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[Return to article](#)

[Château Celebration](#)

Rabbit Ali Baba

4 SERVINGS

Ali Baba is a cat who likes to watch while his owner, Ron Cook, makes this dish (with either rabbit or chicken). Ron was a student of Lydie's years ago. He now lives in Florence with his family and pets and has become a superb Italian cook.

1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil
One 3-pound rabbit, cut into 4 leg and 2 loin pieces
Salt and freshly ground pepper
Cayenne pepper
1 small onion, coarsely chopped
2 garlic cloves, coarsely chopped
6 sage leaves
3 rosemary sprigs
1 1/2 cups Chardonnay
1 tablespoon tomato paste

1. In a large enameled cast-iron casserole, pour the olive oil over the rabbit and turn to coat. Season with salt, pepper and cayenne. Add the onion, garlic, sage and rosemary to the casserole.
2. In a glass measuring cup, use a fork to blend the wine with the tomato paste; pour over the rabbit. Cover and bring to a simmer, then cook over low heat, turning the rabbit pieces a few times, until the loin is just cooked through, about 25 minutes. Transfer the loin pieces to a plate and cover with foil. Continue cooking the rabbit until the legs are tender, about 35 minutes longer. Add the legs to the loin pieces.
3. Boil the pan juices until thickened and flavorful, about 8 minutes. Return the rabbit to the casserole and reheat in the sauce. Season with salt, pepper and cayenne and serve.

MAKE AHEAD The recipe can be prepared through Step 2 and refrigerated overnight.

SERVE WITH Fresh noodles, dried egg noodles or crusty bread.

WINE This dish calls for a rich, ripely fruity and earthy Rhône white that can stand up to the strong rabbit flavor and the aromatic sage and rosemary. Two good choices: the 1998 Domaine Vieux Télégraphe Châteauneuf-du-Pape Blanc and the 1998 Chapoutier Hermitage Blanc Chante-Alouette.

--*Lydie Marshall*

This recipe originally appeared in December 2000.