

Almoronia

From Nelson's Kitchen
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Almoronia is a traditional chicken-and-eggplant recipe that was brought to Morocco by the Jewish communities expelled from al-Andaluz. I started with the recipe by Tess Mallos that I found in *The food of Morocco: a journey for food lovers* and tried to bring it to our times. Instead of deep frying the eggplant in oil, I use the method of salting, pat drying, grilling and let them finish cooking steaming in a closed container. For the chicken, I use skinless, but bone-in, chicken thighs instead of the whole chicken in the original recipe. Also I replaced the boiling of the chicken with a gentle braising. To ensure the most flavour and moisture meat I borrow a method from the America's Test Kitchen and slow braise the thighs for three hours at very low temperature. This time can be cut in half at a higher temperature with similar results.

Ingredients:

- 1.25 kg (2 3/4 pounds) of bone-in skinless chicken thighs
- 1 teaspoon of freshly ground black pepper
- 1 stick cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon of saffron strands
- salt
- 750 grams (1 3/4 pounds) eggplants
- canola oil
- 2 large onions, peeled and sliced into half moons
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 clove of garlic, peeled
- 1 teaspoon of honey

Procedure:

1. Braise the chicken thighs

- Pre-heat oven to 200 F.
- Dissolve the saffron strands into 1/4 cup of water.
- Sprinkle the chicken thighs with salt and 1/2 teaspoon of ground black pepper.
- Place in an oven-safe dish with a tight cover — or use a dish without cover and cover tightly with aluminum foil.
- Break the cinnamon stick into two pieces and put far apart in the dish.
- Spread the saffron water all over the chicken pieces.
- Cover the dish and put in the oven.
- Braise for about three hours. The chicken is done when the temperature close to the bone in the thickest pieces reaches 195 F when tested with an instant-reading thermometer.
- Alternatively, braise in a 325 F oven for about 80 minutes until the internal temperature reaches 195 F.

- Remove from the oven and keep it warm until you are ready to assemble the dish.

2. Grill the Eggplants

- Cut the ends of the eggplants and, using a vegetable peeler, peel longwise stripes from the eggplants, leaving some strips of the skin.
- Cut eggplants into 1 cm (slightly thinner than 1/2 inch) thick slices.
- Sprinkle each slice on both sides with salt.
- Put the eggplants in a colander and let seat for at least 30 minutes and up to 90 minutes.
- Heat up your gas grill to moderate heat level.
- Using paper towels, pat the eggplant slices dry.
- In a shallow dinner plate put a thick film of canola oil.
- Quickly coat both sides of each eggplant slice with the canola oil and place on another dish. Adding more oil as it is absorbed by the eggplant slices.
- Clean the grill thoroughly with a steel brush.
- Either spray the grill a few times with cooking spray or put cooking oil in a small dish and using folded paper towels and tongues coat the grill with oil.
- Grill both sides of the eggplant slices until they are lightly brown and the eggplant slices are cooked but neither dried up nor mushy. They will continue cooking after removed from the grill.
- Transfer the eggplant slices from the grill into a tupperware container with a tight-fitting lead and cover immediately with the lead.
- Let the eggplant slices steam on their own heat for at least 20 minutes.

3. Brown the onions

- Heat the olive oil in a heavy pan over moderate heat and add the onions.
- Cook for about 30 minutes, stirring regularly until the onions are very tender and reach a pale golden colour.
- Stir the honey into the onions and continue cooking while stirring until they reach a deep golden colour.
- Crush the garlic into a paste and add to the cooked onions. Stir for about 30 seconds.
- Add the remaining 1/2 teaspoon of black pepper to the onions.
- Pour about 2 cups of the juice that accumulated into the chicken onto the onions.
- Cook for a further 10 minutes over gentle heat.

4. Assemble the Almoronia

- Preheat oven to 300 F
- Lay the cooked eggplant on the bottom of an ovenproof dish.
- Remove the bones and any blood vessels from the chicken thighs and break the meat into large pieces with your fingers.
- Spread the chicken meat over the eggplant slices.
- Pour the onion sauce over the chicken.
- Place in the oven and cook for 30 minutes.