

## Cynthia's Sweet & Sour Chicken

*This is about 90 times better than traditional sweet-and-sour, in part because the components are grilled/broiled/stir-fried separately. My favorite variation uses the sauce in a chafing dish for dipping, with the components on skewers. If you make the pieces a bit bigger it's also marvelous on the grill. Best made the night before, to give the flavors a chance to mingle.*

### Chicken marinade

- ½ t. kosher salt
- ½ t. brown sugar
- 2T soy sauce (low-salt works just fine)
- 2T pineapple juice (canned—fresh will sludge the chicken)
- ¼ t. fresh ground pepper (white's best if you have it, or grains of paradise, black pepper in a pinch)

### Batter

- 2 eggs, well-beaten
- 2T all-purpose flour (or rice flour, if you have it)
- 2T cornstarch
- 1 t. salt
- 2T water
- For stir-fry: Good high-temp oil (peanut or canola), 2 cloves crushed garlic, 1 chopped scallion
- For pineapple: 2T fresh butter (optional) For mushrooms: 2T lime juice

### Sauce *(please note that I sometimes wind up doubling the sauce recipe)*

- 1 cup brown sugar (experiment with this—I sometimes use a 75:25 brown sugar : powdered sugar ratio if I'm using this as a dipping sauce)
- 4T soy sauce
- 6T (3/8 cup) catsup (yes, catsup—if you make your own tomato sauce/paste that's good too, but you'll need to adjust the sugar (up))
- 1/3 cup vinegar (I prefer rice wine vinegar but some think it's harsh—try red wine or champagne vinegar )
- 4T pineapple juice
- 4T cornstarch dissolved in ¼ cup water and ½ cup pineapple juice

### Components

- 4 whole chicken breasts (8 halves), skinless and boned
- 1 whole pineapple
- 4 bell peppers (mix green, yellow and red peppers if you can)
- 1 cup of well-flavored cherry or pear tomatoes (omit if they're only storebought)
- 4-6 carrots
- 1 package of button mushrooms (be careful—some of the more exotic mushrooms will overwhelm the dish but you can try them—the innocuous little buttons seem to blend better)

### Prep *(the hard part—after many years of making this I've learned to do it in this order)*

**Chicken.** Cut the chicken breasts into roughly 1-inch chunks or a bit bigger and place in a glass bowl. Mix up the marinade ingredients, pour over the chicken pieces and stir until thoroughly coated. Cover and set in the refrigerator while you prep the components. (even better if you can marinate overnight)

**Sauce.** Mix together sauce ingredients (except cornstarch mixture) and heat on low/medium, stirring until blended. Dissolve the cornstarch in the water, then add the pineapple juice and mix thoroughly. Stream into the sauce mixture and KEEP STIRRING. It should thicken up and turn nicely clear—if it's too thick, add more pineapple juice. Set on a back-burner, cover and don't heat.

**Pineapple.** You can do this two ways: *On the grill*, cut the pineapple cross-wise into inch-thick slices, brush with melted butter, and set on the grill until slightly soft with grill marks. Cut into bite-sized chunks. *If you're broiling*, turn your broiler on low, set the pineapple chunks on a rack over a cookie sheet, brush with melted butter and a little brown sugar (not much) and broil until the top corners char. Remove from the broiler and let cool.

**Carrots.** Peel and slice into 1-inch chunks, on the diagonal. Place in a saucepan with 1T sugar and cover with water. Parboil until firm but not crunchy. Douse in cold water to stop the cooking, then drain.

**Tomatoes** (*if those are nasty, sterile, Styrofoam hothouse tomatoes, do NOT use them in my recipe. I will haunt you forever.*). Wash only—no need to cut them up.

**Bell pepper.** Wash and cut into bite-size pieces (remove the pith and all that).

**Mushrooms.** Wash lightly and halve the mushrooms if they're big, leave them alone if already bite-sized. Sprinkle with lime (or lemon juice or rice vinegar).

### **Cook**

Put the oil into your well-seasoned wok and crank up the heat (I hope you're using a gas range). When a drop of water skitters across the wok, drop in the garlic and scallions, stir-fry rapidly until garlic just softens. Remove garlic and scallions, leaving just the flavored oil.

Rapidly stir-fry the mushrooms, carrots, tomatoes and bell peppers separately, in turn, until each is slightly softened (separately gives you maximum control). As each is done, drain on paper towels.

Check your oil levels in the wok and top off if needed—let the wok get hot again. Mix the batter ingredients together in a shallow bowl, then dump a batch of chicken pieces into the batter (enough to cover the bottom third of the wok). Coat thoroughly, let soak for about 30 seconds, then add to wok. Stir fry rapidly (chopsticks work best), turning each piece several times to ensure even cooking. Take out the chunks when barely past translucent pink in the center—DO NOT let the outer meat toughen. Drain on paper towels and repeat until all chicken is cooked.

### **Assembly**

Dump it all into a crock pot or Dutch oven, and heat until everything's thoroughly warmed. Serve. If you're doing this as appetizers, skewer all the components in kebab fashion, then set goodie-side down into the chafing dish of sauce. I've tried saucing the skewers and setting them onto plates, but they tend to get cold.

BTW...this is NOT a crock-pot dish. You can store it in the refrigerator and reheat it—it's even better— and you can freeze it. But if you let it simmer in a crock pot for hours on end it will turn mushy. Yuk.