

A SOUTHERN CHEF'S
Recipe for
Weight Loss
 BY HOLLY PEVZNER



Smothered Chicken Breasts
 in Onion Gravy, page 67



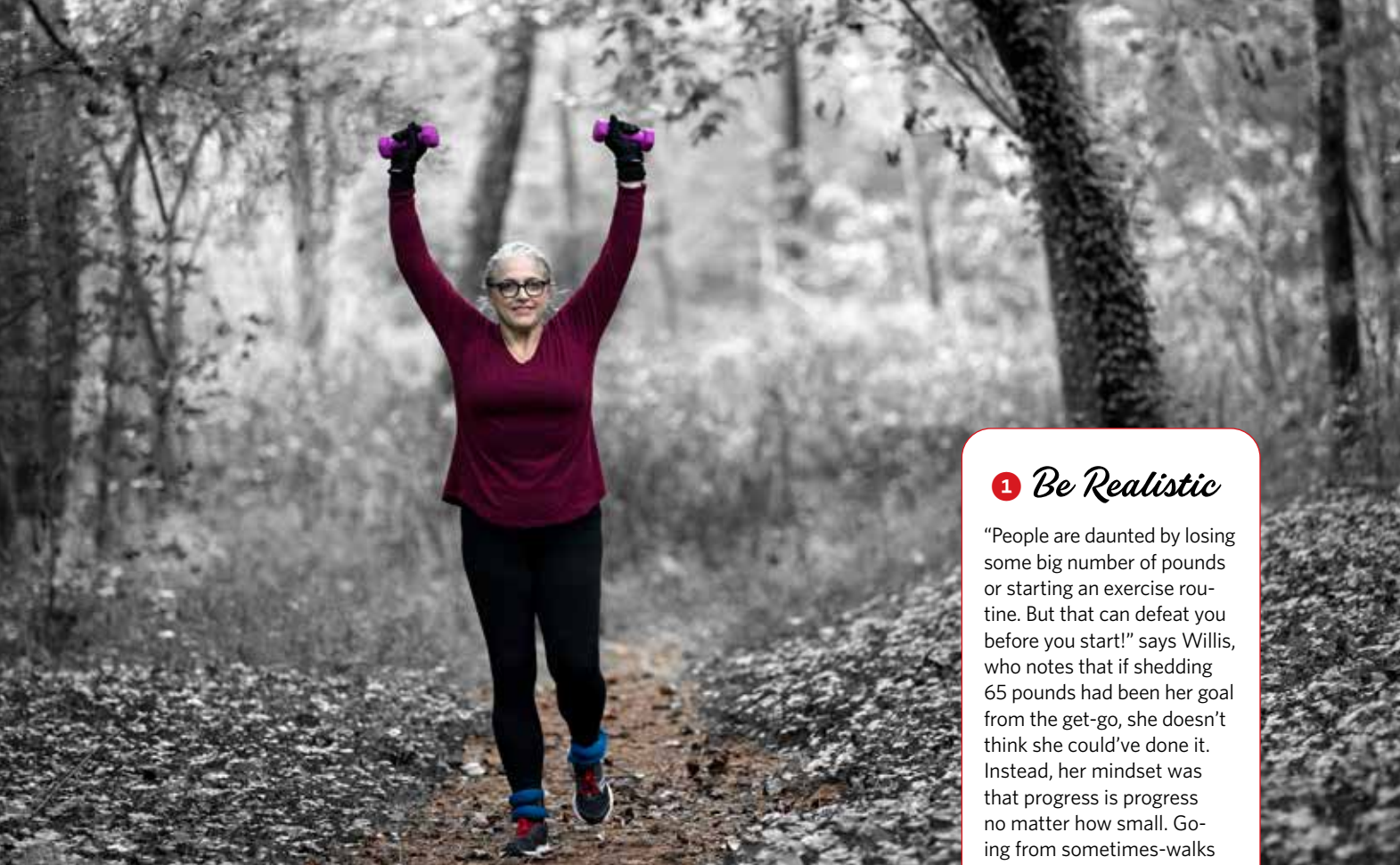
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VIRGINIA WILLIS cooks and eats for a living and yet she managed to lose 65 pounds (and counting) during the pandemic. Here she shares her go-to dishes and tips for success.

Portrait photography **TERRY ALLEN**
 Food photography **JACOB FOX**

Virginia Willis loves to cook. She's been doing it since she was knee-high to her grandma. Even more, Willis loves to eat. That's not shocking given she's a French-trained Southern chef who's written eight cookbooks, including the James Beard Award-winning *Lighten Up, Y'all*. "I'm not one of those people who's like, 'Oh, I can't eat that!' I'm like, *bring it!*" the 55-year-old laughs. What is astonishing, however, is that Willis managed to shed roughly 65 pounds over the past two years—all while testing recipes nearly nonstop and dealing with the breakup of a 10-year relationship, a herniated disc, a big move from Massachusetts back home to Georgia and, of course, a global pandemic.

Willis, a self-proclaimed "sturdy woman," wasn't looking to transform into a skinny person. Instead, she wanted her clothes to fit a little better; she wanted to move a little better. "And, honestly, I didn't want to feel ashamed of my size anymore," she says. Those drivers were enough for a while. The thing is, even at her heaviest, Willis' diet wasn't terrible. She was eating lots of fresh fruits and vegetables and avoiding processed foods. And she was going to the gym. "But I was also drinking and eating too much. I might have been using too much butter and cream, too! But mostly, I just wasn't being kind to myself," she says. Willis lost almost 40 pounds in 2019, thanks to regular workouts and WW-style points-counting. (She has never



1 Be Realistic

“People are daunted by losing some big number of pounds or starting an exercise routine. But that can defeat you before you start!” says Willis, who notes that if shedding 65 pounds had been her goal from the get-go, she doesn’t think she could’ve done it. Instead, her mindset was that progress is progress no matter how small. Going from sometimes-walks to several-times-a-week walks? Progress! Swapping a glass of wine for kombucha? Progress! She’s onto something: A 2019 Oxford University review of 22 studies on weight loss and maintenance found that feeling shame from not meeting a specific weight-loss goal was associated with giving up altogether—while taking a more positive approach about what progress looks like was linked to increased adherence and success.

been to a Weight Watchers meeting, but has taken a shine to the idea that every food has a number and relies on their app. “It makes for super-easy math that helps me stay within my guidelines,” she says.) Then, her motivation began to shift.

In March 2020, a long-scheduled procedure that would’ve eased Willis’ back pain was abruptly canceled thanks to the pandemic. Her physical therapy facility closed. Her gym did too. Heck, COVID-19 even made it more difficult to get fresh, nutritious food at the grocery store. “With all of this going on, I just kept thinking to myself: *What do I need to do to keep myself healthy?*” she says.

Instead of feeling daunted, Willis rose to the challenge. “I kept a list of anti-inflammatory foods for spine health on my fridge that were really ones I already ate, like red fruits and veggies, soy, flaxseed, nuts, olives—but having that reminder made me more cognizant,” she says. Willis also relegated red meat to a once-a-week (tops) treat and traded most starchy side dishes for veggies. “I didn’t have the gym or PT anymore, but I could walk—and boy, did those walks help relieve pandemic stress,” says Willis, who still clocks 3½ miles a day with a rotating roster of friends. “Walking has moved far past simple weight loss for me. It’s my mental health now.” And when morning strolls replace dinner

and drinks as one’s social lifeline, other things tend to change, as well. “I’ve spent much of the pandemic alcohol-free,” says Willis. At first, it was because booze and her back meds didn’t mix. But all that walking and produce-eating helped her lose enough weight to be able to ditch the pain medication altogether. “Essentially, I was free to return to more indulgent drinking and eating when I got off the meds, but I didn’t want to,” says Willis. “I wanted to keep those guardrails and continue to succeed.”

And she has. “If you had told me that I would feel this good as a result of losing 65 pounds, I would not have believed you,” says Willis. She no longer needs that spinal procedure. She’s never been able to get into Child’s Pose quicker. And her blood pressure, cholesterol and other numbers are better than they were a decade ago. “That’s exciting stuff!” says Willis.

The best part is, she’s doing it while eating the foods she loves. “I don’t want to have bland chicken or plain celery sticks,” she says. “I want *delicious* food.” For instance, Willis is an unabashed chocolate lover, so when she saw a “diet” dessert recipe that called for combining fat-free chocolate pudding mix with a can of zero-sugar soda, she frowned. “That’s just sad,” she says. “When I want an after-dinner treat, I

dip slices of Honeycrisp apples into a bittersweet chocolate sauce I make.”

In the end, the secrets to her success are straightforward. She believes in ditching deprivation, exercising daily, keeping an eye on portions and calories, and embracing the notion that one small, healthy behavior leads to another—and another. “The good spreads like a beautiful web,” she says. “Hippie-dippie? Maybe. But it’s true!” Allow Willis to help expand *your* web with the doable tips—and recipes—that continue to work for her today. As down-to-earth as they are, they also happen to be 100% backed by science.

2 Get Those Veggies

“It’s all about eating more vegetables. Period,” says Willis. Yes, they’re full of good-for-you vitamins and minerals, but they’re also low in calories and fiber-rich, which keeps you feeling fuller longer—both of which can help the pounds come off. In fact, a 2020 report published in the journal *Nutrients* concluded that upping produce intake can be a chief contributor to weight loss and maintenance. Buying veggies that are local and in-season is often key to landing the tastiest stuff. But if you need an additional flavor boost, Willis suggests (wait for it) bacon. “A little bit goes a long way,” she says. “It’ll get people to eat Brussels sprouts!” And that’s the ultimate goal, really: to have lots and lots of veg. Not into bacon? Try a dab of miso, says Willis: “It adds a delicious, salty, umami quality.”

3 Turn Meals Upside-Down

This is another strategy to increase your veggie intake—while surreptitiously cutting calories. “Instead of making beef and broccoli, make broccoli and beef, letting the vegetable take the lead,” says Willis. The idea is to get the same flavors, just in a healthier way, so it doesn’t feel like you’re missing out or depriving yourself of meals you love. Willis achieves this by deconstructing some of her favorite dishes too. Take sausage and peppers, for instance. Rather than use fatty, higher-calorie pork sausage, she copycats the flavor by cooking lean ground turkey with garlic, fennel seeds, red pepper flakes and sage, then tosses in tons of veggies. And for pasta dishes, she replaces regular pasta with half whole-wheat and half zucchini noodles. “It’s all about recreating a dish with respect to the original intent,” says Willis.



Still not sure how to get started? Scan with your phone’s camera for advice from a dietitian.



Soup Beans with Cornbread & Kraut, page 67



4 Hydrate, Hydrate, Hydrate

"Water is my first line of defense with hunger," says Willis. "I start every meal with a glass. When I think I want a snack, I drink. And if I'm still hungry, then I'll have the snack." Water takes up space in your belly, which helps you feel full. In one study published in the journal *Obesity*, overweight women on weight-loss diets who increased their water intake to roughly 1 liter a day lost 5 pounds over the

course of 12 months. And when water gets boring, Willis sips a mug of vitamin-packed potassium broth. "That's what spas call it, but it's really vegetable stock," she says. Willis makes her own (right) with bits and bobs of vegetables from meal prep and some aromatics. "I strain it and keep it in a pitcher in the fridge. I drink it warm when it's chilly out and have it cold in the summer," she says.

Gingery Vegetable Broth

ACTIVE: 15 min TOTAL: 1¼ hrs

TO MAKE AHEAD: Refrigerate for up to 5 days or freeze for up to 6 months. **EQUIPMENT:** Cheesecloth I save my veggie peels and scraps in a gallon-size bag in my freezer to make this broth. Before I prepare it, I also take a moment to clean out the produce drawer of any limp carrots, shriveled mushrooms and herbs on their way out. (However, please do keep in mind this is not a garbage bag! If it's too far gone it belongs in the compost, not the stock pot.) Garlic, ginger and turmeric add great flavor and extra nutrients.

- 12 cups washed vegetable & herb trimmings, such as mushrooms, tomatoes, fennel, leeks, bell peppers, romaine ends, butternut squash, kale, chard, thyme, parsley
- 2 large onions, quartered
- 2 medium carrots, cut into thirds
- 2 stalks celery, cut into thirds
- 1 head garlic, cloves separated and peeled
- 8-12 slices fresh ginger
- 8-12 slices fresh turmeric (optional)
- 2 tablespoons black peppercorns
- 4 bay leaves
- 16 cups water

1. Combine trimmings, onions, carrots, celery, garlic, ginger to taste, turmeric to taste (if using), peppercorns and bay leaves in a large pot. Add water and bring to a boil. Adjust heat to maintain a gentle simmer. Partially cover and simmer, without stirring, until the vegetables are very soft and the liquid is golden brown, about 1½ hours.

2. Line a colander with cheesecloth and place it over a large bowl. Carefully strain the broth, pressing on the solids to extract any remaining liquid.

SERVES 16: 1 cup each

ANALYSIS NOTE: After straining, broth has negligible calories and nutrients.





Chicken Stew with Collard Greens & Peanuts

ACTIVE: 30 min TOTAL: 50 min

Being stuck with foods that aren't satisfying doesn't work for me. Who wants to eat sadness? This West African-inspired chicken stew is hearty and has lots of bold, umami flavors. Plus it's packed with so many beneficial ingredients—peanut butter and chicken for protein, nutrient-rich collard greens and colorful vegetables—that I know it's good for me.

- 3 cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 tablespoon canola oil
- 12 ounces boneless, skinless chicken thighs, trimmed and cut into 1-inch pieces
- ½ teaspoon kosher salt plus a pinch, divided
- ¼ teaspoon ground pepper
- 1 medium sweet onion, chopped
- 2 medium carrots, diced

- ½ medium red bell pepper or 2 mini bell peppers, chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped fresh ginger
- ½ cup crunchy peanut butter
- ½ habanero chile or ¼ jalapeño pepper, seeded and finely chopped
- 1 bay leaf
- ¼ teaspoon ground coriander
- ⅜ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ⅛ teaspoon ground cumin
- 2¼ cups cubed peeled butternut squash
- 2 cups packed sliced collards or other dark leafy greens
- Chopped fresh cilantro & unsalted peanuts for serving

1. Whisk broth and tomato paste in a large measuring cup or bowl until smooth. Set aside.
2. Heat oil in a large pot over medium-high heat. Season chicken with ½ teaspoon salt and pepper. Add to the pot and cook, turning

as needed, until browned on all sides, about 5 minutes. Transfer to a plate.

3. Add onion, carrots and bell pepper to the pot; cook, stirring often, until the onion is soft and translucent, 3 to 5 minutes. Add garlic and ginger; cook until fragrant, 45 to 60 seconds. Add the broth mixture, peanut butter, chile pepper, bay leaf, coriander, cinnamon, cumin and the remaining pinch of salt; stir until smooth. Add the chicken and any juices that have accumulated, squash and greens.

4. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover and cook until the vegetables are tender, about 15 minutes. Uncover and cook until the chicken is cooked through and the soup has thickened, about 5 minutes more. Discard the bay leaf. Sprinkle with cilantro and peanuts, if desired.

SERVES 4: 1¾ cups each
Cal 453 **Fat** 25g (sat 4g) **Chol** 80mg **Carbs** 34g
Total sugars 12g (added 0g) **Protein** 30g **Fiber** 7g
Sodium 608mg **Potassium** 1,027mg.

5 Scale Up

Weighing yourself regularly—even daily—is a key habit among those who are able to drop pounds and keep them off, according to research at the National Weight Control Registry. Why? Because it allows you to course-correct before 2 pounds become 12. But it's a tool to be used for good, not guilt. "The number on the scale should never be some big shock that you freak out about," says Willis, who steps on the scale weekly. "Up, down or the same, I need to remember that my weight reflects only one piece of my story." And no matter the digits, there are lessons to learn. "If I'm down, it shows that what I did the prior days was effective. If there's no change, it's still progress, in my mind. Flat is the new down!" she laughs. And if she's up, that's OK too. "I think I've gained 5 pounds in the past month and a half, but I'm not stressed about it," says Willis. She allows for small fluctuations and uses the scale to keep tabs on her overall weight trends. Smart.

6 Take Care of All of You

"I put face lotion on every night. I rotate my ankles 10 times in bed before I go to sleep. It soothes and prepares my feet for the next day's walk. I no longer keep my phone on my bedside table. And I write in my gratitude journal too," says Willis. "These things have nothing to do with my weight loss and everything to do with my weight loss." Why? Because mindfulness and self-care lead to more of the same—and are key ingredients for success. According to a 2019 study published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, regularly writing about feelings of gratitude spurred healthier eating—specifically, the grateful folks ate less fast food and more vegetables each week. The researchers note that's because appreciation likely fosters motivation.



7 Be Accountable

"No one needs to try to lose a bunch of weight or get healthier on their own. That's too much for one person," says Willis. "That's why the whole accountability and support piece is tremendously helpful." For her, walking buds help keep her on track. "Before the pandemic, I'd walk with friends, but it was random. Now I've got a daily appointment, so it's my routine." Having others who support you—and who you don't want to let down—can be hugely impactful. A trial published in the *Journal of Health Communication* found that people who enrolled in a weight-loss program with a buddy dropped more pounds—and inches off their waist—than those who embarked on the journey solo.

8 Dial Back the Booze

"In my experience, it's nearly impossible to lose weight and drink alcohol," says Willis. "That's not to say that I don't drink at all, I'm just much more mindful about it now." That means instead of having a glass or two of wine while making dinner, then more while eating it, she often opts for water or tea. "For the most part, I save my alcohol for dinner with friends, making it part of a celebration," she says. Science supports this idea. A study published in the journal *Nutrients* found that replacing one beer with water each day was associated with lower obesity rates and greater weight loss over a four-year span. First, alcoholic drinks pack a surprising number of calories, and that's on top of whatever you're eating with them. And then there's the lowering-of-inhibitions issue that can easily turn a sliver of pie into a slab.

9 Eat the Cake

"If I want a piece, I'm going to eat it—and I'm not going to go for something that's mediocre," says Willis. "It'll be delicious and just enough cake to feel luxurious, but not so much that it kills my healthy-eating game plan." This approach, says Willis, works better than renouncing any one food altogether. "Deprivation doesn't work for me," she insists. In fact, it doesn't work for anyone. Not only is this habit unsustainable, a *Frontiers in Psychology* report found that rigid dieting strategies (like swearing off certain eats) directly led to *more* food cravings—which can result in less weight loss. Instead, Willis is conscious of serving sizes. When she makes the cookies shown here, for example, she does a tiny batch so there's less temptation hanging around. Generosity helps too. "I'm always sharing food, whether baked goods or dinners, with my neighbors," she says.

Small-Batch Crispy Chocolate Chip Cookies

ACTIVE: 10 min TOTAL: 25 min

TO MAKE AHEAD: Store airtight at room temperature for up to 2 days.

EQUIPMENT: Silicone baking mat or parchment paper

I do not want the enticement of dozens of cookies lying about on the counter or in the freezer. But sometimes I just need a bite of something sweet and chocolaty. This is my "tablespoon cookie" recipe—I don't even bother getting out the measuring cups. And I love how lacy and thin they are.

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, at room temperature
- 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
- 2 tablespoons turbinado sugar
- 1 tablespoon unsweetened applesauce
- ¼ teaspoon vanilla extract
- 4 tablespoons white whole-wheat flour
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda
- ⅜ teaspoon kosher salt
- 3 tablespoons dark chocolate chips

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Line a baking sheet with a nonstick silicone baking mat or parchment paper.

2. Combine butter, granulated sugar and turbinado sugar in a small bowl. Using a rubber spatula, stir until well blended. Add applesauce and vanilla; stir to combine. Add flour, baking soda and salt; stir to combine. Add chocolate chips and stir to combine. Using a tablespoon measure, scoop the dough onto the prepared baking sheet, spacing cookies about 2 inches apart.

3. Bake until the cookies are golden around the edges, about 8 minutes. Let cool on the pan for 5 minutes, then transfer to a rack to cool and firm up, about 10 minutes.

MAKES: 8 cookies (analysis per cookie)

Cal 97 Fat 5g (sat 3g) Chol 8mg Carbs 13g
Total sugars 9g (added 9g) Protein 1g Fiber 1g
Sodium 70mg Potassium 17mg.

Soup Beans with Cornbread & Kraut

ACTIVE: 25 min TOTAL: 1½ hours (plus overnight soaking)

TO MAKE AHEAD: Refrigerate beans (Step 1) for up to 3 days or freeze for up to 3 months.

EQUIPMENT: 8-inch cast-iron skillet

I usually make 1 pound of beans at a time. The first meal is generally these soup beans with cornbread and fermented cabbage. I use the rest in salads, mash them for not-refried beans, add to a burrito or eat as a side dish. Then, when I am tired of them, I freeze what's left in 1-cup containers. For a warm kick of spice, I season the cornbread heartily with freshly ground black pepper. (Photo: page 61.)

BEANS

- 1 pound dried pinto beans, picked over and rinsed, soaked overnight
- 1 tablespoon canola oil
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 10 cloves garlic, coarsely chopped
- 8 cups Gingery Vegetable Broth (page 63) or low-sodium chicken broth
- 2 bay leaves
- 2 sprigs fresh thyme
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- ¼ teaspoon ground pepper
- 1 cup sauerkraut or chowchow for serving

CORNBREAD

- 1 tablespoon canola oil
- 1 cup whole-grain cornmeal
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 large egg, lightly beaten
- 1 cup buttermilk
- ⅜ teaspoon ground pepper

1. To prepare beans: Drain and rinse beans. Heat oil in a large pot over medium heat (or see *Tip, below*). Add onion and cook until translucent, 3 to 5 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, 45 to 60 seconds. Add broth, bay leaves, thyme and the beans. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Reduce heat to low, cover and simmer until the beans are tender, 1¼ to 1½ hours. (You want them to remain whole and not falling apart.) Discard the bay leaves and thyme sprigs. Season with 1 teaspoon salt and ¼ teaspoon pepper.

2. Meanwhile, prepare cornbread: Preheat oven to 425°F. Add oil to an 8-inch cast-iron skillet and place in the oven for 5 minutes.

3. Combine cornmeal, baking soda and salt in a large bowl. Mix egg and buttermilk in a large measuring cup. Stir the wet ingredients into the dry to combine. Pour the hot oil into the batter and stir to combine, then pour the batter back into the hot skillet. Sprinkle with pepper.

4. Bake the cornbread until golden brown, 12 to 15 minutes. Transfer to a wire rack to cool slightly. Cut into 8 slices.

5. Serve the beans with the cornbread and sauerkraut (or chowchow).

SERVES 8: generous 1 cup beans, 1 piece cornbread & 2 Tbsp. sauerkraut (or chowchow) each
Cal 317 Fat 6g (sat 1g) Chol 24mg Carbs 53g
Total sugars 3g (added 0g) Protein 16g Fiber 14g
Sodium 640mg Potassium 788mg.

TIP: To cook beans in a slow cooker, combine the drained beans, onion, garlic, 5 cups broth (or water), bay leaves and thyme in a 6-quart or larger slow cooker. Cover and cook on Low until the beans are tender, about 6 hours. (You want them to remain whole and not falling apart.) Discard bay leaves and thyme sprigs. Season with 1 tsp. salt and ¼ tsp. pepper.

Smothered Chicken Breasts in Onion Gravy

ACTIVE: 25 min TOTAL: 55 min

Gravy gets a bad rap because it's often made with fat drippings or served over fried meat, but it's not inherently unhealthy. I love gravy; in my mind there are rivers of it in heaven! Using a minimum amount of oil to make the roux reduces calories. The result is good, country-style cooking—always welcome on my weight-loss plan. (Photo: page 58.)

- 2 tablespoons whole-wheat flour
- 1 teaspoon onion powder
- 1 teaspoon smoked paprika
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- ¾ teaspoon kosher salt, divided
- ¼ teaspoon ground pepper, divided
- 1 pound boneless, skinless chicken breasts, trimmed
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- 3 medium sweet onions, sliced
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 cup low-sodium chicken broth
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh thyme
- 1 bay leaf

1. Preheat oven to 350°F.

2. Stir flour, onion powder, paprika, cayenne, ¼ teaspoon salt and ⅜ teaspoon pepper in a shallow dish. Pat chicken dry and dredge in the flour mixture to coat on both sides. Shake off excess. (Reserve the flour mixture for Step 4.) Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a large ovenproof skillet over medium-high heat. Add the chicken and cook, flipping once, until brown, 1 to 2 minutes per side. Transfer to a plate.

3. Add onions and the remaining 1 tablespoon oil, ½ teaspoon salt and ⅜ teaspoon pepper to the pan. Reduce heat to medium. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the onions are golden brown, 5 to 7 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, 45 to 60 seconds.

4. Tip the remaining flour mixture into the onions and stir to coat. Add broth and increase heat to medium-high. Bring to a boil, stirring often. Adjust heat to maintain a simmer. Add the reserved chicken and any accumulated juices, thyme and bay leaf. Nestle the chicken into the onions and turn to coat.

5. Transfer the pan to the oven. Bake until an instant-read thermometer inserted in the thickest part of the chicken registers 165°F, 20 to 25 minutes. Discard the bay leaf.

SERVES 4: 3 oz. chicken & 1 cup onion gravy each
Cal 311 Fat 11g (sat 2g) Chol 83mg Carbs 24g
Total sugars 13g (added 0g) Protein 29g Fiber 3g
Sodium 450mg Potassium 766mg.

HOLLY PEVZNER is a health and nutrition writer living in Los Angeles.

VIRGINIA WILLIS is an award-winning chef and cookbook author.