Heavenly Chicken Casserole

4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts
1 large head fresh broccoli
2 cans (or 1 family-sized can) Campbell’s cream of chicken soup
1 C mayonnaise
juice of 1 lemon
1 C shredded sharp cheddar cheese
1 sleeve saltine or butter crackers
1/2 stick plus 2 T butter
dash olive oil
Coarse kosher salt
Freshly-ground black pepper
2 T dry white wine or sherry
large pinch each of rosemary and thyme

Optional: 1 lb fresh mushrooms, sliced
Optional: 1 jar pearl onions, drained

**Prep work.** Place the sleeve of crackers in a plastic bag or wrap in a towel. Using a rolling pin, a meat mallet or some other blunt instrument, crush the crackers into coarse crumbs and set aside. Wash the broccoli. Cut off the last inch of each stalk; skin each stalk and remove any leaves. Cut broccoli into bite-sized pieces. Cut the chicken into bite-sized chunks. Open cans and jars. Slice mushrooms. Preheat your oven to 350˚ F.

**Sauce.** In a large glass or non-reactive bowl, mix the soup, mayonnaise and lemon juice. Taste and add more lemon juice if you prefer a more tart, assertive flavor. Set aside.

**Assembling and cooking.** Over boiling water, steam broccoli until almost done (it will be emerald-green and still a bit crunchy). Remove broccoli from heat and spoon the pieces into a 9” x 13” Pyrex casserole dish, distributing them evenly across the bottom. If you are using the optional pearl onions (I always do), distribute them evenly across the broccoli.

Heat the olive oil and 1 T of the butter in a large cast-iron skillet and sauté over medium heat until firm and cooked through. As chicken cooks, season it with salt and pepper to taste. Add the rosemary and thyme. Shortly before the chicken is done, add 1 T of the white wine/sherry and continue cooking a few moments more. Remove the chicken and distribute the chunks across the broccoli in the casserole dish, reserving the juices in the skillet. If using fresh mushrooms (I always do), put 1 T butter and 1 T white wine/sherry into the skillet, then gently sauté the mushrooms. Distribute mushrooms across the broccoli in casserole dish, again reserving the liquid in the skillet.

Reduce the heat to low and melt the 1/2 stick butter in the skillet with the pan juices, stirring and mixing well. When the butter is melted, pour in the cracker crumbs and stir until the butter and juices are absorbed. Pour the sauce evenly over the ingredients in the casserole dish. Do not stir. Spread the cheese evenly on top of the sauce. Spread the cracker crumbs evenly across the top of the cheese. Bake for 1/2 hour at 350˚ F or until browned on top and bubbly at the edges, perhaps five or ten minutes longer. Serve over steamed white rice.

**Variations:** this is the perfect casserole—the ultimate ‘hotdish,’ and variations are almost limitless. Vegetarians can leave out the chicken altogether. You can substitute dark meat if you wish. You can make the sauce with cream of mushroom soup instead of cream of chicken. Some folks like cauliflower in addition to (or instead of) the broccoli. You can vary the kind of cheese you use, as well as the crackers.

—David Sisk