

CHICKEN, SAGE AND PARSNIP CASSEROLE

This is a simple foolproof country dish with bold gutsy flavours and a surprisingly silky, velvety sauce. The final cooking in the oven caramelises the sauce giving a lovely golden tinge to the chicken and parsnips which is quite scrumptious. It cannot fail to impress – particularly if you scatter the top with a few petals of flowering sage before serving.

2 x 1.2kg / 2 ½ lb. free range chickens
7 or 8 sprigs fresh sage
salt and freshly ground black pepper
16 shallots – peeled
1.7lts / 3 pints white chicken stock
6 carrots
4 small thin leeks
4 parsnips
3 or 4 sprigs of summer savory or flowering thyme
150ml / ¼ pt double cream
chopped fresh parsley and sage flowers or summer savory flowers to garnish

Pre-heat oven to 165C gas mark 4

1. Remove breasts from chickens. Cut down either side of breast bone using a sharp filleting knife and follow the shape of the rib cage. Cut across the breasts at the wings to remove them from the carcasses
2. Cut legs and thighs from carcasses through ball and socket joints at thighs
3. Lift the fillet in each breast and insert a sage leaf in each. Season chicken pieces
4. Heat stock in a large pan until boiling. Add chicken legs and reduce heat to simmer whilst you prepare the vegetables
5. Wash, peel and trim carrots, leeks and parsnips and cut into even sized pieces
6. In a large shallow casserole dish, place the breasts, carrots and parsnips and half the sage and summer savory. Season
7. Add the part cooked chicken legs and then pour over the stock to cover
8. Put casserole in pre-heated oven to cook for about 45 minutes
9. Remove from oven and take out the chicken and half the vegetables with a slotted spoon and reserve
10. Puree the remainder in a processor or liquidiser until quite smooth
11. Sieve into a large pan
12. Chop the remaining sage and summer savory and add to the pan with the cream
13. Cook down to reduce a little and amalgamate the flavours. Season lightly
14. Return the chicken and vegetables to the casserole dish and add the prepared leeks
15. Pour over sauce and return to the oven for about another 20 to 25 minutes until the chicken and vegetables are quite cooked and have a lovely golden glaze
16. Garnish with a sprinkling of chopped parsley and flowering herbs

Serve with a dish of lightly cooked and buttered cabbage.