

Turkey, dressed up or dressed down

SUMMARY: WHETHER YOUR STYLE IS NO-FRILLS OR FIVE-STAR, HERE'S HOW TO MAKE T-DAY A SUCCESS

Thanksgiving is truly my favorite holiday of the year. As much as I enjoy the presents and decorated tree at Christmas, cooking a traditional Thanksgiving meal is what pleases me most: the homey fall flavors, the smells that fill the house all day long, the long buffet loaded with food, and of course, the big piece of pumpkin pie. I can't wait to invite friends and family, plan the menu and then cook this festive meal.

Thanksgiving is so much my holiday that I've written a cookbook on it. My goal was to share my favorite recipes, tried-and-true techniques and tips on planning and organizing that I've developed through the years as a professional cook and author. Every year I travel around the country and teach Thanksgiving cooking classes, so I've learned what delights and what challenges the home cook trying to pull together the big meal with the! big bird and all the trimmings.

One thing I know is that for a lot of people, cooking a turkey can be intimidating. You only do it once a year, at most, and there's always a lot of pressure on the cook to "perform" for this big day, especially when it's your first time cooking the meal. You can get caught up in worries about dry breast meat, bland stuffing or lumpy gravy.

For these cooks, and for cooks who simply may not have a lot of time, I'm offering a "dressed down" version of turkey, stuffing and gravy --classic versions that are absolutely terrific but straightforward.

But I also know that plenty of cooks are more like me and get a kick out of going all out for this fall feast. So I'm also providing a "dressed up" version, a little something extra for the adventurous cook who likes to spend time in the kitchen exploring new techniques and flavor combinations.

Planning ahead for success

As we all know, it's not just the recipes that lead ! to success when cooking a big meal. Buying ingredients wisely, creating an efficient plan of attack and having the right equipment are critical. Here are my top 10 tips for making Thanksgiving a more relaxing and satisfying day.

1. Order your turkey today!
2. If you're buying a frozen bird, allow three to four days to let it thaw in the refrigerator. If you're buying a fresh bird, try to pick it up on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. Fresh birds are commercially refrigerated right above the freezing level so they often have icy juices in the chest cavity. A day or two in a home refrigerator helps.
3. Plan ahead which recipes you're going to make, and make a grocery list. Making only one trip to the grocery store saves more energy for cooking.
4. If your Thanksgiving is a joint cooking effort and you're the organizer and host, make sure everyone knows what they're bringing and whether they should bring along serving dishes and utensils.
5. Check to make sure you have the kitchen equipment you need plus the right amount of dinner plates, dessert plates, silverware, etc. Buy or borrow if need be.

6. Speaking of equipment, if you're making the turkey, the most critical piece of equipment is the roasting rack. I am a huge fan of nonstick, V-shaped roasting racks. They're the sturdiest, they cradle the bird, and the skin won't stick. For years I used an inexpensive roasting pan and it worked just fine. It's the rack that makes a difference.

7. Another important piece of equipment for the turkey-maker is a thermometer. A calibrated thermometer takes the guesswork out of whether the turkey is done. My favorite is a dial-style, instant-read thermometer (not the digital version). Probe-style thermometers that stay in the bird and have a wire that runs from the probe to a read-out on the counter are great, but they are an investment. Read the directions before you buy; some brands are easier to program than others. My favorite probe thermometer is made by Polder. (See the Ask! FOODday feature on Page XX about meat thermometers.)

8. As much as you might think you don't have time for this, clean out your refrigerator before Thanksgiving. The turkey and other refrigerated items take up a lot of room.

9. Make a to-do list separate from the grocery list and try to schedule your time. Plenty of chopping and kitchen tasks can be done ahead.

10. Set the table the night before Thanksgiving. It makes the day so much more relaxed. Oops, number 11 --and most important --enjoy the day and celebrate the true spirit of the holiday.

The Recipes:

Simple, Classic Roast Turkey

This picture-perfect turkey will have skin that is crisp and golden hued, the meat will be moist (yes, even the breast meat!), and the flavor will be divine because you took these simple steps to prepare and roast the turkey.

1 turkey (14 to 16 pounds)

Kosher or sea salt

1 large yellow onion (about 12 ounces), coarsely chopped

2 large carrots, peeled and cut into 1-inch lengths

2 large ribs celery, cut into 1-inch lengths

4 large fresh sage leaves

3 sprigs fresh thyme

1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, melted

Equipment

Large roasting pan

Non-stick roasting rack, preferably V-shaped Cotton kitchen twine Small metal skewer or round toothpick to secure the neck skin Pastry brush Meat thermometer Aluminum foil Carving board with a moat (to catch the juices) Carving knife and meat fork

1. To prepare the turkey for roasting, remove the turkey from the refrigerator one hour before you plan to cook it. Remove the turkey from its wrapping. Remove the neck and bag of giblets from the main and neck cavity of the bird. Set aside. Trim off the tail and set aside. Pull off any pockets of fat attached to the skin near the opening of the chest cavity and discard. Rinse the turkey inside and out under cold running water and pat dry with paper towels. Have ready a large roasting pan with a non-stick roasting rack, preferably V-shaped, set in the pan.

2. Thirty minutes before you plan to roast the turkey, position an oven rack on the lowest level in the oven. Pre-

heat the oven to 500°F.

3. While the oven is heating, sprinkle the inside of the chest and neck cavities with a little salt and pepper. Put half of the onion, carrots, and celery inside the chest cavity. Scatter the rest evenly on the bottom of the roasting pan. Stuff the sage and two of the thyme sprigs inside the cavity. Put the third sprig of thyme in the roasting pan. Add 1 ½ cups of water to the pan.

4. Tuck the turkey wing tips back and under the wings so they lay close to the chest. Cut a 12-inch piece of kitchen twine and bring the legs together, wrapping the twine around the ends (knobs) of the legs to secure them. Tie a knot and trim any extra length of string. Use a small metal skewer or toothpick to secure the neck skin so it doesn't flop open. Use a pastry brush to brush the turkey with half of the butter. Sprinkle the turkey on all sides with a little salt and pepper.

5. Place the turkey, breast side up, on the rack. Roast for 30 minutes. Lower the oven temperature to 350°F. Baste the turkey with the pan juices, and roast an additional 30 minutes. Baste with pan juices. Continue to roast, basting with pan juices after 45 minutes. After another 45 minutes, baste with the remaining butter. Tent the turkey loosely with foil if the breast is browning too much. The turkey is done when an instant-read thermometer registers 170°F when inserted into the thickest part of the thigh. When the internal temperature of the turkey reaches 125°F, the turkey is about 1 hour away from being done. (Roasting times will vary, depending on the size of the bird, its temperature when it went into the oven, and your particular oven and the accuracy of the thermostat.)

6. When the turkey is done, transfer it to a carving board or serving platter, and cover the breast loosely with aluminum foil. Allow the turkey to rest for 15 to 30 minutes before carving to let the juices set. Warm the platter you plan to serve the turkey on.

7. To carve the turkey, untie the bird and remove the skewer or toothpick from the neck skin. Using a sharp carving knife and meat fork, cut down between the thigh and body until you feel bone. Twist the leg and thigh a little, pulling it away from the breast until you see the thigh joint. Now cut through the joint to separate the thigh from the body. Cut the joint where the leg meets the thigh. Repeat on the other side. Now you have legs and thighs ready for a warm platter. To carve the breast meat, start at the keel bone that runs along the top of the breast. Angle the knife and cut thin slices of breast meat from one side of the bird. Continue until you reach the rib cage. Lay slices of breast meat in overlapping fashion down the center of the platter. Place the legs and thighs along the side. Cut additional breast meat from the other side, if needed. Separate the wings from the breast, if desired. Serve immediately. Tent the rest of the turkey with foil to keep warm. Remove the rest of the turkey from the carcass later for some fine leftovers.

Serves at least 12 and up to 20.

Dressed-Up, Classic Roast Turkey

Taking a little extra time to make a garlic-herb butter and then rubbing it between the flesh and skin of the turkey infuses the bird with terrific flavor all the way through the meat. Instead of simply rubbing the turkey on the outside with butter, our dressed-up bird gets the spa package treatment and is massaged, moisturized, and packed with flavor under the skin.

Begin by making the Garlic-Herb Butter (recipe follows) and then follow these steps to ready the turkey for roasting. (Note: For our dressed-up version you won't be using the stick of melted butter in the recipe above,

but will use a little olive oil to rub on the outside of the bird before it roasts.)

Prepare the turkey and preheat the oven as directed in steps 1 and 2 above. While the oven is heating, sprinkle the inside of the chest and neck cavities with a little salt and pepper. Starting at the neck cavity, carefully slide your fingers between the skin and flesh to loosen the skin from the breast and drumsticks, creating a pocket. Spread and rub the Garlic-Herb Butter evenly over the breasts and drumsticks. Put half of the onion, carrots, and celery inside the chest cavity. Scatter the rest evenly on the bottom of the roasting pan. Stuff the sage and two of the thyme sprigs inside the cavity. Put the third sprig of thyme in the roasting pan. Add 1 ½ cups of water to the pan.

Tuck the turkey wing tips back and under the wings so they lay close to the chest. Cut a 12-inch piece of kitchen twine and bring the legs together, wrapping the twine around the ends (knobs) of the legs to secure them. Tie a knot and trim any extra length of string. Use a small metal skewer or toothpick to secure the neck skin so it doesn't flop open. Rub the turkey on all sides lightly with a little olive oil. Sprinkle the turkey on all sides with a little salt and pepper.

Follow steps 5 through 7 to roast, carve, and serve the turkey.

Garlic-Herb Butter

This butter can be made while the oven is preheating. Or, plan ahead and make it a day or two in advance, refrigerate it, and then bring the butter to room temperature.

1 large clove garlic
1/4 teaspoon kosher or sea salt
Pinch freshly ground black pepper
6 tablespoons (¾ stick) unsalted butter, at room temperature
1 tablespoon minced fresh thyme leaves
1 tablespoon minced fresh sage leaves
1 tablespoon minced fresh parsley

In the workbowl of a food processor fitted with the metal blade, mince the garlic with the salt and pepper. Add the butter and process to combine. Scatter the herbs over top and process just until the herbs are evenly combined. Set aside until ready to use, or transfer to a covered container and refrigerate.

Makes about 1/2 cup

Simple Herb-Giblet Gravy

Making an easy turkey stock while the turkey roasts simplifies the gravy-making process. Note that the liver is not used when making stock because it turns the stock bitter. The liver can be browned, chopped, and added to the stuffing, or served to a four-legged friend as a holiday treat!

Turkey neck, tail, and giblets (gizzard and heart only)

2 sprigs fresh thyme
4 sprigs fresh parsley
1 bay leaf
6 black peppercorns
2 tablespoons all-purpose flour, if needed
Salt

Freshly ground black pepper

1. While the turkey is roasting, begin the gravy by first making a turkey stock. Put the giblets in a medium saucepan. Add the thyme, parsley, bay leaf, and peppercorns, and then add water to cover. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat, and then turn the heat to low. Skim any brown foam that rises to the top. Simmer the stock, partially covered, for 1 hour. Pour the stock through a fine-mesh strainer set over a bowl or 4-cup glass measure. Discard the solids. Set the stock aside, and when the fat rises to the top, skim it.

2. While the turkey rests, make the gravy: Pour the vegetables and pan drippings through a strainer set over a medium saucepan. Scoop the vegetables from the cavities of the turkey and place in the strainer. Use the back of a spoon to press down on the softened vegetables, extracting as much liquid as possible, and pressing the solids through the strainer. Bring this mixture to a boil, skimming any fat that comes to the surface. Add enough reserved turkey stock to make about 2 cups of gravy. Boil until reduced slightly. If the gravy needs to be thickened, put the flour in a 1-cup measure, add a small amount of the simmering gravy, and blend until smooth. Slowly pour this mixture into the gravy in the saucepan and whisk until thickened, about 2 minutes. Transfer to a warm, small bowl or sauceboat to serve.

Makes about 2 cups

Simple and Savory Dressing with Fresh Herbs

Is it called stuffing or dressing when it comes to the favorite holiday side dish? The same mixture of toasted bread cubes, sautéed vegetables, and herbs which are bound together with stock and a little beaten egg is called stuffing when it is stuffed into the turkey and dressing when it is cooked in a pan separate from the bird. To make it easy on the cook and assure that the turkey doesn't get overcooked, making this recipe as "dressing" is the preferred method.

5 tablespoon unsalted butter, softened
10 cups unseasoned dry bread cubes
1 large yellow onion (about 12 ounces), chopped
2 large carrots, peeled and chopped
2 large ribs celery, chopped
1/2 cup minced fresh parsley
1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves
1 tablespoon minced fresh sage
1 teaspoon salt
Freshly ground pepper
large eggs, lightly beaten
4 cups canned low-sodium chicken broth

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Coat a deep, 9-by-13-inch baking pan with 1 tablespoon of the butter. Place the bread cubes in a very large mixing bowl.
2. In a 10-inch sauté pan, melt the remaining 4 tablespoons of butter over medium-high heat. Swirl to coat the pan, and add the onion, carrots, and celery. Sauté, stirring frequently, until soft and lightly browned, about 5 minutes. Add the parsley, thyme, sage, salt, and a few grinds of pepper, and sauté 1 minute longer. Add this mixture to the bread cubes, and stir to combine.
3. Add the beaten eggs and stock to the bowl, and mix well. Place the bread mixture in the prepared pan and bake, uncovered, until the top is lightly browned and crusty, about 1 hour.
If you have room in your oven, bake the dressing while the turkey is roasting. Otherwise, bake it beforehand and reheat it once the turkey is out.

Serves 12

Dressed-Up Dressing with Italian Sausage, Mushroom, and Fresh Herbs

Two steps are changed from the basic recipe to dress-up and make this dressing extra-special. First, the bread cubes are made from scratch from wonderfully textured, full-flavored artisan bread. (This can be done one or two days before Thanksgiving, if time permits.) Second, we've added sausage and mushrooms to the dressing. Look for savory and richly flavored link sausages from a local artisan sausage maker, if possible. The sausage is browned first and then the mushrooms are sautéed in the same pan using some of the flavorful fat. The browned bits of sausage clinging to the sides of the pan mix with the mushrooms, so that all these tasty morsels go into the dressing. With the addition of sautéed vegetables and fresh herbs, this is blissful eating.

Homemade Bread Cubes

1 (1 1/2- to 2-pound) loaf of artisan or peasant-style bread, either white or sourdough Preheat the oven to 400°F. Trim the crusts from the loaf, cut the bread into 1/2-inch cubes, and spread them out on two rimmed baking sheets. Toast the cubes until dry, and just beginning to brown, about 10 minutes. Cool completely and store in a covered container until ready to use. (To save a step and a container to wash, place the toasted bread cubes in the large bowl you plan to mix the stuffing in and then cover it with foil.)

Savory Sausage and Mushrooms

2 tablespoons olive oil

3/4 pound mild Italian sausages

1 pound cremini mushrooms, wiped or brushed clean, stems trimmed, and quartered

In a 10-inch sauté pan, heat the oil over medium-high heat, and swirl to coat the pan. Cook the sausages until nicely browned on all sides. Remove and let cool. Drain all but 3 tablespoons of the fat. Add the mushrooms to the pan and sauté, stirring frequently, until lightly browned, about 4 minutes. Add to the bread in the bowl. Slice the sausages into 1/4-inch rounds and add to the bread mixture.

Follow step 1 in the basic recipe to preheat the oven and prepare the baking pan. Proceed with steps 2 and 3 to complete the dressing. (Save clean-up and use the same sauté pan to cook the vegetables.)