

ON THE WHOLE, I'D DESCRIBE MY ITALIAN TASTES as having more of a northern than southern affiliation; it's the non-Mediterranean Italy that has always lured me, not least at the table.

Having said that—and maybe it's the mellowness of age—I seem to be warming to the sunnier approach, cheerfully cooking with tomatoes and roasted red peppers and finding myself unfamiliarly delighted with the result. This stew says it all, really: it has spirit-lifting southern gusto, and the rich sweetness of the roasted red peppers (a kitchen cupboard must-have for me) keeps the acidity of the tomatoes in check.

If I make this for my children for supper, I most often serve it with a bowlful of orzo pasta (see right); when it's for me, though, some wilted spinach and gorgeous bread are the only accompaniments I require.



CHICKEN WITH TOMATOES & PEPPERS

Pour the oil into a small, flameproof Dutch oven or heavy-based pan—I use my old enameled cast-iron one with an 8-inch diameter—and cook the chopped shallot, stirring frequently, until soft; this should take about 3 minutes; an onion may take longer.

Add the chicken pieces along with the dried oregano and turn them in the hot pan. Add the Marsala and watch it bubble up, then promptly add the canned tomatoes and the salt.

Half-fill the empty tomato can with water and pour it into the pan, rinsing out as much of the tomato residue as you can.

Drain the roasted red peppers and snip with scissors—for ease—into bite-sized pieces and add to the pan, then bring to a boil before turning down the heat and letting cook at a steady simmer, uncovered, for 20 minutes until the sauce has thickened slightly and the chicken is cooked through. Decant into a bowl, or bowls, or just leave in the pan, if you prefer, and serve. ■

SERVES 3-4

- 1 TABLESPOON GARLIC-FLAVORED OIL
- 1 ECHALION OR BANANA SHALLOT, OR 1 SMALL ONION, PEELED AND FINELY CHOPPED
- 1 POUND SKINLESS, BONELESS CHICKEN THIGHS, CUT INTO BITE-SIZED PIECES
- 1 TEASPOON DRIED OREGANO
- 2 TABLESPOONS MARSALA
- 1 X 14-OUNCE CAN DICED TOMATOES, PLUS WATER TO RINSE OUT CAN
- 1 TEASPOON KOSHER SALT OR ½ TEASPOON TABLE SALT, OR TO TASTE
- 1 X 12-OUNCE JAR (APPROX. 8 OUNCES DRAINED WEIGHT) ROASTED RED PEPPERS