

Poularde au Champagne

The secret to flour-less nouvelle cuisine sauces is patience. It takes longer than you might think to reduce the liquid, then the cream, to the proper consistency, but patience is crucial to the success of this dish. Keep the chicken loosely covered with foil next to the stove while you reduce the wine first, then the cream. What happens, in technical terms, is that the acidity of the wine increases as it evaporates; this acid combines with the butterfat in the cream, the moisture from which evaporates to concentrate the butterfat. The sauce actually emulsifies, the same basic principle as mayonnaise or hollandaise, except that this one must boil to form the emulsion. The texture of the sauce is noticeably lighter and more velvety than those thickened with starch.

2 frying chickens, 2 1/2 to 3 pounds each
2 tablespoons butter
2 tablespoons oil
6 shallots, finely chopped
2 cups dry (brut) champagne
2 cups heavy cream

Clean the chickens and cut them into serving pieces. Pat them dry with a towel. Sauté the chicken pieces in the butter and oil in a heavy skillet over moderate heat. Do not crowd the pan; do the chickens in two pans if necessary, or in two shifts. Cook the chicken until it is nicely browned and cooked through, about 25 minutes in all. Remove the chicken from the pan and set it aside. Do not put it in the oven to keep warm, as this will dry it out.

Pour the grease from the pan. Add the shallots and the wine. Turn up the heat and scrape up any browned bits that may adhere to the bottom of the pan to dissolve them. Boil the wine until it is reduced to about 1/3 cup. It should have the consistency of a light syrup. Add the cream and let it boil until it reduces by half and thickens into a light sauce. Add the chicken during the final stages of this reduction to reheat it, about 3 to 5 minutes. Taste the sauce for salt and pepper. Serve the chicken napped with the sauce.

NOTE: Sautéed Shitake mushrooms may be added to the sauce when you add the chicken for an elegant additional touch.