

Diane's Blog
11.18.2009

Turkey Virgins and Giblet Gravy

On my recent sweep through Texas, teaching Thanksgiving classes at the Central Market Cooking Schools in Houston, San Antonio, Ft. Worth, Dallas and Austin, I shared my expertise on cooking the big Thanksgiving meal. I had "turkey virgins" in every class – those hesitantly raising their hands to indicate that this was their first time cooking a Thanksgiving dinner and roasting a turkey. In San Antonio three of them sat in the front row. In Dallas, two sat in the back row and I urged them to move up to front.

I remember cooking my first Thanksgiving dinner. I, too, was a turkey virgin. My husband, Greg, and I were living in Chicago in our first apartment after being married. The apartment was on the third floor of a walk up, barely five-hundred square feet and the kitchen was tiny with almost no counter space. We bought a rolling butcher block table and made do. We had an ancient and well-used four burner gas range with one oven and a broiler on the bottom. Greg was in graduate school, I was working, and it wasn't possible to travel to either family's home for the Thanksgiving weekend.

For the two of us I bought a twelve-pound turkey. It seems like a reasonable size – small relative to what was available at the grocery store. Fortunately, it was fresh, or I am sure I would have opened a half-thawed bird on Thanksgiving morning.

Who knew it takes 3 to 4 days for a frozen turkey to thaw in the refrigerator?

I bought an inexpensive, speckled black-enamel roasting pan and used a wire cake rack as my roasting rack. Positioning the turkey in the kitchen sink, I slit the vacuum-sealed turkey bag and pulled out the turkey. I looked in the big cavity of the bird and found the neck. I put it in the roasting pan. I rinsed the bird, patted it dry, rubbed it with melted butter and seasoned it with salt and pepper. I tied the legs together and plopped it breast-side up in the roasting pan. Into the oven it went.

Next step, I was on to stuffing, cranberry sauce, baked yams, and gravy. Greg was helping, keeping up with the sink full of dishes and chopping vegetables as I sautéed and simmered. I called my mother several times to check on the stuffing recipe and made sure I could reinterpret her cranberry relish from the old ways of grinding it in a counter-top, hand-crank meat grinder to the new food processor method.

My final, panicked call had to do with gravy. I had pan drippings and a roast turkey neck to work with, but somehow my turkey didn't come with a heart, giblets, and liver. I felt ripped off, let alone the poor turkey. Just think – he could have been on the path to Oz with Dorothy seeking his inner organs from the great wizard.

My mother told me the bag of giblets was in the neck cavity of the bird.

"What neck cavity?"

“The smaller opening opposite the tail and main cavity.”

“Yikes, who knew?” I never really studied turkey anatomy, let alone that the processors bundle all the organs in a little paper-like bag and shove it into the small neck cavity. And there they were – all steamy-brown and cooked inside the bag.

No, we didn’t have giblet gravy on our first Thanksgiving. We had gravy with chopped neck meat. It was pretty good and so was the roast turkey. And ALL those leftovers – yeah! – they were great for the first few days and then this turkey virgin learned just how many people a twelve pound turkey can feed – and it is way more than two.