

# Throw Over Cheap Cheep for the Rabbit Habit

BY CAROL PENN-ROMINE

In a hushed professional kitchen with 14 other nervous culinary students, all of us dressed in our meticulously cleaned and pressed chef's whites, I drew a folded slip of paper from the bowl on the stainless steel table. It quivered in my hand as I opened it and read "roulade of rabbit loin tagine with Israeli couscous and roasted rabbit sauce." This, along with a specified appetizer and dessert, was my final practical exam in culinary school. My make-or-break. With no recipes in front of me, just the knowledge and techniques I'd acquired in the preceding year and a half of boot camp-style culinary schooling, I had about three hours to create and present this final meal.

"Any course not presented within the half-hour window will get a zero."

Holy Mother of Thumper!

So I hopped to it, racing about the kitchen and gathering all the ingredients I'd need. While I had prepared as best I could to pull off any of those 15 final exam menus, this particular dish was one I had not actually made in school. We'd worked in teams the day we covered Moroccan cuisine, and my portion of the day's exercise had been to prepare a different dish. So here I was in the big final, charged with presenting something I'd never made before.

I passed the exam.

Why am I telling you this? To let you know that I successfully prepared rabbit for the first time under some pretty stressful circumstances. So even if you've never cooked rabbit, I know that you can, too. And it will be easier, since you will not be under the same time constraints. Nor are you likely to have a French chef close by, grading your every move with some aggressively noisy markings on his clipboard.



Characters such as Bugs Bunny and Thumper, not to mention the Peters Rabbit and Cottontail, have done their part to discourage today's consumers from developing a taste for rabbit. Certainly, most of us relate more to Bugs than we do to Elmer Fudd. But rabbit is a lean, healthy and approachable meat in ample supply. So if you must think of the rabbits you know from storybook and screen, instead of imagining the Velveteen Rabbit, think of the vegetable-thieving Were-Rabbit from the *Wallace and Gromit* film.

While many Americans today have a problem even considering eating anything they've ever kept as a pet, rabbit was commonly found on dinner tables as recently as the Eisenhower era. Take a gander through most any cookbook published by the time Elvis began performing his gyrations in public, and you'll find plenty of recipes for rabbit.

A staple protein of pre-supermarket days, rabbit is a smart choice. It's far lower in cholesterol and fat than beef, pork, veal, lamb, turkey or even chicken, and it is also the lowest in calories and the highest in protein. And — chocolate bunnies notwithstanding — the entire rabbit is made up of white meat. Unlike other white meat, it has high natural moisture content, so it doesn't dry out during cooking the way the white portions of chicken and turkey do. Domestically raised rabbit is mild in flavor, tender and easy to digest (by the way, when you see the term "domestic rabbit," it simply refers to its having been raised in captivity, not that it was someone's family pet).

So why not just buy a jumbo package of all-white chicken meat at the giganto-mart and skirt the issue of eating an animal we could be cuddling?

Chicken has become the popular default meat in the past few decades, and it's easy to see why — mass production has made it incredibly cheap, and marketing has drilled into our brains that it is better for us than red meat. But unless you bought it from a farmer or raised it

## RABBIT BRAISED IN RED WINE

Recipe by Carol Penn-Romine

This recipe follows the traditional marinate-and-braise method involved in preparing beef bourguignon, coq au vin and hasenpfeffer, a rabbit dish.

### Marinade

- 2 cups dry red wine
- 1 cup beef broth (or rabbit broth if you have a good supply of rabbit)
- ½ cup cider or red wine vinegar
- 2 cloves garlic, smashed
- ½ teaspoon dried oregano
- ½ teaspoon dried thyme
- ½ teaspoon dried rosemary
- 1 large bay leaf
- 8 whole black peppercorns, cracked

2½ to 3 pound rabbit, dressed and cut into 8 portions

Combine all the marinade ingredients and immerse rabbit pieces. Cover and refrigerate for at least 24 hours, although you can leave it in the marinade for two to three days (wild rabbit benefits from a longer marinate). The marinade will preserve the meat and the acid will tenderize it. Turn the pieces occasionally, so all parts get ample exposure.

When you're ready to cook the rabbit, remove pieces from marinade and pat them dry with paper towels. Strain marinade, discard herbs and garlic, and reserve liquid.

½ cup all-purpose flour

4 slices smoky bacon, cut crossways into lardons (about ¼-inch wide)

1 yellow onion, chopped

8 ounces fresh button mushrooms, quartered if they're large

4 tablespoons unsalted butter, or as needed

1 teaspoon salt (reduce to ½ teaspoon or omit completely if you use canned broth in the marinade/sauce)

Parsley sprigs for garnish

Dredge rabbit pieces in flour to coat completely and set aside.

In a Dutch oven or large pot, cook bacon over medium heat until it is almost done. Add onion and mushrooms and continue cooking, stirring occasionally, until the onion is translucent. Remove the vegetable-bacon mixture from the pot and set aside. Melt one tablespoon of butter in the pot and brown the pieces of flour-coated rabbit on all sides (add more butter as needed). Spread the vegetable-bacon mixture over the browned rabbit, add the reserved marinade and salt (if needed), and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low, cover and simmer for about 1¼ hours, or until the meat is cooked through.

Remove rabbit, vegetables and bacon with slotted spoon, arrange on serving platter and cover with foil to keep warm. Turn the heat up under the pot and reduce the cooking liquid until it is thick enough to coat the back of a spoon. Skim any excess fat, season to taste with salt and pepper, and spoon over the rabbit and vegetables. Garnish with parsley sprigs.

**BEER PAIRING**, *courtesy of Boscos Brewing Co.* — A slightly gamey meat like rabbit is perfect with the caramel and roasty character of an English-style brown ale. Try **Rogue Hazelnut Brown** from Oregon. It has extra complexity and character from the hazelnuts added to the beer.

**WINE PAIRING** *courtesy of Wine Market, 4734 Spottswood* — Grab a sturdy red from the South of France. The aromatic qualities of the wines echo the fresh herbs in the dish. **Lafage Cote Sud Cotes de Catalan 2007**, \$13 • **Domaine Bahourat Costieres de Nimes 2008**, \$14



yourself, chances are the package of chicken in your fridge contains a bird that grew in miserable circumstances, crowded into pens in which it was unable to move about — no scratching, pecking, leg stretching or other chickenly behavior. It was fed food laced with chemicals that are completely unnatural for chickens — or anyone — to eat, along with antibiotics that we in turn eat, and that contribute to the growing problem of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, among other nightmares. So for the low, low price of cheap-per-pound, we get so much more. Along with the chicken, we're purchasing who-knows-what chemicals and drugs, a range of bacteria that might not respond to antibiotic treatment, and the knowledge that our dinner led an unimaginably miserable life. I'd call that a questionable bargain, at best.

The backlash against factory-raised chicken has encouraged increasing availability of pasture-raised chicken. But it has also spurred an interest in rabbit, which makes a nice change of pace and which is being touted as a viable solution for helping feed a hungry planet (in fact, rabbits are now one of the donation options available through Heifer International, [www.heifer.org](http://www.heifer.org)).

Rabbits are easier to raise than chickens and require much less space (as an added bonus, their droppings can be used to fertilize the garden without first having to be composted). As Larousse noted in a classic understatement, the rabbit is "prodigiously fertile." Oh mamma! The fact is, one female rabbit can produce one thousand percent of her own body weight in meat in a single year. From the time it takes dad to wiggle his nose at mum and say, "hey baby!" until their offspring are ready for the table takes as little as three months, making rabbit an exceptionally economical meal.

As for cooking, rabbit has great versatility. You can do most anything with rabbit that you can with chicken, short of making a wish over the pulley bone.

One thing to note: because of the rabbit's remarkable lack of fat, people who have subsisted on nothing but rabbit meat in the wild have died from a lack of dietary fat. Regardless of how you feel about it, some fat is crucial to health and well being. But since most of us spend more time exploring the cheese aisle than we do wandering in the wilderness, this is unlikely to be a problem. So if you happen to run across this little factoid while reading up on rabbit, don't let it spook you.

Granted, rabbit costs a little more than chicken, but the point isn't simply to buy cheap meat. Rather, it is to enjoy a little culinary diversity and loosen the unhealthy grip the factory-farmed chicken industry has maintained on us for far too long. While there are no rabbit producers in the Memphis area, not at present anyway, it is available online and by special order at grocery stores. But if you make a large purchase and stash it in your freezer, the way some people do when buying food in bulk at the giant membership-only stores, then the cost is really quite reasonable. As for shipping distance, if you're buying chicken, even farm-raised, that is trucked in

from afar, then any issue of an increased carbon paw print involved in ordering rabbit is a moot point.

The expression "chickening out" for me has nothing to do with a lack of nerve and everything to do with being so tired of chicken that I could run screaming from the sight of all those breasts and thighs. If you're feeling that way too, then consider throwing over cheap cheep for the rabbit habit. It's not such a hare-brained idea, and it won't cost you too much scratch. *eM*

**Rabbit is available at most meat counters  
— but you need to special order it.**

West Tennessee native Carol Penn-Romine is a chef and food writer based in Los Angeles. A finalist for the 2010 M.F.K. Fisher Award for Excellence in Culinary Writing, she is a contributor to *Gastronomica*, *Christian Science Monitor* and a number of magazines within edible Communities. She is currently working on her first book, a collection of essays on the food traditions of her childhood on her family's farm. You can read about her culinary adventures at [www.hungrypassport.com](http://www.hungrypassport.com).

