

Let's Talk Turkey

Thanksgiving is approaching and households across America will be preparing the traditional turkey. And while the turkey may be the star of the show, what really adds razzle-dazzle to the meal are the tasty side dishes. Indeed, some would argue that these items are what makes or breaks the dinner. Thus, below are my recipes for candied sweet potatoes and sausage and bread stuffing.

However, despite the side dishes key role in the feast, it is the turkey that causes people the most anxiety. Most questions involve how to cook the turkey, and more specifically, how to produce a juicy turkey. Let's face it; turkey meat, especially the breast, is rather dry.

Flavor and juiciness in any meat is a function of two factors: 1) how often the muscle is used by the animal and 2) intramuscular fat. The greater the muscle is exercised the deeper will be the flavor. But even more important for both flavor and succulence is intramuscular fat. Unfortunately, the breast of a turkey is a relatively inactive muscle and very low in intramuscular fat.

Below is a list of pointers for making the juiciest bird possible. With one possible exception, there is nothing you can do to low-fat meat to make it fatter, and hence moister. Generally all you can do is not make matters worse. Therefore, virtually all of the tips for cooking a juicier turkey are really just ways to prevent it from becoming drier than it already is. With that in mind, here are some suggestions to cook the perfect turkey:

- 1) The one way to "fatten" your turkey is to work butter under the skin of the bird before roasting. Some chefs employ a compound butter, which is butter infused with herbs and seasonings. Soften the butter at room temperature, loosen but do not remove the skin, and then work the butter underneath it with your fingers, covering as much of the bird as possible.
- 2) Wild turkeys are a little tougher, (although more flavorful), than commercial turkeys since they get considerably more exercise. But that also means less fat and therefore, less succulence.
- 3) Younger turkeys will be tenderer than their older counterparts. For the most tender, juiciest turkey, pick a young one that's been farm raised.
- 4) Brine your turkey. This is a direct way to make the meat juicier, (but not fatter or more unctuous). Brining is the process of soaking meat in a salt-water solution. The salt causes the meat to absorb some of the water, thus rendering it moister. I recommend at least six hours for a whole turkey. For a 12 – 16 lb. turkey use two cups of kosher salt, or one cup of table salt for every 2 gallons of water. Take an unfrozen turkey, remove the giblets, rinse it, and then submerge it in a large bucket of the salt-water solution and refrigerate. Remove it from the brine, rinse it, and then pat it dry before cooking. Sugar and/or herbs are also sometimes added to the brine to accentuate flavor.

5) DO NOT OVERCOOK THE TURKEY. The quickest route to dry meat of any kind is to overcook it. The turkey is done when, like chicken, the breast is 165 degrees and the deepest part of the thigh has reached 175 degrees. Use a meat thermometer so you can monitor the bird's temperature throughout the cooking process.

6) Allow the turkey to rest for 15 – 30 minutes before carving. All roasted items should rest before being carved. This allows the juices to be reabsorbed into the meat. If you carve it immediately the juices will run out. During this time the turkey will continue to cook due to carry over cooking.

7) Do not stuff the turkey. A stuffed bird takes longer to cook and can make for drier meat. This is because by the time the center of the stuffing has reached 165 degrees the temperature of the exterior meat will be well beyond. Make the stuffing separately.

8) Use a roasting pan three inches deep or less and a rack for even roasting. If the bird sits on the bottom of the pan, or the pan's sides are too high, the heat cannot penetrate the bird uniformly. Turn the roasting pan at various intervals to further facilitate even roasting.

9) Some chefs roast their turkey breast side down, the rationale being that the juices will drip into the breast. Moreover, since the breast cooks faster than the dark meat and needs less cooking, situating it on the bottom exposes it to less direct heat. Or, you can leave the bird breast side up and cover the breast with foil. Remove the foil for the last half hour of cooking to brown the breast.

10) Do not truss the bird. The dark meat will cook faster unfettered and thus reduce the chance of the breast overcooking by the time the dark meat is done.

11) Roast a turkey at lower temperatures, usually 325 – 350. Intense heat can overcook the outside before the center is completely done. However, many cooks will finish the bird at high heat (400 degrees or more) to ensure a fully browned exterior and crisp skin.

12) Finally, don't bother basting. The meat, covered by the skin, will not absorb the juices. Every time you open the oven door you're allowing heat to escape and prolonging cooking time.

Candied Sweet Potatoes

2 sticks salted butter, cut into 1-inch cubes
19 ¼ lbs. sweet potatoes, cut into 1-inch cubes
3 ¾ cups brown sugar
2 tablespoons salt
2 teaspoons black pepper
1 cup water
15 cups miniature marshmallows

In a large, heavy pot, melt the butter over medium heat. Add the potatoes, sugar, salt, pepper and water. Bring to a simmer, reduce heat to medium low and cover. Continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until the potatoes are tender, about 40-60 minutes. Remove lid and bring to a rapid simmer over medium heat. Simmer, reducing fluid for about 7-10 minutes. Remove from heat, cool, and stir in the marshmallows.

Sausage and Bread Stuffing

Half stick of salted butter
1 lb. ground pork sausage
1 large carrot, chopped
3 celery stalks, chopped
1 large onion, chopped
2 lbs. dried bread cubes
4 sage leaves, chopped
1 teaspoon fresh chopped thyme
1 ¼ cup (10 oz.) chicken broth
Salt and pepper to taste

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Melt butter in a large skillet over medium heat. Add ground sausage, carrot, celery and onion. Cook and stir until meat is evenly browned. Drain the excess grease from the pan. Gently fold in the bread cubes. Stir in remaining ingredients until evenly moist. Place into a baking dish, cover, and bake for 45 minutes. Uncover and bake for another 15 minutes.