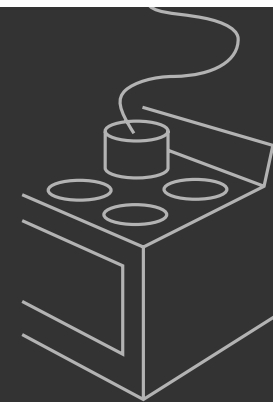


It's Chicken, Tonight!



Easily prepared, reasonably priced, and infinitely versatile, chicken is one of the best foods to rely on for weeknight meals. From a chicken salad in the summer to a whole roasted chicken in cold months, a simple light sauté to crispy, soul-satisfying fried chicken, the choices are almost endless. By trying different herbs and spices you can make even more exotic dishes from around the world.

To enjoy a chicken dinner, you have to start with a really good bird. Below are some essentials for picking and preparing quality chicken—whether you are going to cook a whole chicken and make use of every part, or if you make dinner frequently with chicken breasts, as I often do. With good-quality chicken, the right techniques, solid recipes and flavoring ideas, and a little creativity, you can enjoy making chicken any or every night of the week.

Chicken Facts

The rising popularity of chicken has unfortunately led to the mass production of poultry. This has caused the bulk of chicken available to be commercially raised birds that lack flavor. Good chickens do exist and their availability is growing. You may need to spend a little time tracking them down, though.

What to Look For

If possible, buy chickens or chicken parts from a poultry store or a reputable food merchant whose staff knows about its products. Ask for the source of the chicken and what it has been fed. Free-range chickens,

those allowed to hunt and peck for their food, are going to be more flavorful. This doesn't mean that all large-scale production chickens will be tasteless. Try to find out the source of the chicken and if they were fed a diet rich in grains.

Choose a chicken with the skin on and the bone in, unless the recipe specifies otherwise. The skin should be creamy yellow or white (usually the skin color is determined in part by what the bird eats) and should look moist. The fat should be well distributed. You should look for chickens that are packed on ice or are well chilled in a refrigerated case and that smell fresh.

Varieties of Chicken

Broiler-fryers: Young tender birds that are well suited for quick high-heat cooking. They range from 2½ to 4 pounds.

Roasters: Birds that are slightly older and heavier and are raised for roasting in the oven. They weigh 3½ to 8 pounds or more.

Stewing chickens: Older birds that are generally tougher and are best stewed or braised. They weigh from 3 to 5 pounds or more.

Capons: Male chickens that have been neutered as chicks, resulting in tender, flavorful large-breasted roasting birds. They weigh from 6 to 10 pounds.

Cornish game hens: Miniature hybrids of chicken and Cornish gamecock, each hen usually weighs about 1 to 1½ pounds and provides one large serving or two small.

Cleaning and Storing Chicken

As soon as you get it home, loosen the chicken from the wrapping and place it in the coldest part of the refrigerator. (Make sure that the package isn't leaking. If any liquid is seeping out, put the chicken in a plastic bag or in a bowl before placing it in the refrigerator.)

Cook the chicken within two days. Before cooking, rinse it with cold water and pat it dry with paper towels.

To freeze the chicken for up to 2 months, wrap it in a large airtight freezer bag. Thaw in the refrigerator for 24 hours.

Cutting Up a Chicken

Although for most nights you may find it easier to buy chicken already cut up, doing it yourself will save you money and provide more flavorful meals. The whole chicken will also yield extra pieces that can be used for stock. Try cutting it up during the weekend or on a weeknight when you aren't in a rush.

The techniques involved in cutting up or disjointing the chicken are fairly simple. A sharp boning knife or a good pair of poultry shears is all you will need. Some recipes call for quartered or halved chickens. You can do this or have the butcher do it for you. If you don't want to touch the chicken directly, you can wear close-fitting kitchen or surgical gloves (found in kitchen stores and drugstores), then discard them when you are done.

- 1. Remove the legs:** Place the chicken on the cutting board, breast side up, with the legs facing toward you. Locate the joint by moving the leg, then cut through the skin between the thigh and body to remove the leg. Repeat on the other side.
- 2. Separate the thigh and leg:** Bend the leg sharply to locate the joint between the leg and thigh. Cut through the joint to separate the two pieces. Repeat on the other side.
- 3. Remove the wings:** Move the wing to locate the joint next to the body. Cut through this joint to remove the wing. Repeat on the other side.
- 4. Cut off the back:** Starting at the neck opening, cut through both sides of the rib cage, separating both breasts from the remaining carcass.
- 5. Remove the breastbone:** Holding the breast skin side down, slit the thin membrane covering the breastbone in the center. Grasp the breast and flex it upward to pop out the bone. Pull the bone free, using the knife if necessary.
- 6. Cut the breast in half:** Place the breast skin side down on the cutting board. Cut along the center of the breast, through the cartilage, to split it in half.

Oven-Barbecued Chicken

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

✓ *EASY PREPARATION*

This is by far my favorite recipe for roasted chicken. For best flavor, the chicken is pan-browned, then roasted. Serve it with your favorite potatoes, carrots, or green beans, and a green salad. You will have a perfect meal every time. It's so easy, you will serve it often.

1 whole chicken (about 4 pounds), cut into pieces with skin intact, back discarded, or 3 to 4 pounds of whatever chicken parts you prefer

1 tablespoon olive oil

1 cup barbecue sauce (the spicier the better)

4 or 5 fresh rosemary sprigs or other herbs, for garnish (optional)

- 1.** Preheat the oven to 400°F.
- 2.** Rinse the chicken pieces and pat them dry. Allow the chicken to rest on a cookie sheet for 20 minutes.
- 3.** Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a large, heavy ovenproof skillet or gratin dish. Brown the chicken on both sides, turning only once, cooking each side 5 to 6 minutes. Arrange chicken skin side up in the skillet. *
- 4.** Brush with the barbecue sauce and roast in the oven for 25 minutes—longer if the breasts are very large—until the chicken reaches a temperature of 160°F on an instant-read thermometer inserted into the thickest part of the breast, basting several times with sauce. If the breasts and thighs are done but the legs—which have more fat—are not, remove the breasts to a platter and let the legs cook for a few more minutes.
- 5.** Transfer the cooked chicken to a warmed platter. *
- 6.** Garnish with rosemary sprigs, if you like. Serve the chicken very hot with the pan juices in a bowl on the side.

*** TIP:** To brown chicken properly, follow these tips:

Bring chicken to about room temperature so it will cook more evenly.

Use a large pan to avoid crowding. (Overcrowding will cause the chicken to steam in its juices rather than brown.)

When the oil begins to bead and smoke slightly, add the chicken with the presentation side down first—this would be either the skin-on side, or the side that had the skin.

Brown the pieces until they are a light caramel color and then move them to a clean baking sheet.

*** TIP:** Warmed plates and platters keep hot foods hot longer. You can warm them in a plate warmer if you have one, in a 200°F oven for 20 minutes, or in a clean sink full of hot tap water. Dry the plates or platters well before using.

Chicken with Grapes

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

✓ *SOMETHING SPECIAL*

When I was in college, I used to make a chicken dish with a mustard cream sauce that impressed all my friends. This enhanced version has the addition of sweet grapes to balance the tangy richness of the sauce.

4 medium boneless skinless chicken breasts, or if the breasts are more than 10 ounces each, use only 2 and slice them in half horizontally

Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

1 teaspoon finely chopped or creamed garlic *

1/2 cup dry white wine, such as Sauvignon Blanc

1/2 cup chicken broth

1 tablespoon Dijon mustard

1/2 cup heavy cream

1 cup seedless green grapes, halved

1 tablespoon chopped fresh Italian flat-leaf parsley, for garnish

1. Season the chicken well with salt and pepper.

2. Heat the butter in a heavy skillet over medium-high heat. Cook the breasts, turning once, until the chicken reaches a temperature of 160°F on an instant-read thermometer inserted into the thickest part of the breast, 12 to 15 minutes. Remove the chicken from the skillet and tent with aluminum foil to keep warm.

3. Add the chopped garlic to the same skillet and cook, stirring, for 30 seconds. Stir in the wine, chicken broth, and mustard. Raise the heat and boil the liquid until reduced by half. Beat the cream into the sauce. Boil until

the sauce thickens a little, 3 to 4 minutes. *

4. Taste and season the sauce with salt and pepper if necessary.

5. Return the chicken breasts to the skillet with the sauce and add the grapes. Simmer gently until the chicken is heated through, 3 to 4 minutes. Do not overcook. Serve hot, garnished with a little parsley.

SERVING SUGGESTION

This would be great with some steamed carrots tossed with lemon juice and a 5-minute packaged couscous.

*** TIP:** To prepare garlic, first separate the cloves from the head. Then, lay the clove on the work surface and quickly press the side of the knife down on the clove with the palm of your hand. The skin will come right off. Chop the garlic lightly. For a creamy texture, add a little salt, which will make it easier to work into a puree. Press the garlic repeatedly with the blade of the knife, rubbing it against the chopping board until it forms a creamy paste.

*** TIP:** To see if a sauce is the right thickness, dip a spoon in the sauce and run a finger lengthwise down the back of the spoon. The sauce is thick enough when your finger draws a clean stripe, without the sauce seeping over the edges.

Tarragon Chicken Breasts

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

✓ *SOMETHING SPECIAL*

Tarragon, in discreet amounts, can be used to season tomatoes and salad dressings, and it goes especially well with chicken. Serve this dish with seasoned rice and fresh spinach, or Italian Green Beans with Tomatoes (page 165).

4 medium boneless skinless chicken breasts, tenderloins removed, * or if the breasts are more than 10 ounces each, use only 2 and slice them in half horizontally, pounded to an even thickness *

Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

2 teaspoons finely chopped garlic (2 medium cloves)

¾ cup fresh or thawed frozen tiny pearl onions

½ cup dry white wine, such as Sauvignon Blanc

1½ teaspoons dried tarragon, or 2 tablespoons freshly chopped tarragon, or more, to taste

¾ cup heavy cream

3 to 4 sprigs fresh tarragon, for garnish

1. Season the chicken well with salt and pepper.
2. Melt the butter in a heavy skillet over medium-high heat. Cook the chicken in the butter, turning once, until the chicken reaches a temperature of 160°F on an instant-read thermometer inserted into the thickest part of the breast, 8 to 10 minutes. Remove the chicken from the skillet and tent with aluminum foil to keep warm.
3. Stir the garlic and onions into the same skillet. Cook, tossing, until tender and golden brown, about 5 minutes. Stir in the wine and tarragon. Raise the heat and boil until the liquid is reduced by half, about 3 minutes. Stir in the cream.
4. Boil until the sauce thickens again slightly. Taste and season with salt and pepper if necessary.
5. Return the chicken to the sauce and simmer gently until heated through, 3 to 4 minutes. Serve the chicken on individual plates, sliced diagonally across the breast, with some of the sauce spooned over each serving. Garnish with fresh tarragon.

SERVING SUGGESTION

Arrange the sliced chicken on a bed of rice and vegetables. Then drizzle or spoon the sauce over and garnish with fresh tarragon.

*** TIP:** To remove the tenderloin from each boneless breast: slide a paring knife under the tendon (the tough white strip that holds the tenderloin to the breast). Place the tenderloin, tendon down, on the cutting board. With the knife against the tendon, pull on the tendon, moving it gently from side to side with your other hand, until it pulls away.

*** TIP:** To make the chicken breasts even, place each chicken breast in a plastic bag or between two sheets of plastic wrap. Gently flatten with the side of a meat mallet so that the breast is the same thickness all over. Make sure you don't pound the breasts too thin. These are not cutlets; you are only assuring that the meat will cook evenly. If it gets too thin, it may tear and dry out very quickly during cooking.

Chicken Niçoise Salad with Walnuts and Blue Cheese Vinaigrette

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

✓ SOMETHING SPECIAL ✓ TAKE-ALONG

A traditional composed niçoise salad features many small but delectable and separate components such as tomatoes, olives, and green beans, with the main focus being tuna. This is a simpler but lovely composed salad using chicken. (Of course, you can substitute tuna or salmon for the chicken, if you like.) In winter, use vine-ripened tomatoes, or leave them out if the tomatoes aren't tempting. Though it isn't at all classic, I like to add some boiled potatoes for a heartier salad.

2 boneless skinless chicken breasts

2 cups low-sodium chicken broth

Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

1/2 pound smallest green beans, tipped and tailed, or frozen baby green beans

Blue Cheese Vinaigrette (below)

4 cups mixed greens of your choice (bagged greens are fine)

1/2 English-style cucumber, washed but unpeeled, very thinly sliced

3 small ripe tomatoes, cut into wedges, seeds removed

3 hard-boiled eggs, peeled and quartered *

1/2 cup oil-cured black olives

1/3 cup walnut halves, toasted

1. In a medium saucepan, poach the chicken breasts in simmering chicken broth until the chicken reaches a temperature of 160°F on an instant-read thermometer inserted into the thickest part of the breast, 8 to 10 minutes. Remove the chicken from the broth, cool, and slice the breasts across the grain on the diagonal. Season with salt and pepper.

2. Bring 4 quarts of water to a boil in a large saucepan. Add the green beans and cook until just crisply tender, 3 to 4 minutes. Drain well and refresh quickly by dunking them in a bowl full of

ice water. Dry the green beans with a clean cloth towel. If using frozen green beans, steam over boiling water for 5 minutes and then dry with a clean cloth towel.

3. Make the vinaigrette.

4. To serve, arrange a bed of greens on a large serving platter. Layer the vegetables on top of the greens in an attractive pattern. Top with egg wedges, and scatter with olives and walnuts. Drizzle with a little of the vinaigrette and pass the remaining vinaigrette in a separate bowl.

*** TIP:** To make perfect hard-boiled eggs, place 6 eggs at room temperature in the bottom of a medium saucepan. Add water to 1 inch above the eggs. Bring the water to a boil over high heat. After it comes to a boil, remove the pan from the heat and cover. Allow the eggs to sit 12 minutes, then soak the eggs in ice water for 6 minutes. Peel each egg by tapping it all over on the counter, rolling the egg to loosen the shell, then peel.



Blue Cheese Vinaigrette

MAKES ABOUT 2/3 CUP

This richly flavored vinaigrette is a great option for salads. Also try it as a dipping sauce for vegetables or barbecued chicken.

2 tablespoons white wine vinegar

2 teaspoons Dijon mustard *

**Salt and freshly ground pepper,
to taste**

1 teaspoon finely chopped garlic

1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil

**1/3 cup crumbled blue cheese
(1 1/2 ounces)**

In a small bowl, beat together the vinegar, mustard, salt, pepper, and garlic. Beat in the olive oil. Stir in the blue cheese. Let the dressing stand 15 minutes or longer to develop the flavor. Serve or store in a covered container in the refrigerator up to 2 hours.

*** TIP:** Dijon mustard is made from the finest mustard seeds perfectly blended with herbs, spices, and white wine. I have at least four different types of mustard in the pantry at all times to use in marinades, glazes, and sauces.

Chicken Scaloppine with Sesame Noodles

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

✓ SOMETHING SPECIAL

This dish combines the naturally great flavor of chicken with a wonderful lemon-parsley sauce. What makes it even more interesting is that it's served over tasty sesame noodles. Pound the chicken as in the Tarragon Chicken Breasts recipe (see the Tip on page 99), though these should be pounded into very thin cutlets.

Sesame Noodles (below)

1/4 cup all-purpose flour

Salt and freshly ground pepper,
to taste

4 boneless skinless chicken breasts,
each breast halved horizontally into
2 thin fillets and pounded to an even
1/4-inch thickness

2 tablespoons butter

1 tablespoon olive oil

2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice

2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh
Italian flat-leaf parsley *

1. Preheat the oven to 200°F. Prepare the sesame noodles.
2. In a shallow bowl, combine the flour, salt, and pepper. Dredge the chicken breasts in the flour mixture, shaking off any excess.
3. Melt the butter with the olive oil in a large, heavy skillet over medium-high heat. Add the chicken and cook it, turning once, until it is golden brown and reaches 160°F on an instant-read thermometer inserted into the thickest part of the breast, 7 to 8 minutes (or less if the cutlets are very thin).
4. Mound the sesame noodles in the bottom of a heated serving platter.
5. Remove the chicken from the skillet and arrange over the noodles; keep warm in the oven.
6. Stir the lemon juice and parsley into the juices remaining in the skillet; cook 1 minute. Spoon over the chicken and serve at once.

*** TIP:** Parsley comes in different varieties but I think the best for seasoning dishes is the flat-leaf variety, sometimes called Italian parsley. When buying it, look for firm stems and leaves. At home, trim the stems at the base. Place the parsley in a small glass of water; loosely cover it with plastic wrap or a thin plastic bag and store in the refrigerator. It will stay fresh for about 2 weeks.

Sesame Noodles

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

✓ *EASY PREPARATION*

Asian noodles are becoming much more available in stores around the country. One of the most popular noodles in Japan is soba, made from buckwheat flour. You may find them sold fresh in the produce department, or dried in the Asian section of your supermarket. Once they're cooked, just toss them with chicken, vegetables, and dressing for a fantastic quick meal with a different flavor.

8 ounces fresh or dried soba noodles
 1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon light sesame oil
 ¼ cup low-sodium chicken broth, hot
 2 tablespoons light soy sauce
 2 tablespoons Asian sesame paste
 2 tablespoons very thinly sliced green onions (from 2 to 3 whole onions) *
 2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh Italian flat-leaf parsley

1. Cook the noodles in 6 quarts of boiling salted water, 3 to 4 minutes for fresh noodles, 6 to 9 minutes for dried noodles. Drain well, and turn into a warm serving bowl.

2. Toss the drained noodles with 1 tablespoon sesame oil.

3. In a small bowl, beat together the chicken broth, soy sauce, sesame paste, and 1 teaspoon sesame oil. Toss with the hot noodles and keep warm.

4. Just before serving, toss the noodles gently with the green onions and parsley.

***TIP:** Green onions (often called scallions), are thin, quick-growing, and mature onions. While most have a white undeveloped root end, some have a small but rounded bulb. Store in a plastic bag in the refrigerator. When a recipe calls for them, use the trimmed white part and about 2 inches of the tender green.

Coconut Chicken Curry with Basmati Rice

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

✓ SOMETHING SPECIAL

For many people, curry has come to mean a generic but fragrant spice mix sold in the supermarket, usually containing turmeric, cumin, and cayenne among other seasonings. However, in India and other countries in the East, there are numerous curry flavoring combinations. “Curry powder” can represent almost any blend of spices used to create a savory dish. So if you don’t like a traditional curry powder, blend your favorite spices to create your own.

1 cup basmati rice *

2 cups water

Salt, to taste

1 tablespoon fresh lime juice

1 cup unsweetened coconut milk

2 tablespoons mild curry paste or powder, or more, or hotter, to taste

1 teaspoon sugar

1 bunch (about 5 thin) green onions, cut into 1/4-inch slices

3 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro

1 tablespoon vegetable oil (peanut is preferred)

3 boneless skinless chicken breasts, halved across and cut into 1/2-inch-wide strips

1 teaspoon finely chopped garlic (1 medium clove)

1. In a medium saucepan, stir together the rice, water, and salt. Bring to a boil, stir once, and reduce heat to a simmer. Simmer until all the water is absorbed, about 15 minutes. Cover the pot with a kitchen towel and then the pot cover. Remove from heat and set aside for 10 minutes.

2. While the rice is cooking, in a small bowl, combine the lime juice, coconut milk, curry paste or powder, sugar, green onions, and cilantro.

3. Heat the oil in a wok or heavy skillet over high heat. Toss the chicken breast slices in the wok and stir-fry for 2 to 3 minutes.

Add the garlic and cook, stirring, 1 minute more. Pour in the coconut milk mixture, lower the heat, and simmer 4 minutes more.

4. Use a fork to stir the rice in the pot and then turn into a serving bowl. Spoon the chicken and sauce on top and serve immediately.

SERVING SUGGESTION

You can add steamed vegetables such as green beans or asparagus. Spread the rice in the bottom of a heated serving platter. Layer with vegetables and then the chicken and sauce.

*** TIP:** Basmati rice is special long-grain rice often used in Indian cooking. It has a light texture and is very fragrant. There is no need to rinse the basmati rice before cooking. Just make sure to use about 1 part rice to 2 parts liquid to cook it.

Chicken Saltimbocca

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

✓ EASY PREPARATION

Chicken breasts are easy to cook, and dishes based on them come together quickly. This classic but always exciting combination of sage, ham, and chicken will really spice up a weeknight dinner.

8 thin slices prosciutto or smoked ham, cut to the size of each piece of chicken

4 boneless skinless chicken breasts, sliced in half horizontally to make 8 thin cutlets (or, if the breasts are more than 10 ounces each, use only 2 and slice them in half horizontally to make 4 thick cutlets, then slice them in half horizontally again to yield 8 thin cutlets)

8 large fresh sage leaves or 1/2 teaspoon dried sage *

Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

2 tablespoons butter

1 tablespoon olive oil

1/4 cup dry white wine, such as Sauvignon Blanc

1/4 cup chicken broth

1. Lay 1 slice prosciutto on each chicken cutlet. Top each package with a sage leaf and skewer it to the ham and chicken with a round-edged (not flat) toothpick. (If using dried sage, sprinkle a little on the chicken before topping with the ham and skewering with the toothpick.) Dust with salt and pepper.

2. In a heavy skillet large enough to hold all the cutlets in one layer, heat the butter and oil over medium-high heat. Quickly brown the chicken cutlets on both sides, 1 to 2 minutes per side. Turn cutlets ham

side up. Stir in the wine and chicken broth. Lower the heat and simmer gently until the chicken reaches a temperature of 160°F on an instant-read thermometer inserted into the thickest part of the breast, about 5 minutes.

3. Serve hot, sage leaf up, with the sauce spooned over the cutlets.

SERVING SUGGESTION

Serve with rice pilaf and steamed green beans.

*** TIP:** Dried herbs and spices can be a cook's saviors in the kitchen. Remember that dried spices last 1 1/2 months and dried herbs last only one year. Once you bring them home from the store, immediately mark them with the date. To store them, keep in a cool dark place where they won't dry out. When they lose their color, they have lost a lot of their natural oils, which give them their flavor. To use dried herbs, either toast them in a skillet or crumble them between your fingers to activate the oils.

Chicken Sausages with White Beans and Fresh Greens

MAKES 6 TO 8 SERVINGS

✓ *MAKE-AHEAD* ✓ *SOMETHING SPECIAL*

This hearty, delicious recipe is a quick and easy all-in-one meal even the kids will love.

12 chicken or turkey sausages *
2 cups dry white wine, such as Sauvignon Blanc
3 tablespoons olive oil
1 tablespoon finely chopped garlic (from 3 large cloves)
2 cups chopped white onions (from 2 small onions)
3 cups seeded deveined and chopped red bell pepper (from 3 medium peppers)
1 serrano chile, stemmed, seeded, deveined, and finely chopped
¼ cup fresh thyme, stemmed, leaves chopped
Three 14-ounce cans cannellini beans, drained and rinsed
Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste
3 bunches fresh greens, such as arugula, spinach, or watercress

1. Place the sausages in a large, heavy skillet, and pierce each one with a fork. Add ¼ cup of the wine. Cover the pan and simmer the sausages over medium heat for 5 minutes. Uncover and increase the heat to high. Cook, turning the sausages occasionally, until the wine evaporates and the sausages are browned, about 10 minutes. Transfer the sausages to a plate. After they have cooled, slice them on the diagonal into 1-inch pieces.

2. Pour off all but ¼ cup of the drippings from the pan. Add the olive oil and heat the skillet over medium heat. Add the garlic, onion, red pepper, chile, and thyme, and cook, stirring, until the vegetables are tender, about 10 minutes. Increase the heat to high and add the remaining

wine. Boil until the liquid is reduced by half, about 3 minutes, scraping the pan with a wooden spoon so all the nice brown bits in the pan are incorporated into the sauce. Add the beans and sausage, and season with salt and pepper. Stir until heated through, about 10 minutes.

3. Divide the fresh greens among the plates and top with the sausage mixture.

SERVING SUGGESTION

This is a good dish for evenings when latecomers will have to eat after the main meal. Refrigerate their portions, which can later be microwaved on high for about 2 minutes, until good and hot.

***TIP:** Sausages come in many great flavors. I have made this dish with chicken-apple sausage, fennel-pork sausage, and many others. Find your favorites and then enhance the dish by seasoning it with more of the herbs and spices found in the sausages. Sausages will keep in the freezer for several months, so always keep them on hand.