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Casa Orinda - Still Cookin'

By Susie Iventosch



Chef Kenneth Jensen Photo Susie Iventosch

I'm sorry to report we haven't secured the Casa Orinda recipe for their famous fried chicken ... yet! But, Chef Kenneth Jensen was happy to offer up the house recipe for Chicken Saltimbocca, a tasty dish of boneless chicken breast, seasoned with fresh sage, baked with prosciutto and topped with melted mozzarella cheese. This dish is elegant for a dinner party, but easy enough for a mid-week family dinner.

Lamorinda Weekly reporter Sophie Braccini wrote a story about the Casa Orinda's 75th anniversary on these pages in June of 2007, where she described the restaurant origins and menus over the years. She recounted the story about the restaurant's founder Jack Snow, who relocated from Montana in the early 1930s to work on the Caldecott Tunnel. He was a very social man, but found little in the way of socializing venues in the area, and decided to start his own establishment for food and entertainment. The original restaurant, opened in 1932, still stands today, and is a gathering place for friends, families, and people who love good, traditional food. (Read the story in our online archive: <http://www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0109/pdf/CasaOrindaCelebratesits75thBirthday.pdf>)

The Casa has an extensive menu, featuring some 40 entrees in addition to several nightly specials. Still, the fried chicken is the single most popular dish,

followed by their famous prime rib.

"We sell between 200 and 350 meals on a weekend evening," said Chef Jensen. "And 50 to 100 of those are fried chicken!"

Back in the early 1970s when my husband, Len, was a busboy and valet (car parker) at the Casa, he says the fried chicken dinner was the most popular dish then, too. But, he remembers in those days you could get the half-chicken dinner with mashed potatoes, biscuits, gravy and a salad with the "absolute best blue cheese dressing ever" all for \$2.99!

"I'll bet I made thousands of those salads myself," he recalls.

Times have changed, but these days a half chicken with all the fixings is considered a bargain at \$16.95! (Nowadays the salad has been replaced by a vegetable.)

The Casa's chicken saltimbocca is a house recipe. Chef Jensen said he's prepared it exactly the same way since he first joined the restaurant six years ago, and they'd been making it that way long before he arrived.

"The last time the Casa changed the menu was about 30 years ago, in the late 1970s," he noted. "We are an old-fashioned, traditional restaurant. We've been around a long time and we try to do our very best!"

When you've got a good thing going like the Casa Orinda, there's no compelling reason for change. The proof is in the 77 years and generations of repeat customers.

Give their chicken saltimbocca a try. With fresh sage, a reduced white wine sauce, prosciutto and mozzarella, it is easy to prepare and delicious to eat! But, if you're in the mood for fried chicken, you'll just have to stop by in person and order up a serving!

Casa Orinda,
20 Bryant Way, Orinda
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CASA ORINDA CHICKEN SALTIMBOCCA

Ingredients

4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts (about 10-ounces each)
8 thin slices prosciutto
8 fresh sage leaves
1 cup white wine
2 cups chicken stock
3 ounces butter
1 cup flour
8 slices mozzarella cheese (I used fresh)
Salt and pepper to taste*

* I also added ½ teaspoon ground sage and ½ teaspoon poultry seasoning to the flour before coating the chicken breasts.

Directions

Slice chicken breasts in half horizontally and pound just a little bit
Flour split chicken breasts and season with salt and pepper (and ground sage.)
Melt 1½ ounces of the butter in a large heavy skillet. When butter foams, add chicken breasts, a few at a time, and sauté on each side for three minutes.
Remove from pan and place in a baking pan or dish.
When all chicken breasts have been sautéed, remove any excess butter, add the white wine and deglaze skillet.
Then add the chicken stock, bring to a boil and reduce to about half the volume.
Add the remaining butter to the sauce and simmer for about 3 more minutes.
On top of each chicken breast half, place a sage leaf, then a slice of prosciutto, and the cheese on the very top.
Pour sauce around chicken breasts in baking dish and bake at 375 degrees for about 4 minutes, or until cheese is melted. Serve with your favorite pasta or starch and vegetable.

Notes: I chopped the sage leaves and sprinkled on top of each chicken breast instead of using a whole leaf. I also omitted the remaining butter from the sauce, because I used more of it in the initial sautéing process, therefore didn't feel I needed to add the extra at the end!)

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