

A whole roasted turkey is shown on a metal roasting rack inside a dark roasting pan. The turkey has a golden-brown, slightly charred skin. The legs are tied together with a string. The background is a light-colored wooden surface.

TURKEY 101

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It helps to think of your turkey as just a great big chicken. That brings the intimidation factor down a few notches. During the holiday season, everyone from TV chefs to magazines can tell you how to make the "best turkey ever." This includes tips like brining a turkey, flipping a hot 22-pound turkey mid-roast, or deep-frying it outside using asbestos gloves and safety goggles. Does all of this have you breathing into a paper bag to avoid a panic attack?

Calm down—help is here. If you are a mere mortal who just wants to prepare a decent turkey without all the specialized paraphernalia and techniques, this section is for you.

First, the turkey itself. Should you buy fresh or frozen? Fresh is always a good thing, and the bird is usually more juicy. However, who can resist those deals where you get a free turkey for buying the rest of your groceries at the supermarket, or if you have been given one from the company you work for? Also, frozen turkeys are less expensive.

Personally, I prefer fresh over frozen. You can see the true plumpness of the bird (hard to tell when it's as hard as a cement block) and see the color, too. You want a creamy-skinned bird with smooth skin. Look for any leftover pinfeathers. You can easily pull those out with a pair of tweezers. Also, my preference is a hen over a tom (tom turkeys are bigger, though). I happen to think a hen is more flavorful and tender, although I couldn't find any facts to back that up. So do what works for you—both can produce a tasty bird.

To thaw a frozen turkey, you need adequate time. The turkey should be thawed in your fridge and these big birds take quite a while to thaw completely. Don't try thawing it the night before! You need 24 hours for every 4 to 5 pounds, so if you have a 12-pound bird, it will take about two and a half days to thaw in the fridge. A quick-thaw method is to put the turkey (in its original, sealed plastic wrap) in a sink full of cold water. You will need to change the water every 1/2 hour or so till thawed. This method will take 6 to 9 hours, depending on the size of your bird.

Turkey Triage

Got a problem that needs fixing? Here, you find some quick fixes, patches, and helps to pull your dinner from disaster. Gravy too thin? Got lumpy gravy? Turkey taking too long to cook? Stuffing too dry? Cranberries too runny? I have some quick rescues and resuscitations in this section.

- **Dry stuffing?** Melt some butter and add half again as much chicken broth. Heat together and toss in the stuffing. Fluff stuffing with a fork and serve.
- **Thin gravy?** You need to thicken it with a little more flour. I always use a jar and a lid to minimize the lump factor. Add 1 tablespoon flour to 3 tablespoons cold water. Put the lid on and shake violently until you feel your teeth knocking around in your head. (You don't have to shake that hard; I'm trying to make a point.) Add the flour-and-water mixture to the pan of boiling gravy and whisk away as you add it. The gravy will thicken in a matter of moments—just keep whisking!
- **Lumpy gravy?** You violated the first rule of gravy making: make sure your roux is smooth and lumpless. Gravy making tips are included in the gravy recipe, but suppose you didn't read it and now you have this lumpy mess? Get out the blender and blend the daylight out of this stuff, a batch at a time! Fill the blender only half full or you will end up with a turkey-gravy ceiling (you don't want to hear how I know this). Return the gravy to the pan for a quick reheat and voilà! Lumpless gravy!
- **Runny cranberries?** Pour off some of the juice and call it a day. You could go to all the trouble of trying to thicken the sauce by cooking it some more. (The mixture will thicken naturally because of the pectin in the cranberries, and pectin is released as the cranberries cook.) So the reason your cranberries are runny is that you didn't cook them long enough. I say pull out the strainer, drain off some of the juice, and slap the sauce into a serving dish. Don't you have enough going on without having to redo the cranberries?
- **Turkey taking forever to cook?** You're probably opening the oven too much, basting it. I did this one year and we ate at about 7 P.M. (planned on eating at 4:00!). Every time you open the oven, you lose about 25 degrees, so shut the oven, raise the temperature about 25 degrees for the next hour (don't baste!), and you should be back on track.

Remember, I promised you I would tell you what to do with the giblet pouch? Now is the time. In that drippy bag you are going to find a big old turkey neck, the heart, gizzard, and liver. The heart, gizzard, and liver are great treats for the dog, but unless giblet gravy is your heart's desire (sorry, couldn't help myself), in my opinion they have no place in a gravy boat.

First, throw the turkey neck, half a carrot, celery stalk, and half an onion, quartered, into a medium saucepan and fill about three quarters of the way up with cold water. Put the pan on a medium-high heat, bring to a boil, then lower the temp and allow to simmer for about 1 hour or so. Throw a lid on the top and turn it down even lower and allow it to cook for another hour. Strain the broth from the solids (toss the solids) and set aside for later gravy making. If it is hours away from that event, refrigerate the broth.

Hitting The Gravy Train

Okay, the turkey has been removed from the pan and is resting comfortably. Skim the big greasy globs of fat from the roasting pan and place in a medium saucepan (there should be about 3 tablespoons or so of fat, depending on the size of your bird). Next, take an equal amount of Wondra flour and add to that turkey grease. (I know this sounds yucky, but you have to trust me.) The heat should be about medium high and you need to whisk away to your heart's content until the roux (pronounced ROO) is golden and thick, and naturally lumpless. This roux procedure will take you all of 5 minutes—very easy, you can't mess this up. Set your beautiful roux aside.

Now, back to the roasting pan. Add 1 cup of your reserved turkey stock to the roasting pan and turn up the heat (you will probably need two burners for the job) and bring it to a boil. Using your wire whisk, scrape up all the browned bits off the bottom of the pan. Those browned bits contain concentrated turkey flavor that will make your turkey gravy absolutely to die for. Don't skip this step. Now, add all the golden roux you just made in the saucepan into your roaster, and whisk like your life depended on it. In just moments, a beautiful, velvety bronzed gravy should be emerging and filling you with the joy of accomplishment. Salt and pepper to taste, and add a pinch of white pepper.

I am an admitted snob when it comes to gravy making, but even cookbook authors have their limitations when making enough turkey gravy. Truth be told, a turkey doesn't make as much gravy as necessary for the gravy hounds undoubtedly sitting at your very holiday table. You know the types—they use three ladles of gravy on their potatoes alone, before tackling the turkey on their plates. It is because of them that I came up with this trick. Actually, I take that back. My sister did this and I was shocked at how good it was. I didn't know she had done it at the time or I probably would have thrown myself prostrate on the stove, begging her not to ruin the gravy. Here's what she did: she added a package of dry turkey gravy mix (and the accompanying water) to her already-made gravy. No one was the wiser, including me! I was amazed at how much gravy she had and was thrilled that I (an admitted gravy hound myself) was able to amply ladle gravy without being scolded about "saving some for the next guy." She told me about the sneaky gravy-extension trick after I had polished off Round One of The Meal and noticed there was still gravy left. I nearly needed smelling salts when she told me what she had done. I tried this trick at home and it is simply fabulous. This kind of mix stuff I will do on special occasions, but I will never admit to it, so don't tell a soul you heard this from me.

CHART FOR COOKING YOUR BIRD

The National Turkey Federation recommends you cook your turkey until the temperature reaches 170 degrees in the breast and 180 degrees in the thigh (watch out for the bone). A meat thermometer is distinctly different from a candy thermometer! (I tried to use one for this purpose when I was first learning to cook. It wasn't successful.)

STUFFED TURKEY

8 to 12 pounds	3 to 3½ hours
12 to 14 pounds	3½ to 4 hours
14 to 18 pounds	4 to 4¼ hours
18 to 20 pounds	4¼ to 4¾ hours
20 to 24 pounds	4¾ to 5¼ hours

UNSTUFFED TURKEY

8 to 12 pounds	2 to 3 hours
12 to 14 pounds	3 to 3¼ hours
14 to 18 pounds	3¼ to 4¼ hours
18 to 20 pounds	4¼ to 4½ hours
20 to 24 pounds	4½ to 5 hours
24 to 30 pounds	5 to 5¼ hours

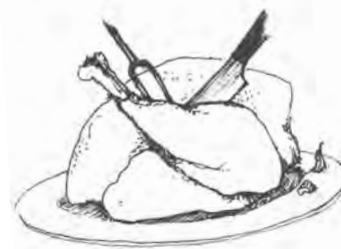
Right about now, you're probably wondering where the basting instructions are. Personally, I don't baste. Why? Because basting actually dries out the bird! Every time you open the oven door, you lose 25 degrees of heat. And because you lose heat, you have to cook the turkey longer. Longer cooking time means a drier turkey, period. (Yeah, yeah . . . I know you have been basting birds for a hundred years in your family and everyone swears by basting.) I too, was in the basting camp til one year I was overwhelmed with all I had to do, and we had the best, juiciest turkey ever. So, my advice is: don't baste.

Once the turkey is finished with its roasting, remove it from the oven and let it rest for about 10 minutes in the pan. Then remove your bird from the pan to a cutting board and again, allow it to rest, at least 20 minutes, 1 hour is better. (And, like I said earlier, it gives you a sense of a timetable to finish up the rest of the dinner. Just put a little foil jacket on old tom to keep him warm. this is important because it will retain its juiciness if given the proper "nap".

HOW TO CARVE A TURKEY



1. Let the turkey rest for an hour before carving, and then remove it from the pan. This will be easier to do if you make two heavy duty strips of aluminum foil to act as lifters (unless you have turkey lifters).



2. To start carving, first remove the turkey legs. Using the carving fork, hold the bird firmly against the cutting board and slice through the skin between the breast and thigh---there is an obvious gap. Pull back the leg to locate the joint, then cut through the joint to remove the whole leg. Repeat on the other side.



3. You need to separate the thigh from the drumstick. To do this, stretch the thigh and the drumstick apart, find the joint, and with a firm downward movement of the knife, cut all the way through the joint.



4. Unless you have invited Fred Flintstone for Thanksgiving, you're going to want to carve the meat off the drumstick. Place the carving fork on the cutting board and aim the narrow end of the leg between the tines, so you don't pierce the meat. Now slice the meat off the drumstick.



5. You may want to cut the slices from the thigh, working parallel to the bone, as seen in the illustration. You can easily remove the wing using your hand to disjoin it from the breast, or simply cut through once you have located the joint.



6. Now that you've taken all the appendages off, you need to carve the breast meat. Starting at the outside of the breast cut the slices diagonally. Do this on both sides of the turkey and ta-da---you've carved the bird.