

A close-up photograph of a roasted chicken in a rustic, earthenware clay pot. The chicken is golden-brown and sits atop a bed of vegetables including carrots, onions, and green beans, garnished with fresh herbs like rosemary and thyme. The pot is placed on a wooden surface, with a metal lid and a pocket knife visible in the background.

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lamb and dried apricot tagine

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

SERVING

While you could serve the tagine solo, it would be a shame not to offer something to go with the wonderful sauce. I serve either couscous (cooked without spices in chicken broth or water) or white rice.

STORING

Like most braised dishes, this is a good keeper. You can make it a day or two ahead and, when it's cool, cover it well and keep it in the refrigerator. If you make the dish ahead, refrain from adding the toasted almonds until you reheat the tagine for serving, and hold off on the last dusting of cilantro until ready to serve.

THE FIRST TIME I MADE THIS TAGINE, I made a mistake: I stayed in the kitchen while it simmered slowly in the oven, and the smell of the spices — ginger and cumin, cinnamon, dried chiles, coriander, and saffron — drove me nuts. I was so dizzy, to say nothing of hungry, by the time I pulled the pot out of the oven that I might just as well have spent the time spinning in circles.

The recipe comes from Françoise Maloberti, a gifted home cook, to whom, after you've made it, you'll be as grateful as I am. Like many Moroccan tagines, this one is *aigre-doux*, or sour-sweet, and studded with fruit — here, plumped dried apricots. Because of the toasted almonds that are cooked in the tagine for the last few minutes, and because of the hot peppers and saffron, the dish is reminiscent of couscous, which is a tagine's first cousin. It's not surprising that the best (and easiest) accompaniment you can offer is a spoonful of plain couscous, a pasta that's got texture, a mild flavor, and, most important, a remarkable capacity for soaking up good sauces.

While Françoise uses peeled, seeded, and chopped tomatoes, I often use canned diced, which put the tagine in the realm of easily doable in winter.

- 2 chicken bouillon cubes and 1¾ cups boiling water (what Françoise uses) or 1¾ cups chicken broth
- ¼ pound moist, plump dried apricots (I use Turkish)
- About 6 tablespoons olive oil
- About 1¾ pounds boneless lamb shoulder, fat removed, cut into 1½-inch cubes
- Salt and freshly ground pepper
- 4 medium onions, coarsely chopped
- 4 garlic cloves, split, germ removed, and finely chopped
- 1 14½-ounce can diced tomatoes, drained, or 4 medium tomatoes, peeled, seeded, and chopped
- 1–2 small dried chile peppers
- 1 tablespoon coriander seeds, cracked
- 2 pinches of saffron threads
- ½ teaspoon finely grated fresh ginger
- ½ teaspoon ground cumin
- ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- About ¼ cup chopped fresh cilantro
- ½ cup toasted sliced almonds
- Couscous or rice, for serving (optional)

Center a rack in the oven and preheat the oven to 325 degrees F.

If you're using the bouillon cubes, drop them into a medium bowl and pour over the boiling water; stir to dissolve. If you're using chicken broth, bring it to a boil, then pour it into a bowl. Add the apricots to the bowl and let them soak and plump while you prepare the rest of the tagine.

Put the base of a tagine, a high-sided heavy skillet, or a Dutch oven over medium-high heat and pour in 3 tablespoons of the oil. Pat the pieces of lamb dry between paper towels, then drop them into the hot oil (don't crowd the



pan — work in batches if necessary) and brown on all sides, about 4 minutes. With a slotted spoon, lift the meat out of the pan and onto a plate. Season the lamb with salt and pepper. Pour out the fat in the pan, leaving whatever bits may have stuck.

Return the pan to the stove, reduce the heat to low, and add 2 more tablespoons olive oil. When the oil is warm, stir in the onions and garlic and cook, stirring, for about 5 minutes, just to get them started on the road to softening. Add the tomatoes, season with salt and pepper, and cook, stirring often, for 10 minutes, adding a little more oil if needed.

Drain the apricots and add the chicken bouillon/broth to the pan, along with the chile(s), coriander, saffron — crush it between your fingers as you sprinkle it in — ginger, cumin, cinnamon, and 2 tablespoons of the cilantro. Stir to mix and dissolve the spices, then season with salt and pepper. Spoon the meat and any juices on the plate over the vegetables and top with the apricots. Seal the pan with aluminum foil, clap on the lid, and slide it into the oven.

Bake the tagine for 1 hour. Carefully lift the lid and foil and scatter the almonds over the meat. Re-cover the pan and bake the tagine for 15 minutes more. (Sometimes I skip this step and just save the toasted almonds to sprinkle over the tagine at serving time.)

If you cooked the braise in a tagine, sprinkle the remaining 2 tablespoons cilantro over the meat, bring the tagine to the table, and serve directly from the pan. If you used a skillet or Dutch oven, transfer the tagine to a warm large serving platter and dust with the cilantro. Serve with couscous or rice, if you like.