

## To Make a Frykecy (1669-1691)

Chicken Fricassee is still popular in many areas of the United States, and was known in French cooking from the late middle ages and in English cooking manuscripts from the 1500s. We know that the dish was popular in Virginia in 1709-1712, from the diaries of William Byrd, who wrote down almost everything he ate. However, being a man, Byrd did not cook nor record recipes. If food historians wanted to reconstruct Byrd's fricassee, we would have to start with an English cookbook of the time.

However, there is a recipe for chicken fricassee in a very famous cooking manuscript that belonged to Byrd's sister-in-law, Frances Parke Custis, and eventually passed down to Martha Custis Washington, wife of President Washington. (This style of fricassee would not have seemed old-fashioned by George Washington's time, but Washington was known not to like such fancy dishes, so it is unlikely that Martha Washington used the recipe.) Byrd's wife, Lucy, had written her name in the manuscript as a child. However, neither Lucy nor Frances were known for their cooking (or, to be fully accurate, for the cooking of their slaves.) And Byrd's diary does not mention eating fricassee at home or at the Custis home.

So, if this English recipe was ever used in America, it was probably by an earlier owner of the manuscript, such as Lucy and Frances' mother, Jane Ludwell Parke (1688?-1708). However, the editor of *Martha Washington's Booke of Cookery*, Karen Hess, deduces that the manuscript was copied from an earlier family manuscript by someone with very different handwriting than Jane Ludwell Parke. Hess suggests that that copyist may have been Jane Ludwell Parke's step-mother, Frances Culpepper Berkeley Ludwell (1634-1691), who had come to America between 1649 and 1669. As Lady Berkeley, she was the wife of the governor of Virginia, and as Mrs. Ludwell, wife of the governor of Carolina. She would have been in charge of a well-equipped kitchen with a budget for frequent entertaining of leading planters. (One of the guests who might have eaten the "Frykecy" was Lady Berkeley's cousin Nathaniel Bacon, who left the inner circle to lead a rebellion in 1676, burned Jamestown, and threatened to shoot the 70-year-old governor. Lord Berkeley coolly turned away, but compromised by letting Bacon continue his unauthorized Indian fighting.)

The details of breaking the bones to enrich the sauce, and thickening at the end with egg yolks survived almost into the 19th Century, and the seasoning with parsley, thyme, onion, and lemon suggest that this recipe was first written after the medieval use of fruit and sweet spices in chicken dishes had faded. I think this dish would fit onto the dinner menu of any affluent Colonial home from the 1640s to the American Revolution. For cutting up the chickens, I have relied on Mary Randolph's *Virginia House-Wife* (1824). Some quantities are as suggested by Karen Hess.

"Take 2 Chicken, or a hare, kill & flaw [skin] them hot, take out theyr intrills & wipe them within, cut them in pieces & break theyr bones with A pestle. Thn put halfe a pound of butter into the frying pan, & fry it till it be browne, thn put in the Chiken & give it a walme [bubble] or two. Thn put in halfe a pinte of faire water well seasoned with pepper, & salt, & a little after put in a handfull of parsley, & time [thyme], & an onion shread all smal. Fry all these together till they be enough, & when it is ready to be dished up, put into the pan the youlks of 5 or 6 eggs, well beaten & mixed wth A little wine vinegar or juice of leamons, stir thes[e] well together least it Curdle, thn dish it up without any more frying."

2 broiler-fryer chickens, or 6 pounds cut-up broiler-fryer, free-range preferred

1/2 pound salted butter

1 cup homemade chicken broth (optional, suggested by Karen Hess to compensate for today's less flavorful chickens)

a bunch parsley

10-15 sprigs of fresh thyme or 2 teaspoons dried thyme

1 onion

2-3 eggs

1 lemon, or 2 teaspoons wine vinegar

*Equipment:* chef's knife or mallet and rubber cleaver to cut up chicken, kitchen mallet or brass pestle to crush bones, heavy soup pot with tight lid, large ovenproof platter, tongs, lemon juicer.

1. If using cut-chicken, go on to Step 2. With whole chickens, remove bag of giblets, wash chickens and drain. Cut off wings and drumsticks. Remove thighs, cutting off the leg bones near the backbone. Cut breasts off the backbone. Cut across or break the backs in half.
2. With a pestle or kitchen mallet, break up the backbone, the ends of the drumsticks and thighbones, and crush the wing tips and some of the ribs.
3. Melt the butter in the soup pot over medium heat and let it foam until starting to brown.
4. Increase heat and add chicken backs, necks, and giblets to pot, followed by legs and thighs, with the breasts and wings on top. Allow to brown for a few minutes before stirring.
5. Add a teaspoon of salt and some fresh ground pepper to a cup of water.
6. Pour water into the soup pot, stir once, and cover tightly. Reduce heat to a simmer.
7. Half, peel, and chop the onion.
8. Take a handful of parsley. Tie it up into a bundle with one of the parsley stems.
9. If using fresh thyme, tie it up into a bundle with another parsley stem.
10. Open the soup pot and add the onion, parsley and thyme. Stir to get the herbs under the surface.
11. Again cover tightly, and cook until chicken is just beginning to fall off the bones, about 30-40 minutes.
12. Heat up a platter in a warm (150 degrees) oven.
13. Remove chicken from pot to the platter, and keep warm in the oven. Discard the bundles of herbs.
14. Scrape up any browned bits into the remaining pan juices. There should be about 1 to 1-1/2 cups. If there is much more, increase heat to boil off some of the water and concentrate the juices. If there is much less, add a little water or chicken broth.
15. Break one egg for every half-cup of juices over an empty cup and separate by pouring the yolks from shell to shell. Save the whites for another use, such as the **Chocolate Puffs** below. Put the yolks into a bowl.
16. Stir the eggs to a golden yellow. Remove the soup pot from the heat.
17. Juice half a lemon, and add a tablespoon of lemon juice (or two teaspoons of vinegar) to the egg mixture, stirring well.
18. Stirring rapidly, add a little of the hot pan juices into the eggs to warm them up.
19. Stirring the remaining pan juices rapidly, add the eggs and whip to a light creamy texture.
20. Quickly add the chicken pieces. stirring to coat them with the sauce.

*Serve in a typical Colonial Virginia dinner at 2 p.m. with at least three other meat or fish dishes and numerous side dishes including seasonal vegetables, sweet potatoes, and green salad. Remove the tablecloth for an equally elaborate course of desserts. 17th Century Englishmen ate many foods with small bones, and would not necessarily prefer the drumsticks to the necks or backs, although the gizzards might be saved for servants. The egg-bound sauce cannot be reheated without curdling, so spoon it onto any leftover pieces of chicken to make a pretty glaze, and serve cold for a Virginia supper or breakfast.*