

How to Prepare a Turkey

By Dick Waltman

Preparing a turkey should be a pleasant and enjoyable undertaking. Yet, some face it with fear apprehension. In fact, some have never tried because of fear of failure. Since preparing a turkey is one of the few things in life that I'm quite good at, I offer the following guidance for those souls, and perhaps others, who would like to produce a really excellent bird with minimal effort, and perhaps to impress their guests!

What do you need to fix a turkey properly? Other than the bird itself, there are a few things you need to get before the actual day you are preparing the bird. First of all, you need something in which to prepare the turkey. The most convenient vehicle, in my opinion, is one of those aluminum (gasp!!) pans you can buy at the grocery store for a couple of bucks. Okay, so it is aluminum. I think you can cook in aluminum a couple of times a year without endangering your health. Besides, it's cheap, you don't have to find a place to store it for a year, and you can recycle it! You are also going to need to aluminum foil to make a tent over the turkey. A baster is also a nice piece of equipment to have, but not essential, an internal temperature, and last, get a whisk if you don't have one; cheap and nothing works quite as well. As for ingredients, make sure you have the following: two loaves of white bread (Italian, French, or plain white, or even that insipid "bunny" bread), one pound of really good quality park sausage (Jimmy Dean, Sara's), several tablespoons of ground sage, black peppercorns, celery and bay leaves.

So...you have a turkey and the above ingredients/equipment. What now?

A couple of days before "the day" you need to dry out the bread. One convenient way to do this is to simply take the bread and spread it around the racks of your oven, in just a few days the bread will be nice and dry. Otherwise, 15 to 20 minutes on "warm" will do the job. In Colorado, you can actually just spread the out around the kitchen and it will dry just fine. Some find this unsightly, however.

The day before the day you are going to cook your turkey, you should make sure it is completely thawed. If your bird is still somewhat frozen, it should be defrosted by submerging it in cold water and rotating it an all sides until completely thawed. Keep your unfrozen bird in the refrigerator until the morning.

On the day you need your turkey, you need to get up early enough to get your turkey in the oven in plenty of time to meet your desired serving time. For example, if you are serving guests at two o'clock, you want your turkey cooked by 1:30. If you have a twenty-pound turkey, it will take roughly 15 minutes per pound to cook, if you stuff it, which is what were going to do. Twenty pounds times 15 minutes is 300 minutes, or say, five hours, plus or minus. So, if the turkey is to be ready at 1:30, it must go into the oven by 8:30. You should get started on the stuffing at least one hour before that, 90 minutes is better, especially the first time you try this.

Take the turkey out of the fridge. Using a pair of scissors, remove the plastic wrap. You will find within the interior of the bird a paper sack that contains the heart, liver, and giblets. Place these (dissuading the paper sack) into a pan containing about a quart of water, a few peppercorns, and a couple of bay leaves, and boil for about 25 minutes. Meanwhile, rinse the bird with cold water and hang up to dry (just kidding, pat the bird dry with a towel). Sautee the pork sausage with a couple of chopped onions and garlic, if you like. Pour off the grease when cooked. Cool the heart, liver, and giblets and cut them all into very small pieces. VERY SMALL PIECES. This can be achieved by fist thinly slicing them into small strips and then finely chopping them. This takes some discipline but is most important to get these delicious little morsels into the stuffing without someone asking, "What is that stuff?"

Break up the dried bread into a large container, keeping the bread in large chunks, bigger than a quarter but smaller than a half dollar, if you can recall how big a half dollar is. Now combine the bread with a couple stalks of celery (dime sized slices), the chopped giblets, etc., sausage/onions, sage, fresh cracked pepper, and if desired, a pinch of salt. You may have to add mote water, but be careful not to get the mixture too soggy; you want it good and moist, but not soggy.

Stuff the bird with this concoction. Not just the obvious main cavity, but also, also the other end where the neck used to be. You may need help with this. Get as much stuffing into the bird as you can, without packing it to tight. If there is too much stuffing, mound it into a "corner" of the pan. This also is a solution to what to do with the neck, place it into the bottom of the pan. Breast up or breast down? Today, many recommend breast down. I personally say:" Breast up!" The upside-down turkey not only looks pretty stupid, the stuffing falls out. We are building wonderful gravy, so add plenty of water to the bottom of the pan, say about an inch deep.

You can roast the turkey just as it is or place a tent over it to help retain the moisture. You can fabricate a proper tent with three lengths of foil, which you join by folding the edges several times. Then, crimp the tent to the edges of the pan, keeping the foil off the turkey. This whole process is a lot simpler than it sounds...

Having tented the bird, into the oven. Cook the turkey at 325° F. When is the turkey done? The 15 minutes per pound is only a guide. The way to tell if a turkey is done is to try and twist the leg. After you have twisted the leg a few times without result, you will recognize when things change during the final hour or so, remove the tent so the turkey will brown up and enhance the presentation. Baste.

You want the turkey to "rest" 20-30 minutes after removing from the oven and before carving. How do you get the turkey from the pan to the platter? Two people with two spatulas under the bird. The second person grasps the bird with a pair of hot pads or towels. It's easier if you first remove the stuffing from both ends.

In the pan you will have the makings for wonderful gravy. Skim off the fat; remove the neck and excess dressing from the liquid, not being too fastidious about it as bits of this

and that make for better gravy. You will probably need to add some liquid, and the best liquid to add is potato water from the potatoes you are boiling. Do not drown the miller! For thickener, flour is trickier, but tastes oh so much better the friendlier cornstarch. Place 4-5 tablespoons of flour in a bowl and add cold water slowly whilst whisking with a wire whisk. You should have a lump-free liquid about the consistency of whole milk. Then, slowly add to the baling gravy mixture, whisking all the while until you get something near the consistency you desire. When the gravy cools, it will thicken.

Regrettably, because of the food police, I must add a footnote. If you stuff your turkey, make sure the internal temperature reaches 170° Fahrenheit. Should you opt not to stuff your bird, please follow the manufacture's directions.