

Thanksgiving Starts Here...

The perfect roast turkey is tender, juicy, flavorful — and foolproof. The Food Network's Alton Brown is witty, irreverent — and the perfect person to take you step by step (from selecting to carving) to a delicious holiday bird.

I remember my first turkey.

I was 25; it was 20 pounds. I had no idea what I was doing, so I snagged a recipe from a glossy food mag that promised to produce the perfect turkey. The ingredients required for the stuffing and the glaze cost exactly two dollars more than the turkey itself, not including the gas it took to drive to three different markets in search of said ingredients.

To make a long and painful story short, I worked my butt off all day long and was rewarded with a turkey that had all the flavor and mouth feel of pulverized Sheetrock, though I have to say, the stuffing and skin were sublime. Of course, that's the ultimate goal of most turkey recipes: to create a great skin and stuffing to hide the fact that turkey meat, in its cooked state, is dry and flavorless. Does it have to be that way? No. We just have to focus on what the turkey is and what the turkey needs. And we have to consider what it is we really want. This is how I see it...

THE PRIMARY GOAL

To prepare a juicy, flavorful turkey with a pleasantly crisp, brown skin that tastes terrific even without the assistance of stuffing or gravy. All of the (minimal) ingredients you need are in bold type.

THE PRIMARY CHALLENGE

Because it's not very moist to begin with, turkey meat is extremely easy to overcook. Once overcooked, it becomes very unappealing indeed. What's worse, turkeys are composed of two different types of meat — white and dark — which have to be cooked to different temperatures.

STRATEGIES

- Buy the right bird.
- Alter the nature of the meat.
- Cook the meat in two phases, one to brown and crisp the skin and another to cook the bird to the exact state of doneness.
- Let the meat rest to preserve moisture.

GOOD BIRD HUNTING

Although you can order a fresh turkey by mail, once you take shipping into account, the cost is usually three times that of a grocery-store bird. I prefer a **frozen turkey in the 18-pound range** (which will feed about 12 people). Since a frozen bird is about as pliant as a bowling ball, it doesn't get bruised on its way to the supermarket. If you don't have time to brine the bird, buy a kosher one, which has already spent time in salt.



TOOL BOX

Here is the gear required for this project:

- One 5-gallon cooler with a drain spout
- Five 1-gallon resealable plastic bags
- Freezer packs
- Paper towels
- V-shaped rack (optional)
- Large roasting pan (two disposable aluminum pans are fine)
- Heavy-duty aluminum foil
- Scissors
- Nonstick vegetable oil spray
- Disposable kitchen gloves (optional)
- Probe thermometer with digital base, insulated wire, and alarm
- Carving knife
- Large cutting board

BREAKING THE ICE

QUICK THAW

Place the wrapped bird in a 5-gallon cooler with a drain spout. Place the cooler in the bathtub and cover the turkey with cold water. You don't have to do the quick thaw in the tub, but it sure makes things easier. I drain and replace the water every 2 to 3 hours (to keep the water at 40°F or below) until the turkey has thawed (8 to 10 hours, depending on beginning temperature).



SLOW THAW

Place the bird in a cooler with about an inch of ice in the bottom. Park it in a cool place, and the bird will be workable in about four days. Add more ice if the cooler's temperature rises above 40°F.

TIME TO BRINE

Turkeys may not come into the world moist, but there's no reason they have to be dry when they leave. The key is to soak your bird in a salt solution, or brine. Clean your cooler with soap and water, then pour in half a gallon of **hot tap water, 2/3 cup sugar, and a pound of salt.** (Remember, different salts take up different volumes. For instance, you need 3 cups of Diamond Crystal kosher salt to make a pound but only 2 cups of Morton's kosher salt.) Stir thoroughly to dissolve the crystals. Then stir in **8 pounds of ice** (that's a gallon of water) and **16 cups (128 ounces) of vegetable broth.**

Meanwhile, unwrap the thawed turkey and remove any parts (neck, bag o' internal organs, etc.) that might be lurking inside the cavities. If you want to use these to make gravy later, okay. Me, I feed 'em to the dog. If there's a metal or plastic clip holding the turkey's back legs together, leave it on.

Place the turkey in the brine, breast side up. If your cooler is too big, the brine may not cover it. If we're talking only an inch or so, don't worry about it. But if your bird is seriously beached, you'll need a smaller container. If your turkey floats, fill a one-gallon resealable plastic bag with water and place it on top of the buoyant bird. Set the cooler, lid closed, in a cool place for 8 to 12 hours, turning the bird over once if possible. For safety reasons, it is important to keep the brining liquid at 40°F or right below. Check it periodically with the probe thermometer; if the temperature is getting too high, add a few freezer packs that have been enclosed in resealable plastic bags.

FINAL COUNTDOWN

(T MINUS 4 HOURS AND COUNTING TILL DINNER)

Remove one of the oven racks and set the other in the next-to-the-lowest position, then preheat the oven to 500°F. Why 500°F? Because we need the fat under the turkey skin to heat quickly and sauté the skin from below. If we start with a low temperature, a lot of the fat will melt and roll away to the bottom of the bird without doing any browning at all.

Remove the turkey from the brine, rinse under cold water, and pat dry with paper towels. Contemplate the main cavity. Lots of things could go in there...in fact, only one thing shouldn't: stuffing. Stuffing is evil. Stuffing adds mass, so it slows the cooking. That's evil because the longer the bird cooks, the drier it will be. And since the cavity is a perfect haven for salmonella bacteria, you have to be absolutely certain that the cavity is heated through to 165°F, which means overcooking at least part of the bird...which is evil. If you really love stuffing, wait until the turkey comes out of the oven, add some of the pan drippings to the stuffing, and bake it in a dish. That's called dressing, and that's not evil — stuffing is, though.

Aromatic items such as fresh herbs, onions, and celery are cleared for the cavity. Not only will they infuse the

meat with their essence, but they also make the kitchen smell very nice, thus priming your diners for the glories to come. So loosely pack your bird with any combination of **fresh herbs** (for instance, thyme, rosemary, and sage); **one onion, two celery stalks, and two large carrots, all roughly chopped**. But keep the packing loose — otherwise you might as well have stuffing and stuffing is...you know.

Place the turkey, breast side up, on a V-shaped rack set inside a large roasting pan (I just stack together two of the big disposable foil pans that populate supermarkets around the holidays). A V-shaped rack is basically a heavy wire rack that holds the turkey up off the floor of the pan and keeps it kind of bunched in on itself. If you don't have a V-shaped rack, make an aluminum foil snake, about an inch thick and three feet long. Loop it until you've got an oval-shaped spiral about ten inches by eight inches. Set this coil in the pan, then place the turkey on the coil. Although V-shaped racks and snakes will keep the turkey from sitting in its own drippings, they can't work miracles like promoting browning on the bottom. Oh, well — a non-brown bottom is better than a soggy bottom.

Cut a piece of heavy-duty aluminum foil that when folded in half is big enough to cover the turkey's breast. Lay this onto the breast, shiny side up, and mold it into a breastplate (i.e., a triangular sheath that covers the breast meat completely). Remove it, lube the underside with nonstick vegetable oil spray, and set aside.

Now, rub a quarter of a **stick of butter** between your hands until your digits are liberally lubed (if this is just too icky for you, use disposable gloves). Rub the butter into the turkey as if you were a masseuse on a mission.

You'll probably need to re-butter your hands a couple of times in order to get a nice, even coating. When you're done massaging, ditch the remaining butter and the gloves (if you're using them).

Time to get the bird in the box. Since the first segment of this thermal trip is about browning the breast, I go in neck-end first and breast up. Set your oven timer to half an hour. When it dings, check the breast. It should be nicely browned — if not, return the turkey to the oven and cook another ten minutes. Then remove the bird and apply the breastplate. This will help reflect heat and slow the cooking of the breast meat. That way, by the time the white meat hits the target temp of 161°F, the dark meat should be around 180°F, which is ideal.

Last but not least, insert your thermometer's probe directly through the foil and into the deepest part of the breast. Yes, most turkeys come with thermometers installed, but since they're made to pop up at 180°F, they're tragically late to the party. Probe thermometers feature, well, a probe that connects to a digital base via a couple of feet of insulated wire. The base has a magnet on it so that it can be placed on the outside of the oven while the turkey cooks. Most models also feature an alarm that can be set to go off at the temperature of your choice (see the complete setup, TK).

Reduce the oven temperature to 350°F and return the turkey to the oven, breastplate armor securely in place. Set your probe thermometer to go off at 161°F. (Yes, I know that the instant-kill temperature for salmonella is 165°F, but the temperature will continue to rise inside the bird for several minutes after you take it out of the oven.) If you leave the oven door closed, an 18-pounder should hit the thermal finish line 2 to 2 1/2 hours after the oven temperature has been reduced. That means no basting! Basting is evil. Basting does nothing for the meat. Why? Skin. Skin is designed to keep stuff *out* of the bird, so basting just lets heat out of the oven. That means the turkey will take longer to cook...so don't touch that door!



Once 161°F has been attained in the breast (and 180°F in the thigh), take the bird out of the oven and give it a rest. No matter what you do, do not skip this step. If you slice up that bird straight from the oven, all that juice you worked so hard to get into it will run out all over the platter, lost forever. So cover with either aluminum foil or the lid from your kettle grill and wait half an hour.

When carving time arrives, first be sure to wow the assembled appetites with the whole bird before breaking it down. I like to create thick slices by removing the breast meat in two lobes, then cutting across the grain.

The only downside to roasting a brined bird is that the pan drippings may be too salty for gravy making. You can usually get around that by mixing the drippings with **1 cup H₂O**, **1 cup low-salt chicken broth**, and a **cornstarch** slurry. Or you can look at it this way: The turkey will be so tender that you won't need any gravy. Some fresh cranberry sauce, however, would be very nice indeed. Besides tasting great on Turkey Day, the bird will still be loaded with moist flavor the next day. And let's face it, in the end, isn't Thanksgiving really about the sandwiches?

THE MEAT OF THE STORY

Everything you always wanted to know about carving but were afraid to ask:



A. Pull turkey legs away from the body until thighbones pop. Cut away the legs. Separate thighs and drumsticks at the joints. Place all parts on a cutting board and carve parallel to the bone.



B. Remove the breast meat in two lobes and place skin side up on cutting board. Slice crosswise against the grain. (For longer, thinner slices, leave breast attached and carve parallel to the breastbone.)



C. Pull wings away from the shoulders and cut wings at joints. Serve wings whole.

— Adapted from an article by Alton Brown, *Bon Appétit*, November 2003

http://www.epicurious.com/bonappetit/cooking_class/turkey03/index