

Selecting the Turkey

Fresh turkeys are easy to find during the holidays and taste immeasurably better than their frozen counterparts, which will have drier meat. If at all possible, choose a fresh bird that was raised free-range and fed organic grain. These turkeys have more flavor than those raised on factory farms and can be ordered from specialty butchers or natural-foods stores. Avoid self-basting turkeys, which are injected with a yellow, fatty substance to keep them moist.

What Size Turkey to Buy

For best results, buy a turkey that weighs more than 10 lb. If you want a smaller bird, a turkey breast is a better choice. To ensure ample servings for Thanksgiving dinner as well as generous leftovers, allow for 1 to 1½ lb. of turkey per person.

Storing the Turkey

Plan to pick up a fresh turkey the day before it is to be roasted and store it in its original wrapping in the coldest part of the refrigerator. Frozen turkeys should also be kept in the refrigerator as they thaw to keep bacteria from multiplying. Allow 3 to 4 hours per pound for turkey to thaw, and keep in mind that it may take 2 to 5 days for a frozen turkey to defrost completely. Cook thawed turkey within 2 days and do not refreeze it or the texture of the meat will suffer.

Stuffing the Turkey

Roasting a bird unstuffed, with dressing baked separately, saves time and effort—and results in a more evenly cooked bird. Dressing cooked in a baking dish contains none of the additional fat that would be absorbed inside the turkey. But for many, a stuffed bird is a Thanksgiving tradition. The stuffing baked in the bird is more moist and tastier than dressing baked separately, as its flavor improves with the added fat. If stuffing a turkey, follow these guidelines:

- Prepare the stuffing just before roasting. This way, warm stuffing can be put into the bird and directly into the oven. If you do make the stuffing ahead, warm it before filling the bird.
- Never put stuffing into a bird the day before (or even several hours before) roasting. The warm stuffing can breed bacteria from the bird.
- Do not pack the stuffing too tightly inside the turkey as it will expand during cooking. Truss the main cavity to hold the stuffing inside.
- Cook the stuffing to 165°F on an instant-read thermometer. If it is not done and the bird is, transfer the stuffing to a baking dish and bake until it tests done.
- If adding meat to a stuffing, cook it thoroughly first.

Flavoring Turkey

Turkey is a delicate, mild-flavored type of poultry whose taste can be enhanced using the following techniques.

Brining: A traditional method of preserving foods before the days of refrigeration, brining is a cooking technique that is regaining popularity. Chefs and home cooks alike are discovering that a good brine bath adds flavor and juiciness to the classic roasted turkey. It has become one of the most popular choices of preparing the turkey.

A brine penetrates into food much more deeply than a marinade. Water from the brine enters each meat cell, making the meat juicier while infusing it with flavor. Brining helps keep the meat juicy without giving it a salty taste—you'll never have to worry about serving a dried-out holiday bird again.

Our Williams-Sonoma premium brine mix includes juniper berries, pieces of Washington State apple, coarse sea salt, California lemon peel, Spanish rosemary, wild French thyme, Turkish bay leaves and California garlic. The aromatic blend, when combined with the natural sweetness of apple cider, is designed to complement your favorite turkey seasonings.

Williams-Sonoma also carries a dry brine mix. This classic blend of fragrant herbs and spices plus kosher salt is simply rubbed on the turkey, then the bird is allowed to rest in the refrigerator. The salt's natural properties draw moisture to the surface of the meat, where it joins with the aromatics to create a savory marinade.

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Continue to cook the turkey legs until the meat is pulling away from the bone and is fork-tender, 30 to 60 minutes more. Transfer the turkey legs, skin side up, to a rack set over a separate foil-lined baking sheet. (The skin on the turkey parts will be pale.)

Preheat a broiler. Broil the turkey parts until the skin is golden brown and crispy, 8 to 10 minutes. Transfer the turkey parts to a carving board and let rest for 5 to 10 minutes before carving. Serves 8 to 10.

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Cider-Bourbon Glazed Roast Turkey with Shallot Gravy

To enhance the flavor, this turkey is first brined in a seasoned saltwater liquid, then the bird is brushed with cider bourbon roasting glaze during the last 30 minutes of cooking. Serve with shallot gravy alongside.

Prepare the turkey brine according to the package instructions. Place the turkey in a brining bag or large stockpot, add the brine and refrigerate for 12 to 36 hours.

Remove the turkey from the brine; discard the brine. Rinse the turkey inside and out with cold water and pat dry with paper towels. Tuck the wings behind the back and place the turkey, breast side up, on a rack in a large roasting pan. Let stand at room temperature for 1 hour.

Position a rack in the lower third of an oven and preheat to 400°F.

Roast the turkey for 30 minutes, then reduce the oven temperature to 325°F. Continue roasting until an instant-read thermometer inserted into the thickest part of the breast, away from the bone, registers 165°F and into the thigh registers 175°F, about 2 hours and 35 minutes more. If the skin begins to brown too quickly, tent the turkey with aluminum foil. During the last 30 minutes of cooking, baste the turkey with the roasting glaze every 10 minutes.

Transfer the turkey to a carving board, cover loosely with foil and let rest for about 30 minutes before carving. Skim the fat off the pan drippings. Add ¾ cup water to the roasting pan and set over medium heat. Boil for 2 to 3 minutes, scraping up the browned bits. Transfer to a bowl.

In a small sauté pan over medium heat, melt the butter. Add the shallots and thyme and cook for 5 minutes. Add the flour and cook, stirring rapidly, for 2 minutes. Rapidly whisk in the reserved pan drippings, the stock and demi-glace. Cook, stirring constantly, until the gravy is thickened, 2 to 3 minutes. Stir in the sherry and season with salt and pepper. Pour the gravy into a warmed sauceboat and serve with the turkey. Serves 14 to 16.

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Willie Bird Turkeys from Williams-Sonoma

Raised on certified organic grains without the use of hormones or antibiotics, and allowed to roam freely outdoors, fresh organic turkeys from the Willie Bird ranch in Sonoma County, California, are among the juiciest and most flavorful birds for your holiday feast.

- Free-range turkeys, raised in the golden, oak-shaded hills of Sonoma County.
- Produced by Willie Bird, a family-owned company that has raised turkeys since 1948.
- Certified by Oregon Tilth to be free of artificial pesticides and chemicals.
- Quantities are limited, so order early; go to williams-sonoma.com.

Ingredients for Cider-Bourbon Glazed Roast Turkey with Shallot Gravy

1 jar (1 lb. 2.2 oz.) turkey brine

1 fresh turkey, 18 to 20 lb., neck, heart and gizzard removed

1 jar (10 oz.) cider bourbon roasting glaze

3 Tbs. unsalted butter

2 shallots, finely diced

1 tsp. finely chopped fresh thyme

3 Tbs. all-purpose flour

2 cups turkey stock, lightly salted, or low-sodium chicken broth

1 Tbs. chicken demi-glace

2 Tbs. dry sherry

Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

Ingredients for Roasted Turkey Breast with Madeira Sauce

2 boneless turkey breast halves, each 2½ to 3 lb.

Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

1 Tbs. chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

2 tsp. chopped fresh thyme

2 Tbs. canola oil

5 Tbs. unsalted butter

1½ cups chicken or turkey stock

2 Tbs. all-purpose flour

2 Tbs. Madeira wine

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Technique Class: The Perfect Turkey

When you are roasting a turkey, the centerpiece of the holiday menu, achieving golden skin, juicy white meat and well-cooked dark meat all at the same time qualifies as an art. The following tips and recipes will help you cook a perfect bird.

Roasted Turkey Breast with Madeira Sauce

Instead of cooking a whole turkey, a turkey breast is a timesaving substitute. And roasting the breast on its own will ensure moist, tender meat. It's a great addition to the meal when you are cooking for a crowd and are concerned that a whole turkey won't provide enough meat for everyone.

Preheat an oven to 350°F.

Season both sides of each turkey breast half with salt and pepper, then sprinkle each side evenly with the parsley and 1 tsp. of the thyme. Lay one breast half, skin side down, on a clean work surface and lay the other breast half, skin side up, on top of the first, with the thickest parts of each breast at opposite ends. When tied together, they should form a roast of even thickness. Cut 6 to 8 pieces of kitchen twine, each about 12 inches long, and tie the turkey breast halves together at 2-inch intervals.

In a small roasting pan or a large ovenproof fry pan over medium-high heat, warm the oil and 3 Tbs. of the butter. When they are nearly smoking, brown the roast for 3 to 4 minutes per side. Transfer the pan to the oven and roast the turkey, turning occasionally, until an instant-read thermometer inserted into the center of the meat registers 165°F, about 2 hours.

Remove the pan from the oven, transfer the turkey to a carving board and cover loosely with aluminum foil. Let rest for 10 to 15 minutes.

Meanwhile, set the roasting pan over medium heat and add the stock and the remaining 1 tsp. thyme. Bring to a simmer and whisk to scrape up any browned bits; keep warm.

In a small saucepan over medium-low heat, melt the remaining 2 Tbs. butter. Whisk in the flour until smooth and blended and cook, whisking constantly, until the mixture thickens and just begins to turn golden, 1 to 2 minutes. Add the stock from the roasting pan along with the Madeira, stirring to combine. Bring to a simmer, whisking constantly. Cook, stirring frequently, until the sauce is thickened, 3 to 4 minutes. Adjust the seasonings with salt and pepper.

Carve the turkey into ¼-inch-thick slices and transfer to a warmed platter. Pour the sauce into a sauceboat and pass alongside the turkey. Serve immediately. Serves 8.

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Maple-Brined Turkey

Ingredients for Maple-Brined Turkey with Gingersnap Gravy

For the maple brine:

1 gallon room-temperature water

2 cups kosher salt

2 cups maple syrup

2 Tbs. peppercorns

1 Tbs. juniper berries

1 Tbs. whole cloves

8 fresh thyme sprigs

4 fresh bay leaves

1 gallon ice water

1 fresh turkey, 10 to 12 lb., neck and giblets removed

4 Tbs. (½ stick) unsalted butter, at room temperature

1 bunch fresh sage

1 yellow onion, roughly chopped

1 large carrot, roughly chopped

2 celery stalks, roughly chopped

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For the gingersnap gravy:

1 quart turkey or chicken stock

½ cup apple cider

Juice of 1 lemon

2 cups crumbled gingersnaps

Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

Maple-Brined Turkey with Gingersnap Gravy

Gingersnaps move from the dessert plate to the gravy boat in this excellent—and unusual—recipe from Chef Chris Bradley. After an overnight bath in a brine sweetened with maple syrup (preferably from Vermont, says Bradley), the turkey is roasted until golden brown. The roasting juices are combined with stock, apple cider and gingersnaps to create a sweet-savory gravy with a pleasant gingery kick.

To make the brine, in a large stockpot over high heat, combine the room-temperature water, salt, maple syrup, peppercorns, juniper berries, cloves, thyme and bay leaves. Bring to a boil, then remove from the heat. Stir in the ice water and let cool to room temperature. Submerge the turkey in the brine, cover and refrigerate overnight.

Remove the turkey from the brine, rinse thoroughly with cold water and pat dry with paper towels. Gently smear the butter under the skin of the breast and thighs and stuff the cavity with the sage. Place the onion, carrot and celery in a single layer in a roasting pan. Place the turkey, breast side up, on top. Let stand at room temperature for 1 hour.

Preheat an oven to 400°F.

Roast the turkey for 30 minutes, then reduce the oven temperature to 325°F. Continue roasting until the skin is golden brown and an instant-read thermometer inserted into the thickest part of the breast, away from the bone, registers 165°F and into the thigh registers 175°F, 1½ to 2 hours more. Transfer the turkey to a carving board, cover loosely with aluminum foil and let rest for 30 minutes before carving.

Meanwhile, make the gingersnap gravy: Skim the excess fat off the pan juices. Transfer the juices, onion, carrot and celery to a saucepan. Add the stock and apple cider and bring to a simmer over medium heat. Strain the mixture, discarding the solids. Return the liquid to the saucepan and stir in the lemon juice and gingersnaps. Bring to a simmer over medium heat and cook, whisking frequently, until the gingersnaps dissolve, 8 to 10 minutes. Whisk vigorously to break up any lumps and season with salt and pepper. Pour the gravy into a warmed sauceboat.

Carve the turkey and pass the gravy at the table. Serves 8 to 12.

Adapted from a recipe by Chef Chris Bradley, Gramercy Tavern, New York City.

Buttermilk Brined Turkey

Soaking the turkey in a saltwater brine produces tender, juicy meat. In this recipe our brine mixture also includes buttermilk, which adds flavor to the turkey and helps keep the meat moist.

In a small saucepan over high heat, combine the turkey brine and water and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer, stirring often, until the brine dissolves, 5 to 10 minutes. Let the brine mixture cool to room temperature. In a large pot, stir together the brine mixture and buttermilk.

Rinse the turkey inside and out with cold water and place in a large brining bag. Carefully pour the buttermilk brine mixture into the bag. Seal the bag, pressing out the air, and place in a large stockpot or other container large enough to hold the turkey. Refrigerate for 24 to 36 hours, turning occasionally.

Remove the turkey from the brine; discard the brine. Rinse the turkey inside and out with cold water and pat dry with paper towels. Trim off and discard the excess fat. Place the turkey, breast side up, on a rack in a large roasting pan. Rub the skin evenly with the butter. Truss the turkey as desired using kitchen twine. Let the turkey stand at room temperature for 1 hour.

Position a rack in the lower third of an oven and preheat to 400°F.

Roast the turkey for 30 minutes, then reduce the oven temperature to 325°F. Continue roasting, basting every 30 minutes with the pan juices. If the breast begins to cook too quickly, tent it loosely with aluminum foil. After about 2 hours of total roasting time, begin testing for doneness by inserting an instant-read thermometer into the thickest part of the breast and thigh, away from the bone. The breast should register 165°F and the thigh, 175°F. Total roasting time should be 3 to 4 hours.

Transfer the turkey to a carving board, cover loosely with foil and let rest for 20 to 30 minutes before carving. Serves 12 to 14.

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Turkey Confit

This recipe offers a creative variation on the traditional holiday bird. A whole turkey is cut into parts and braised in a slow cooker until fork-tender. Just before serving, the pieces are broiled to produce an appealingly crispy skin.

Cut the turkey into 2 half breasts and 2 whole legs. Rub 2 Tbs. turkey paste under the skin of each turkey part and place on a baking sheet. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least overnight or up to 16 hours.

Place the legs, skin side up, in a slow cooker. Place the breasts, skin side up, on top of the legs. Add the duck fat, thyme, bay leaves and bacon. Add enough canola oil to cover the turkey parts by 1 inch. Cover and cook on high according to the manufacturer’s instructions for 2½ hours. Transfer the turkey breasts, skin side up, to a rack set over a foil-lined baking sheet.

Flavoring Turkey

Ingredients for Buttermilk Brined Turkey

1½ cups turkey brine

1 quart water

4 quarts buttermilk

1 fresh turkey, 16 to 18 lb., neck, heart and gizzard removed (reserved, if desired)

4 Tbs. (½ stick) unsalted butter, at room temperature

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For the turkey brine: In a large stockpot over high heat, combine the water, salt, maple syrup, peppercorns, juniper berries, cloves, thyme and bay leaves. Bring to a boil, then remove from the heat. Stir in the ice water and let cool to room temperature. Submerge the turkey in the brine, cover and refrigerate overnight.

For the buttermilk: In a large stockpot over high heat, combine the water, salt, maple syrup, peppercorns, juniper berries, cloves, thyme and bay leaves. Bring to a boil, then remove from the heat. Stir in the ice water and let cool to room temperature. In a large pot, stir together the brine mixture and buttermilk.

For the turkey rub: In a small saucepan over high heat, combine the butter, sage, thyme, bay leaves and peppercorns. Bring to a boil, then remove from the heat. Stir in the ice water and let cool to room temperature. In a large pot, stir together the brine mixture and buttermilk.

Flavor Injecting: Another way to add flavor is with a flavor injector, a kitchen tool used to insert marinade deep into the meat of the bird. Injectors are stainless-steel, easy-to-handle syringes filled with liquid marinade. When the needle pierces the turkey skin, the liquid is plunged throughout the flesh, keeping the turkey moist during cooking and imparting complex layers of flavor. For a delicious combination, try Cajun spices blended with melted butter.

Ingredients for Turkey Confit

1 fresh turkey, 10 to 12 lb.

8 Tbs. turkey seasoning paste

12 oz. duck fat

4 fresh thyme sprigs

2 bay leaves

2 bacon slices

Canola oil as needed

Roasting

One of the oldest and simplest forms of cooking, roasting refers to cooking food in an uncovered pan in the dry heat of an oven. One of the most appealing qualities of roasted foods is the beautiful and delicious brown crusts that develop in the oven. Contact with heat causes the sugars and proteins in food to form compounds on the surface similar to caramel, forming a flavorful crust. Simultaneously, the steady oven heat slowly penetrates to the center of the food, which remains juicy. This irresistible counterpoint of caramelized crust and tender interior makes roasting a favorite cooking method for turkey. Follow these basic steps:

- Bring the turkey as close as possible to room temperature. Remove it from the refrigerator 1 hour before roasting, but no longer. This is the maximum time allowed for food safety.

- Use a high-quality roasting pan. The best materials for roasting pans are heavy-gauge stainless steel, anodized or enameled aluminum, or enameled steel or cast iron. These metals ensure even cooking and keep the bottom of the food and the pan drippings from burning. Also, heavy-gauge metals allow for stovetop searing and deglazing of pan juices for sauces and gravies. Plain, untreated aluminum is not a good choice for roasting pans because it can react with acidic ingredients such as tomatoes, vinegar and wine, resulting in discolored food with a metallic flavor.

- Once you begin to roast your turkey, using a leave-in thermometer inserted into the thickest part of the breast or thigh, away from the bone, will provide the most consistent results. The breast should register 165°F and the thigh, 175°F. This tool provides the comfort of knowing exactly when the turkey has reached the desired temperature without consistently having to pierce the flesh with an instant-read thermometer, thus losing juices in the process.

- For an unstuffed turkey: Some cooks roast the turkey with the breast side down for the first one-third of the cooking time. This increases the rate at which the thighs cook, so they will be done at about the same time as the breast.

- For a stuffed turkey: Loosely cover the breast with a double-thick piece of aluminum foil for the first two-thirds of the cooking time. This slows the rate at which the breast cooks, so it will be done at about the same time as the thighs

- Before carving the roasted turkey, allow the turkey to rest for 20 to 30 minutes. You can loosely cover the turkey with aluminum foil, but be sure that steam can escape or the skin will become wet and not remain crisp. Resting time allows for some of the juices to be absorbed back into the meat, making it more moist and easier to carve.

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