
High-Roast Turkey

Could we high-roast a turkey without having to call the fire department or drying out the breast meat? We set out to discover the secret of two-hour roast turkey without the smoke.

➤ BY BRIDGET LANCASTER ◀

High-roast turkey is the holy grail of holiday cookery. Not even two hours goes by before the bird is roasted, and with picture-perfect skin. Yet the potential for the piercing shriek of a smoke alarm and torched breast meat are sufficient reason to approach this recipe with more than a pinch of trepidation.

It all started with Barbara Kafka, who introduced America to the high-roast turkey in her book *Roasting* (Morrow, 1995) with a recipe for turkey roasted in a 500-degree oven. In the past five years, we have performed many tests using the high-roast method with chicken, paying particular attention to the problems that high temperatures present for the home cook. We wondered if this technique could be applied to turkey. For this endeavor, we started by placing a 12-pound bird breast-side up on a V-rack, placing the rack in a roasting pan, and then roasting the turkey undisturbed until the thigh meat registered the optimum temperature of 175 degrees—in this case, just under two hours. As promised, there was crisp skin, but only over the breast meat, probably because the turkey was never rotated in the oven. In addition, the breast meat overcooked by the time the thighs were cooked. Even worse, the kitchen filled with black smoke caused by burnt pan drippings. Still, despite the seeming failure of my initial attempt, I was encouraged by the terrific-looking skin and the short amount of time needed to roast the turkey.

Whack 'n Roast

Tackling the problem of the unevenly cooked meat first, I started the turkey breast-side down, then flipped the turkey from side to side, finally finishing breast-side up. This method yielded evenly cooked meat, but since each side of the turkey spent less time face up, the skin was less than crisp.

In their natural form, turkeys are not designed to roast evenly. The vaulted bone structure of the breast promotes faster cooking, while the legs lag behind. I decided a turkey redesign was in order.



An unusual butchering technique gets a 12-pound turkey out of the oven in less than two hours and delivers supercrisp skin and evenly cooked meat.

I butterflied the turkey—a technique in which the backbone is removed and the bird is opened up and then flattened. Logic dictated that with the turkey basically in two dimensions, not three, and all of the meat facing up, the turkey would cook more evenly, and the skin would have equal time to crisp. As it turned out, however, butterflying a turkey is a whole lot harder than butterflying a chicken, a feat I'd accomplished many times with only a little help from a good pair of scissors to cut out the backbone. Because scissors are no match for the sturdier bone structure of a turkey, I found a good-quality chef's knife was necessary to cut along either side of the backbone. Even

with a sharp blade, I still needed to apply some serious pressure to cut through the thicker bones, sometimes literally hacking my way through. Once the backbone was removed, I found that the sturdy rib cage would not flatten under the heel of my hand, as a chicken's would. I reached for my heavy-duty rolling pin, placed the turkey breast-side up, and whacked the breastbone until it flattened—aggressive culinary therapy, if you will. All of this means getting quite physical, but there's no way around it if you want to turn out a perfect high-roast turkey.

I roasted the butterflied bird, and the results were outstanding. As the legs were now in contact with part of the breast, they helped prevent the white meat from overcooking. The thighs, which had been cooking more slowly than the breast meat, zoomed ahead, and by the time the breast meat was up to optimum temperature, 165 degrees, the thighs had reached their target temperature of 175 degrees. If it weren't for the billowing smoke, I would have shouted eureka!

"No Smoking"

The meat was evenly cooked and the skin was crisp, but what to do about the smoke? Filling the roasting pan with water to keep the fat from hitting the bottom of the hot pan solved the smoke problem but delivered soggy skin. (Much of the water evaporates, creating a humid environment, which is anathema to crisp skin.)

After many tests, I finally hit on stuffing as the answer. Placed in the bottom of the roasting pan, where it could soak up the drippings, the stuffing could not only eliminate the smoking problem but also pick up outstanding flavor.

The question now was how best to construct this arrangement. A broiler pan was my first thought, since the slotted top would allow the drippings to reach the stuffing. But while the broiler pan top was the perfect size to hold the turkey, the bottom held only enough stuffing for four—not enough for seconds, not to mention leftovers. After going through the kitchen's bat-

talion of roasting pans to use with the broiler pan top, I finally resorted to a disposable rectangular aluminum roasting pan. It was big enough to hold plenty of stuffing, sturdy enough to support the broiler pan top, and, best of all, it was easy to clean up—I just threw it away.

The recipe I had been using, the Cornbread and Sausage Stuffing from *Cook's* November/December 2000 issue, now needed some fine-tuning. After soaking up the fat and liquid from the drippings, our previously well-balanced recipe had become greasy. I lowered the fat in the recipe by reducing the amount of butter from 8 tablespoons to 2 and by cutting the amount of half-and-half and sausage in half. I also reduced the amount of chicken broth; the stuffing got plenty of moisture from the juices of the turkey.

Crisp Skin, Seasoned Meat, Good Gravy

With the mechanics of high-roast turkey in place, I was able to move on to flavor—or lack thereof. As we often do at *Cook's*, I turned to brining—a process in which the turkey is soaked in a solution of salt, sugar, and water. The salt in the solution makes its way into the meat and seasons it. The brine also adds moisture to the meat, which protects it from the effects of overcooking. But with this moisture comes soggy skin. Air-drying the brined turkey in the refrigerator the night before it was roasted (a technique perfected in our November/December 2000 issue) allowed the moisture in the skin to evaporate, and once again the roasted skin was crackling crisp.

So I had great turkey and stuffing, but what about the gravy? I had always made gravy using pan drippings, but now my stuffing soaked up those precious juices. Gravy made only from giblet stock was weak. The solution was the backbone, which I chopped into small pieces and threw into a roasting pan along with the neck and giblets, celery, carrot, onion, and garlic. I roasted the bones and vegetables at 450 degrees until well-browned, then placed them in a saucepan along with chicken broth, white wine, and water, and made a stock.

Turkey Timeline

1 TO 2 DAYS BEFORE SERVING:

- Butterfly and brine the turkey.
- Prepare the dressing.

8 TO 24 HOURS BEFORE SERVING:

- Air-dry the turkey.
- Prepare the gravy. (This can also be done earlier, while the turkey brines.)

2 HOURS BEFORE SERVING:

- Roast the turkey with dressing.

WHILE ROASTED TURKEY RESTS:

- Reheat the gravy.

After the stock cooled down, I skimmed off the fat and reserved it to make a roux—a mixture of flour and fat used to thicken sauces or gravies. This gravy was big on flavor, and, by making it ahead, while the turkey was brining, I was able to cut down the amount of work necessary on Thanksgiving Day. Finally, I had delivered great skin, moist, flavorful meat, and superior dressing—roasted in less than two hours.

CRISP-SKIN HIGH-ROAST BUTTERFLIED TURKEY WITH SAUSAGE DRESSING

SERVES 10 TO 12

If you prefer not to brine your turkey, we recommend a kosher bird. The dressing can be made with cornbread, challah, or Italian bread, but note that they are not used in equal amounts. If you don't own a broiler pan top or if yours does not span the roasting pan, try a sturdy wire rack that rests comfortably on top of a 12 by 16-inch disposable roasting pan. Cover the rack with a large sheet of heavy-duty foil, fold excess foil under, spray it with nonstick cooking spray, and, with a paring knife, cut slits in the foil for fat drainage.

Turkey

- 2 cups kosher salt or 1 cup table salt
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 turkey (12 to 14 pounds gross weight), rinsed thoroughly; giblets, neck, and tailpiece removed and reserved for gravy (recipe follows), and turkey butterflied following illustrations 1 through 5, "Butterflying the Turkey," page 11
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter, melted

Sausage Dressing

- 12 cups cornbread broken into 1-inch pieces (include crumbs), or 18 cups 1-inch challah or Italian bread cubes (from about 1½ loaves)
- 1¾ cups chicken stock or canned low-sodium chicken broth
- 1 cup half-and-half
- 2 large eggs, beaten lightly
- 12 ounces bulk pork sausage, broken into 1-inch pieces
- 3 medium onions, chopped fine (about 3 cups)
- 3 celery ribs, chopped fine (about 1½ cups)
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh thyme leaves
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh sage leaves
- 3 medium garlic cloves, minced or pressed through garlic press
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- 2 teaspoons ground black pepper

1. **TO BRINE THE TURKEY:** Dissolve salt and sugar in 2 gallons cold water in large stockpot or clean bucket. Add turkey and refrigerate or set in very cool spot (not more than 40 degrees) for 8 hours. (See page 17 for tips on brining outside of refrigerator.)

2. **FOR THE DRESSING:** While turkey brines, adjust one oven rack to upper-middle position and second rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 250 degrees. Spread bread in even layers on 2 rimmed baking sheets and dry in oven 40 to 50 minutes for challah or Italian bread or 50 to 60 minutes for cornbread.

3. Place bread in large bowl. Whisk together stock, half-and-half, and eggs in medium bowl; pour over bread and toss gently to coat so bread does not break into smaller pieces. Set aside.

4. Heat heavy-bottomed, 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat until hot, about 1½ minutes. Add sausage and cook, stirring occasionally, until sausage loses its raw color, 5 to 7 minutes. With slotted spoon, transfer sausage to medium bowl. Add about half of onions and celery to fat in skillet; sauté, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 5 minutes. Transfer onion mixture to bowl with sausage. Return skillet to heat and add 2 tablespoons butter; when foam subsides, add remaining celery and onions and sauté, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 5 minutes. Stir in thyme, sage, and garlic; cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds; add salt and pepper. Add this mixture along with sausage and onion mixture to bread and stir gently to combine, trying not to break bread into smaller pieces.

5. Spray disposable aluminum 12 by 16-inch roasting pan with nonstick cooking spray. Transfer dressing to roasting pan and spread in even layer. Cover pan with foil and refrigerate until needed.

6. **TO PREPARE TURKEY FOR ROASTING:** Set slotted broiler pan top on top of roasting pan with foil-covered dressing and spray with nonstick cooking spray; set roasting pan on baking sheet to support bottom. Remove turkey from brine and rinse well under cool running water. Following illustration 6 in "Butterflying the Turkey," page 11, position turkey on broiler pan top; thoroughly pat surface of turkey dry with paper towels. Refrigerate turkey and dressing, uncovered, 8 to 24 hours.

7. **TO ROAST TURKEY WITH DRESSING:** Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 450 degrees. Remove broiler pan top with turkey and foil cover over roasting pan; replace broiler pan top with turkey. Brush turkey with melted butter. Place entire assembly with turkey in oven and roast until turkey skin is crisp and deep brown and instant-read thermometer reads 165 degrees when inserted in thickest part of breast and 175 degrees in thickest part of thigh, 80 to 100 minutes, rotating pan from front to back after 40 minutes.

8. Transfer broiler pan top with turkey to cutting board, tent loosely with foil, and let rest 20 minutes. Meanwhile, adjust oven rack to upper-middle position, place roasting pan with dressing back in oven, and bake until golden brown, about 10 minutes. Cool dressing 5 minutes, then spoon

STEP-BY-STEP | BUTTERFLYING THE TURKEY



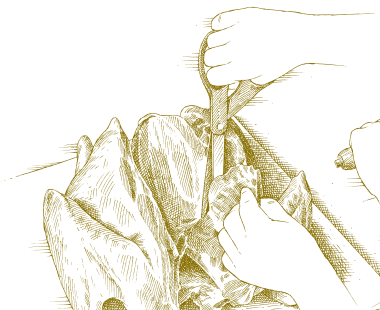
1. Holding turkey upright with back-bone facing front, use hacking motion to cut directly to left of backbone with chef's knife.



2. Continue cutting to left of back-bone until cut is complete.



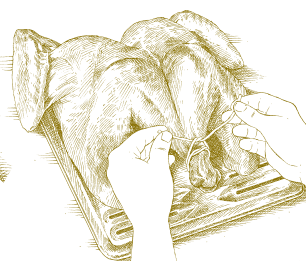
3. Holding backbone with one hand, hack directly to right of backbone until backbone is cut free.



4. Using scissors, cut between ribs and skin. Then cut out rib plates and remove any small pieces of bone.



5. Place turkey breast-side up on cutting board and cover with plastic wrap. With large rolling pin, whack breastbone until it cracks and turkey flattens.

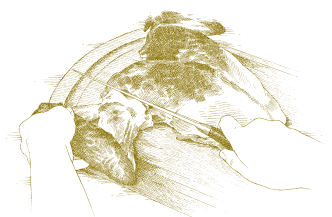


6. After brining and rinsing, place turkey breast-side up on broiler pan top. Tuck wings under turkey. Push legs up to rest on lower portion of breast. Tie legs together.

STEP-BY-STEP | CARVING THE TURKEY



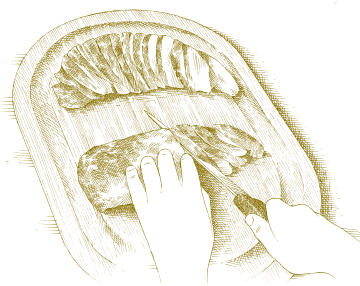
1. With sharp carving knife, cut both leg quarters off turkey.



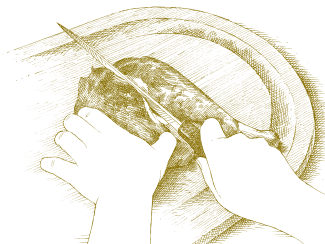
2. Cut both wing pieces off breast section.



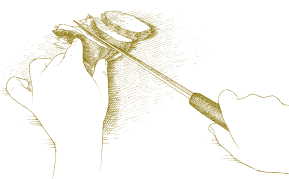
3. Slice straight down along breast-bone. Continue to slice down, with knife hugging rib bones, to remove breast meat from bones.



4. Beginning at narrow end of breast, slice meat across grain, about 1/4 inch thick.



5. Pull thigh and drumstick apart and locate joint. Cut through joint, separating it into two pieces.



6. Remove largest pieces of meat from thigh and slice meat across grain, about 1/4 inch thick.

into bowl or onto turkey serving platter. Carve turkey (see page 11) and serve.

TURKEY GRAVY

MAKES ABOUT 1 QUART

To roast the trimmings and vegetables, it's best to use a roasting pan that can sit on the stovetop. If you don't own one, a broiler pan bottom will work; when setting it on the stovetop, however, use medium heat instead of high heat and add only half the amount of chicken broth before scraping up the drippings; add the other half of the chicken broth to the saucepan along with the wine.

Reserved turkey giblets, neck, and backbone, hacked into 2-inch pieces

- 1 medium carrot, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1 celery rib, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 2 small onions, chopped coarse
- 6 garlic cloves, unpeeled
- 3 1/2 cups chicken stock or canned low-sodium chicken broth (two 14 1/2-ounce cans)
- 2 cups dry white wine
- 6 sprigs fresh thyme
- 1/4 cup all-purpose flour
- Salt and ground black pepper

1. Heat oven to 450 degrees. Place turkey trimmings, carrot, celery, onions, and garlic in large flameproof roasting pan. Spray lightly with cooking spray and toss to combine. Roast, stirring every 10 minutes, until well-browned, 40 to 50 minutes.

2. Remove roasting pan from oven, and place over burner(s) set at high heat; add chicken stock and bring to boil, scraping up browned bits on bottom of pan with wooden spoon.

3. Transfer contents of roasting pan to large saucepan. Add wine, 3 cups water, and thyme; bring to boil over high heat. Reduce heat to low and simmer until reduced by half, about 1 1/2 hours. Strain stock into large measuring cup or container. Cool to room temperature; cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate until fat congeals, at least 1 hour.

4. To finish gravy, skim fat from stock using soup spoon; reserve fat. Pour stock through fine-mesh strainer to remove remaining bits of fat; discard bits in strainer. Bring stock to simmer in medium saucepan over medium-high heat. In second medium saucepan, heat 4 tablespoons reserved turkey fat over medium-high heat until bubbling; whisk in flour and cook, whisking constantly, until combined and honey-colored, about 2 minutes. Continuing to whisk constantly, gradually add hot stock; bring to boil, then reduce heat to medium-low and simmer, stirring occasionally, until slightly thickened, about 5 minutes. Season to taste with salt and pepper and serve with turkey. (Can be refrigerated up to 3 days; reheat in medium saucepan over medium heat until hot, about 8 minutes.)