

Recipe by Julia Heffelfinger

Creamy Chicken-and-Rice Casserole

Serves 4 to 6



This baked chicken, rice and mushroom casserole is the ultimate early spring dinner! It's cozy and hearty for cool nights, but lightened up with lemon, white wine and fresh herbs. The magic of this casserole is that it eats like a risotto, but without all of the stirring on the stove top. The dish bakes in the oven until all of the chicken stock, cream and white wine are absorbed, the chicken thighs are cooked through, and the rice is tender and creamy. This easy one-pot dinner is elegant and something you can riff on week after week.

6 bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs (about 2 pounds)

Kosher salt and pepper

1 Tablespoon canola or grapeseed oil

2 Tablespoons unsalted butter

2 medium leeks, trimmed and thinly sliced (white and light green parts only; see Note)

8 ounces cremini (Baby Bella) mushrooms, cleaned and thinly sliced

3 garlic cloves, minced

1½ cups medium grain white rice, such as Arborio or Calrose

¾ cup white wine

2 cups chicken stock or low-sodium broth

1 cup heavy cream

1 heaping teaspoon freshly grated lemon zest, plus lemon wedges for serving

Fresh tarragon and chopped Italian parsley, for garnish

Flaky sea salt, for sprinkling

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F and season the chicken thighs with salt and pepper.
2. In a large, ovenproof braiser or frying pan with a lid (you can use a Dutch oven, too), heat the oil. Place the chicken thighs skin side down and cook over moderately-high, undisturbed, until the skin is golden brown and releases easily from the pan, 5 to 7 minutes. If needed, cook your thighs in batches so they do not crowd the pan. Transfer to a rimmed plate and pour off all but 2 tablespoons of the chicken fat. **Pro-tip:** If your chicken thighs are sticking to the bottom of your

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pan, that means they are not done browning. Let them cook for a few minutes more until they release easily.

3. In the same pan, melt the butter over moderate heat (if your pan is really hot, reduce the heat slightly). Add the leeks and mushrooms and cook, stirring occasionally, until the vegetables are tender, about 5 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Stir in the garlic and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add the rice and cook over moderate heat, stirring occasionally, until the rice is coated in fat and slightly toasted, 1 to 2 minutes.
4. Increase the heat to high and add the wine. Cook, scraping up any browned bits on the bottom of the pan, until all of the liquid has reduced, about 2 minutes. Add the stock, cream, lemon zest, $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of salt and a couple grinds of black pepper. Stir to combine. Bring the liquid to a simmer, then remove from the heat. Nestle the chicken thighs on top skin side up, cover and transfer to the oven. Bake the casserole for 20 to 25 minutes, or until the rice is tender and all of the liquid is absorbed.
5. Remove the casserole from the oven and preheat the broiler. Uncover the casserole and broil for 1 to 2 minutes, or until the chicken skin is crispy and browned.
6. Let rest for 5 minutes, then garnish with fresh tarragon and parsley and sprinkle with flaky sea salt. Serve, passing lemon wedges at the table.

NOTE Leeks can have a lot of dirt and sand between their layers. To make sure that grit doesn't get into your food, trim your leeks and then halve them lengthwise. Hold the leek halves under running water while carefully separating the layers with your fingers so that any dirt can be rinsed away. Then thinly slice and proceed with the recipe.