

HOMAGE TO A BIG CHEESE IN BRIE

By Meril Markley

Does anyone recall a series on the Travel Channel from a dozen years ago called “The Flavors of France?” In it the host traveled to a region, visited the sights, and filmed renowned local chefs as they prepared signature dishes in their restaurant kitchens. Episode 37 focused on Paris and the region to the east, featuring a dish called *poularde au cidre et moutarde* (chicken with cider and mustard). We loved the series, especially this episode as we could almost smell the chicken browning and the essence of leeks, carrots and onions in a sauce of cider, mustard and cream wafting from the skillet. Yum! My husband, Michael (chef at our house), was able to fashion a version that has become a beloved dish for friends and family. So, in anticipation of a recent business trip to France, we decided to try and track down the restaurant and say thanks, in person, to our hero.

Owing to the wonders of the internet and some cyberspace detective work, I found a hotel and restaurant listed on a French website and sent an inquiry. Chef Christian Berton wrote back and confirmed that yes, he had made the *poularde*, and he was delighted that anyone in America had seen the show, much less remembered his

signature dish. He still owned La Chaum’ Yerres and would welcome us for lunch the following Friday.

On a damp and chilly December morning, we set out with our French friends, Brigitte and Michel, for the town of Chaumes-en-Brie (of cheese renown), about an hour’s drive from Paris. Despite being on the edge of town and surrounded by farmland, La Chaum’ Yerres was anything but a rustic hideaway and instead offered an elegant dining room decorated in shades of pink and rose. At lunchtime it was full – a family celebrating a birthday, businessmen on their way to a meeting, and numerous “regulars” choosing from a menu featuring locally grown items and an extensive wine list.

There was no *poularde* on the menu that day so we opted for a starter of *ris de veau* or veal sweetbreads in a light puff pastry and a main course of wild duck breast (*colvert sauvageon*) stuffed with *foie gras* and prepared at the table in a flaming finale. To accompany our meal, Michel chose a 2006 Pernand Vergeless from the Burgundy Region near Beaune, a deep purplish-red wine with enough heft to stand up to the robust flavors of a duck who has lived in the wild. To finish it all off, Michel opted for *crème brûlée*,



a masterpiece reflecting how local dairy products have distinctive flavors depending on what the cows eat, while Michael had *profiterolles* in a chocolate sauce so intense and fragrant we all had to have a taste.

After the meal, Chef Berton stopped by our table to chat and to tell us about his daughter who lives in Los Angeles. We hope he can stop in Houston on his way to visit her so we can introduce him to “The Flavors of Texas” and the wonders of Texas wines.

For more about La Chaum’ Yerres, photos of Chef Berton and his restaurant, and Michael’s version of the *poularde*, visit www.mmarkley.com

Next time – a road trip through Southern France in search of a Count’s elusive elixir...

Poularde au Cidre et Moutarde

Taken from *The Flavors of France* on The Travel Channel

8 chicken thighs*
1 onion, chopped
3 leeks, sliced in rings ¼ inch wide
1 bunch organic carrots, sliced in rings ¼ inch wide
1 bottle hard cider
Dijon mustard
Whipping cream
Duck fat
Pepper
Fry chicken in duck fat until lightly browned (about 15-20 minutes), turning as necessary. Remove from pan. Sauté carrots, leeks and onions in the duck fat and chicken juices (5-10 minutes). Put chicken back in pan with the vegetables. Add cider and pepper and bring to a simmer; cover and continue cooking for 45-60 minutes, turning the chicken at least once. Remove chicken and vegetables, separate out or skiff the fat so juices remain and add back to pan. Add cream and mustard to the juices to create the sauce. Continue cooking at medium heat for a few more minutes until sauce has begun to thicken. Place chicken and vegetables on a plate with rice and ladle sauce over vegetables and rice.
*Original recipe calls for a chicken cut into parts, but we think thighs work best, and we leave the skin on throughout the cooking process