p. 92.

chicken soup with crucifers and caraway

Chicken thighs create a very chickeny broth, but during cooking, they're not sapped of all their flavor. Croutons take the place of noodles in this hearty soup; be sure the rye bread you use to make them has lots of caraway seeds—they're a key flavor component.

Serves 4 to 6

FOR THE BROTH

- 3 Tbs. vegetable oil
- 3 lb. skin-on, bone-in chicken thighs
- Kosher salt
- 2 medium carrots, coarsely chopped
- 2 ribs celery, coarsely chopped
- 1 small onion, peeled and quartered
- 2 medium cloves garlic, very coarsely chopped
- 8 sprigs fresh flat-leaf parsley
- 3 sprigs fresh thyme
- 1 dried bay leaf

FOR THE SOUP

- Kosher salt
- ¼ medium head green cabbage, thinly sliced (about 2 cups)
- 1 cup tiny broccoli florets
- 1 cup tiny cauliflower florets
- 1 small carrot, finely chopped
- ¼ small white onion, finely chopped
- 3 Tbs. unsalted butter; more as needed

- 4 slices rye bread with caraway seeds, cut into ½- by ¾-inch squares (about 4 cups)
- Apple cider vinegar (optional)
- Toasted caraway seeds, for garnish (optional)

MAKE THE BROTH

Put the oil in a large pot over medium-high heat. Season the chicken lightly with 1 tsp. salt. Add the chicken thighs to the pan, skin side down (they should fit in one tight layer), and cook until browned, about 6 minutes. Flip—don't worry if some skin sticks here and there—and cook for another minute.

Add the carrots, celery, onion, garlic, parsley, thyme, and bay leaf. Add 2 quarts of water, and bring to a gentle boil. Cover partially, reduce to a simmer, and cook, stirring occasionally, until the chicken is cooked through and tender, about 1 hour.

Transfer the chicken to a rimmed baking sheet and pour the broth through a fine-mesh strainer set over another container. Discard the vegetables.

When the chicken is cool enough to handle, remove and discard the skin. Take the meat off the bones, and shred or cut it into bite-size pieces. (The broth may be made up

to 2 days ahead. Refrigerate the chicken and the broth in separate covered containers.)

MAKE THE SOUP

Skim off the layer of fat on top of the broth. Put the broth in a large pot over medium heat. After it has warmed through, add 1½ tsp. salt.

Add the cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, carrot, and onion, and bring to a boil. Reduce to a simmer and cook until just tender, about 5 minutes.

Meanwhile, put the butter in a large non-stick skillet over medium heat. Add the bread cubes, stir to coat with the butter, season with ¼ tsp. salt, and cook, stirring occasionally and adding more butter if needed, until crisp and browned on most sides, about 8 minutes.

Add the chicken to the soup, and cook until heated through, about 3 minutes. Season to taste with salt.

Divide the soup among serving bowls. If you like, add a splash of vinegar to each bowl. Divide the croutons among the bowls, garnish with caraway seeds, and serve.

Pair With: ROGGENBIER This is a big beer, but the varied elements in this soup can handle it. Plus, it's hard to resist the opportunity to pair a rye beer with rye bread croutons. If you can't find roggember, try an American rye.





chicken saag

My husband and I were saddened when our favorite Indian restaurant switched from making their saag with chicken thighs to making it with chicken breasts. What had been a deeply satisfying dish suddenly came off as bland, so I tried replicating the saag at home. You can make this with fresh spinach, but frozen is easier and tastes just as good. Serve this creamy stew with naan or basmati rice. Serves 4

- 2 tsp. garam masala (see Note)
- 1 tsp. ground cumin
- 1 tsp. paprika
- ½ tsp. ground turmeric
- Kosher salt
- 1½ lb. boneless, skinless chicken thighs
- 2 Tbs. vegetable oil; more as needed
- 1 large yellow onion, chopped
- 3 large cloves garlic, minced
- 1 2-inch piece ginger, minced

- ½ jalapeño, minced (about 1 Tbs.)
- 20 oz. frozen chopped spinach, thawed and lightly squeezed of excess liquid
- 2 Tbs. finely chopped scallions
- 2 cups heavy cream
- ½ cup chopped fresh cilantro

In a medium bowl, combine the garam masala, cumin, paprika, turmeric, and 2 tsp. salt. Add the thighs and rub all over with the spice mixture. Let sit for 30 minutes at room temperature, or cover and refrigerate for up to 1 day.

Put the oil in a large nonstick skillet over medium heat. Add the thighs and cook, flipping once or twice, until just cooked through, 6 to 8 minutes. (It's okay if they stick a bit and tear because you'll be cutting them into pieces.) Transfer to a plate; they will cook more later.

If the pan looks dry, add a little more oil. Then add the onion and cook, stirring occasionally and scraping up any bits, until

the onion becomes translucent, about 2 minutes. Add the garlic, ginger, and jalapeño, and cook, stirring occasionally, 1 minute. Add the spinach, scallions, and cream, and cook until the spinach is tender, 5 to 7 minutes.

Meanwhile, cut the thighs into 2-inch pieces. Add them and any accumulated juice to the pot and stir. Cook, stirring occasionally and adjusting the heat as necessary, until the chicken is fully cooked, about 3 minutes. After that, the dish can sit on a low simmer for up to a half-hour and will only taste better for it. Season to taste with salt. Add the cilantro, toss well, and serve.

Note: You can find garam masala, an Indian spice blend, in most supermarket spice aisles, or you can order it online.

 **Pair With:** VIOGNIER Delicately aromatic Viognier is lovely with exotic spices like garam masala, but it's also weighty enough for dark-meat chicken.

spicy and sweet chicken thighs with seared scallions

Deeply flavored chicken thighs are a perfect match with this gingery, chile-spiked soy marinade. If you like things really spicy, add another teaspoon of sambal oelek to the marinade. Serves 4

- ½ cup soy sauce**
- 3 Tbs. dark brown sugar**
- 2 Tbs. rice vinegar**
- 1 Tbs. Asian sesame oil**
- 1 Tbs. sambal oelek or other chile sauce**
- 1 2-inch piece fresh ginger, minced**
- 3 large cloves garlic, minced**
- 1¾ to 2 lb. boneless, skinless chicken thighs, trimmed of excess fat**
- 12 medium scallions**
- 2 Tbs. vegetable oil**

In a medium bowl or large zip-top bag, combine the soy sauce, sugar, vinegar, sesame oil, sambal oelek, ginger, and garlic. Reserve ¼ cup of the marinade. Add the thighs to the remaining marinade and turn to coat. Let sit at room temperature for a half-hour, turning once, or refrigerate covered for up to 2 hours, turning the thighs occasionally.

Cut 11 of the scallions into 1-inch pieces. Thinly slice the remaining scallion on the bias and reserve separately.

Heat 1 Tbs. of the vegetable oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add the 11 scallions and cook, stirring, until fragrant, about 10 seconds. Add the reserved ¼ cup marinade to the pan and cook, stirring frequently, until the scallions are slightly charred and the sauce has thickened, about 2½ minutes. Remove from the pan and set aside.

Add the remaining 1 Tbs. of vegetable oil to the pan. Add the thighs to the skillet smooth side down without patting them dry. Cook undisturbed, adjusting the heat as necessary, until browned, 6 to 7 minutes. Shake the pan to loosen the thighs, flip, lower the heat to medium, and cook until done (cut into a thigh at the thickest part to check), another 7 to 8 minutes. Return the cooked scallions to the pan and toss. Serve the chicken garnished with the scallion slices.

 **Pair With:** OFF-DRY GEWÜRZTRAMINER
Off-dry wines—that is, ones with a touch of sweetness—are the way to go for food that's either a little sweet or a little spicy. Since this dish is both, give off-dry a try.



Visit FineCooking.com to get the recipe for Baby Bok Choy with Warm Miso Dressing (side dish shown in photo).





crispy, garlicky chicken thighs

At *The Purple Pig* in Chicago, they skewer squares of skin-on boneless chicken thighs and pan-fry them to perfect crispness. Though a delight to eat, it's not so fun boning thighs at home. Fortunately, you can get similar crackly skin with bone-in thighs and hands-off roasting in a very hot oven. **Serves 3 to 4**

- 1 Tbs. granulated garlic
- 2 tsp. sweet paprika
- ½ tsp. smoked paprika
- ⅛ tsp. cayenne
- Kosher salt
- ¼ cup vegetable oil

2 lb. skin-on, bone-in chicken thighs

Freshly ground black pepper

In a medium bowl, combine the garlic, paprikas, cayenne, and 1½ tsp. salt. Rub 1 Tbs. of the spice mixture under the skin of the thighs, making sure to leave the skin attached.

In a large bowl, combine the oil with the remaining spice mixture. Add the thighs and turn to coat. Let sit at room temperature for 40 to 45 minutes, or cover and refrigerate for up to a day, turning the thighs occasionally.

Position a rack in the center of the oven and heat to 450°F. Pat the thighs dry with a paper towel, season with ½ tsp. salt and

¼ tsp. pepper, and place on a foil-lined rimmed baking sheet. Roast until the chicken is cooked through and the skin is crackly and crisp, 40 to 45 minutes. Serve immediately.



Pair With: SPANISH ROSÉ Spanish rosés tend to include Tempranillo, which adds meaty notes that are awesome with smoked paprika, also hailing from Spain.



Visit FineCooking.com to get the recipe for Crispy Potatoes with Lemon and Lots of Oregano (side dish shown in photo).