

Moroccan Chicken – Comfort du Jour

The bone-in chicken thighs are marinated in a spicy blend of chiles and seed spices, surrounded by tender and colorful vegetables, plus dried fruit and fried almonds. If it sounds like a weird combination, trust me, you will change your mind after you taste it. It's spicy, sweet and wholly satisfying.

This dish is pretty and delicious, as spicy as you want it to be, easy to make and a welcome flavor change-up from the usual weeknight chicken dinner. I hope you like it!

Serves 4

INGREDIENTS

2 Tbsp. neutral oil, such as canola
2 tsp. harissa blend spices* (see notes)
4 large bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs
1 small sweet onion, chopped into large pieces
1 small zucchini, cut into uniform chunks
1 small yellow squash, cut into uniform chunks
Handful of fresh baby tomatoes, whole
Small handful each dried plums (prunes) and apricots
1/2 cup low-sodium vegetable or chicken broth
1 tsp. neutral oil, such as canola
1/4 cup whole, raw almonds, unsalted
Cooked couscous for serving

*NOTES

Traditionally, harissa is presented as a paste made from fresh chiles, and it is really tipping the scale on Scoville heat units. My dry blend of harissa spices allows some flexibility in the heat department and includes red chile, garlic, black pepper, cayenne, and what I call the “three C spices,” which are caraway, coriander and cumin. The seeds should be slightly toasted and then ground into a rough powder before blending with the other ingredients. If you prefer, substitute a ready-made harissa blend, or use the harissa paste seasoning available at Trader Joe's. My harissa dry spice blend recipe is listed below.

You will need an oven safe skillet with a tight-fitting lid for this recipe. Alternatively, you could make it in an electric skillet with a lid.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Combine the oil and spice blend in a large, deep bowl that is large enough to hold the chicken thighs for marinating. Season the chicken pieces on both sides with kosher salt. Add them to the spice marinade and turn several times to coat evenly. Cover and refrigerate at least two hours.
2. Preheat oven to 350° F, with oven rack in the center.

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3. Heat a 10-inch cast-iron skillet over medium heat. When skillet is warm (but not hot), add chicken pieces, skin side-down. Do not move or turn the pieces for about 10 minutes, until the fat is rendered and skin is golden and crispy. Larger pieces may take longer. Cook the second side about 5 minutes, until browned. Remove pieces to a bowl or plate and keep warm.
4. Add the chopped onions, then zucchini and squash to the remaining oil in the skillet, tossing briefly to coat and lightly sauté them. Season with salt to taste. Remove skillet from heat.
5. Arrange the baby tomatoes among the skillet vegetables, then arrange the dried fruit pieces evenly throughout the skillet. Place the chicken thighs on top of the mixture.
6. Swirl broth into the bowl that held the chicken pieces, to grab all the flavors lingering there. Pour the broth down the sides of the skillet, so that it flows underneath to the vegetables.
7. Cover the skillet and transfer to the preheated oven. Bake for 45-60 minutes, until vegetables and fruit are soft and chicken pieces are tender. Prepare the couscous near the end of cooking time.
8. Heat teaspoon of oil in a small skillet until it's quite hot and shimmery. Add raw almonds and toss them about for about two minutes. They will pop and sputter a bit, so be careful. When they are toasty and fragrant, use a slotted spoon to remove them.
9. Serve the vegetables and chicken over cooked couscous, and spoon the fried almonds over the top.

HARISSA DRY SPICE BLEND

- 1 Tbsp. crushed red pepper flakes (more or less to your heat preference)
- 1 Tbsp. granulated dried garlic
- 1 1/2 tsp. ground black pepper (adds bite with minimal heat)
- 1 1/2 tsp. whole coriander seed
- 1 tsp. cumin seed
- 1 tsp. caraway seed
- 2 or 3 shakes ground cayenne pepper (adjust to your heat preference)

Combine coriander, cumin and caraway seed in a small skillet. Roast dry over medium heat until toasted and fragrant, about 90 seconds. Cool completely, then crush seeds with a mortar and pestle or in an electric spice grinder. The seeds do not have to be powder; a few rough pieces is OK.

Combine all ingredients and store in a sealed jar with your other spices.