ARTICLE / YUMMLY COOKING STORY

How to Cook a Turkey: Your A-Z Guide to Buy, Prep, Cook, and Carve

Don't play chicken with your Thanksgiving centerpiece! Whether it's your first turkey or your 14th, this step-by-step guide will help ensure that the star of the holiday table comes out perfectly.

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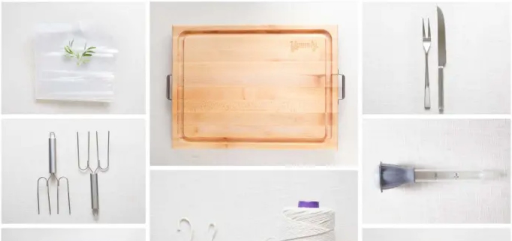
It's no time to wing it when your family comes home to roost for the holidays. But with a little preparation and knowledge, you can be sure not to run afoul of a tasty Thanksgiving dinner. OK, OK ... enough with the bad poultry puns. (But couldn't we all use a little levity before the family descends on our homes?) Pulling off a Norman-Rockwell-style Thanksgiving is no small feat, but if you break it all down into parts, it's definitely doable! So let's start with the big guy: how to get a nice juicy turkey with crispy brown skin. If you've already got the basics down, skip ahead to our FAQs to get the answers to your most burning (or should I say golden brown?) questions.

The most important step in cooking a perfect turkey happens before you ever turn on the oven. Some initial planning — including taking stock of your supplies, choosing your Thanksgiving recipes, and gathering your ingredients — goes a long way toward avoiding surprises that can leave you scrambling. While no one can plan ahead for Uncle Larry's political ramblings, there are a few things you'll want to check on before getting started.

First Things First: Check Your Supplies



Your must haves (and a couple nice-to-haves) for turkey time.

Take stock of your equipment and be sure to get everything you need out of storage before the big day. You may need some or all of the following:

- **Roasting pan and roasting rack.** *Note*: While it may be tempting to use a disposable pan to save money and avoid extra clean-up, the hidden cost is the less sturdy aluminum from which it's made. Consider the risk of splashing hot basting liquid as the pan buckles under the weight of the turkey, or worse, envision dropping your turkey on the floor. If you plan to make turkeys every year, consider investing in a sturdy roasting pan; otherwise, be sure to stabilize your disposable pan on a baking sheet so you can transfer it in and out of the oven with ease.
- **Turkey baster.**
- **Meat thermometer.** Look for an instant-read thermometer or an oven-safe meat thermometer with a cable that allows you to continuously monitor the temperature of the turkey.
- **Carving knife and fork.**
- **Large cutting board with grooves to catch the juices.**
- *Optional:* **cooking twine for trussing, turkey lifters, brining bags, fat separator.**

Consider Your Recipe

Sure, you'll need to know what recipe you're using in order to make your grocery list, but there are other important reasons to decide on your turkey plans well in advance. Due to its size and long cooking time, you're generally going to be planning your entire meal around the turkey. Unless you're fortunate enough to have a double oven, the turkey roasting temperature will be a key consideration in choosing your side-dish recipes. Likewise, the timing of the meal will be largely dependent on when your turkey is done.

A butterflied turkey cooks quick — and takes up less space in the oven.

There are some alternatives you can consider to keep your turkey from holding your oven hostage, though. A butterflied (or "spatchcocked") turkey will cook more quickly than a whole bird, as will cooking a turkey in pieces. Both of these methods have the added advantage of freeing up space in your oven; the bird is smaller when it's broken down. Cooking for a smaller crowd? Consider a turkey breast as opposed to a whole bird. Alternately, you can grill, smoke, or deep fry a turkey to free up your oven altogether. We've put together a list of our favorite recipes using these various less-traditional approaches at the end of the article to help you out.

Pick Your Bird

For the best turkey, opt for an untreated, vegetarian-fed bird.

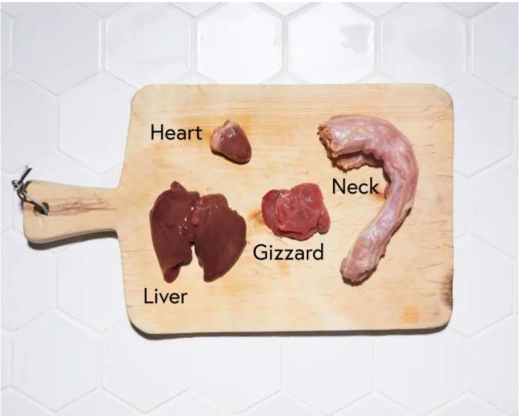
To end up with the tastiest Thanksgiving turkey possible, the turkey you buy is as important as the recipe you choose. Here are the basic questions to consider:

- **How much turkey do you need?** The rule of thumb is one pound per person, or one and a half pounds to make sure you have leftovers.
- **What type of turkey is best?** Generally speaking, you do get what you pay for. The best-tasting birds are typically vegetarian-fed and untreated. Read your labels carefully. Treated birds are sometimes described as "self-basting" and have been injected with a saline solution that ostensibly makes for a juicier bird. Treated turkeys are more likely to have texture issues, may become soggy, and can become overly salty depending on how you prepare your bird. Kosher turkeys are also prepared with salt; for that reason, never brine a treated or Kosher turkey.
- **Fresh or frozen?** While purists will tell you that fresh turkey is better, I don't find there to be a big difference in quality nowadays. The biggest difference is that of convenience. Depending on the size of your turkey, you may need to buy a frozen turkey up to a week in advance to give it enough time to defrost. Fresh turkeys may still be partially frozen as they're stored at cold temperatures, so don't be afraid to squeeze your bird in the store to get a sense of how hard it is. Either way, you'll want to make sure your bird is completely thawed the night before you cook it. Read on for defrosting tips.

Prep The Turkey: Defrost It WAY Ahead Of Time

Before you can proceed with any turkey recipe, you need to make sure your turkey is completely thawed. A frozen turkey can take a significant amount of time to defrost — my 12-pound turkey took a full four days. If you plan on brining a turkey (or using a "dry-brine," or salt rub), you'll need to add another day to the process. Defrosting should always be done in your refrigerator, never at room temperature (dangerous bacteria *love* room temperature). Expect defrosting to take about 24 hrs for every 4-5 lbs. In a pinch, you can speed up the process by submerging the bird in cold water changed every 30 minutes. Making sure your turkey is fully defrosted is absolutely critical if you're planning to deep fry it: Frozen turkey is a major risk factor for starting fires with your fryer. Just Google "Frozen Turkey in Deep Fryer" and watch some of the YouTube videos that pop up, if you're wondering exactly how major a risk.

Once defrosted, remove the packaging and the giblets/neck from the turkey. Note that the neck is often in the main cavity, and the giblets in the neck cavity — so be sure to check both ends to make sure you've gotten everything! Do save these for your gravy and/or stock (with the exception of the liver); they can also be frozen for use at a later date if you don't need them right away. Food safety experts recommend that you don't rinse your turkey, as the splashing water is actually more likely to spread bacteria around your kitchen.



Save your giblets — minus the liver — for your gravy.

To Brine Or Not To Brine?

Turkey needs salt to bring out its flavor. This can be as simple as seasoning with salt and black pepper some time before cooking, or a more time-consuming bath in saltwater brine. In both cases, the salt is absorbed into the turkey and begins to break down the protein, leading to a tender, juicy bird. If your turkey is kosher or has been treated, you'll want to skip this step, as it's already been treated with salt.

The basic brining process is to boil seasonings in saltwater to create a flavorful brine, bring it back to room temperature, and immerse your turkey in it for 24 hours. Special brining bags can be bought for this purpose, or you can simply use a clean bucket. There are many recipes out there; my favorite is **this one**. (Although I'm tempted to try this **pickle brine**!) In my experience, brining does indeed deliver a flavorful and moist turkey; however, it also can be messy. Having personally sprung a leak in a brining bag, I'll be going with a bucket (or double-bagging) this year. Whether you use a bag, a bucket or a large pot, you'll need to make enough room in your refrigerator to hold the turkey and brine while it works its magic.

Heavy-duty brining bags make prepping your bird a breeze.

An alternative is what's known as "dry brining," which involves rubbing a salt mixture all over the turkey. With this method, you leave the salted turkey uncovered in the refrigerator for 1-3 days. This allows the skin to dry, which helps produce crispy skin. While dry brining saves the hassle and mess of making and using a wet brine, know that salt will initially draw out the juices from your turkey (which are then reabsorbed — yum, flavor!). Put your salt-rubbed bird in a pan while it rests, or you'll have a mess in your refrigerator. With the dry brining method, salt both the outside of the bird and under the skin, and follow the recipe for how long to let your salt-coated turkey sit.

Inside The Salt Shaker: What You Need to Know About Salt

- Salt is salt is salt … right? No! Most turkey recipes call for kosher salt, but you should be aware that there's a big difference between the two leading American brands of kosher salt. Good recipes will specify which brand. Either is fine, but you'll want to keep the following ratio in mind: 3 Tbsp. Diamond Crystal kosher salt = 4.5 tsp. Morton kosher salt. When in doubt, start with the lesser amount, and increase according to taste.

- Some birds already have salt in them, either through injection or pre-salting. Read the label carefully ("self-basting" or "kosher" turkeys have added salt), and check the ingredients list. If it shows anything besides "turkey," you've got a treated bird, and shouldn't add additional salt.
- The more salt in your bird, the more salt in the pan drippings. Taste as you go when making gravy, and substitute or dilute with broth if your drippings are too salty. I learned this one the hard way!

Get Ready For The Oven

Thanksgiving Day often starts with an early wake-up call to preheat the oven and get the turkey inside. But before you do, there a few final steps of prep that need to be done (and a few more decisions to make!)

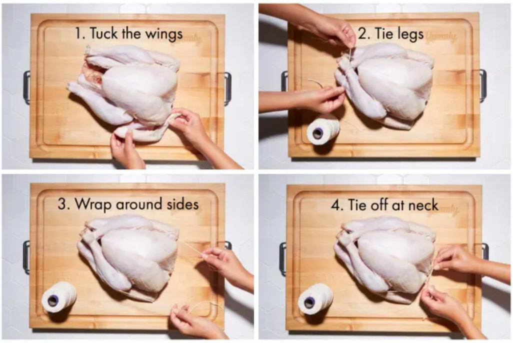
Remember: *dry skin = crispy skin.* Pat your turkey with paper towels to get it as dry as possible. Letting your turkey sit uncovered in the refrigerator for an hour or two while you start prepping other dishes can further dry out the skin. Drier skin will also help any butter and seasonings stick to the surface of your bird.

Slather your turkey with plenty of butter for golden-brown skin.

If dry skin is the key to crispness, then fat is the key to browning. Most recipes will instruct you to slather the bird with butter or olive oil, being sure to get under the skin as well as on the surface. You'll want to season your bird now as well. At minimum, add salt and black pepper to the cavity of the bird; better still is to add aromatics such as onion, herbs, and/or citrus.

The turkey should come to room temperature before you start cooking, so plan to have it out of the fridge at least an hour before you want it to go in the oven. Place your turkey breast side up, and put it on a roasting rack so that the bottom doesn't get soggy. Keep about 1/4 inch of liquid (wine, broth, or water are all fine) in the bottom of the pan to keep the juices from burning and to give you plenty of juice to baste the turkey with.

What's All The Truss About?



How to truss a turkey in four simple steps.

For a long time, I assumed that trussing poultry was both tricky and necessary — not so in either case! In fact, leaving a turkey untrussed can help the dark meat cook faster … which can be a boon if you're trying not to overcook the more delicate breast meat. So why do people truss a turkey? The two primary reasons are for presentation (it results in a neater looking bird) and to help hold in the stuffing. Which brings us to your next big decision:

To Stuff Or Not To Stuff?

Whether you fill your turkey with stuffing or bake it on the side is often a matter of personal preference (and heated debate). Stuffing cooked inside the turkey may come out moister and more flavorful as it gets basted by the turkey drippings while it cooks. There are a lot of reasons to forego this particular tradition, however. First of all, a stuffed bird will take longer to cook, adding 30-60 minutes to your total cook time. The longer it takes to cook your turkey, the greater the chance of the breast meat drying out. No need to sacrifice the quality of your turkey when you can make a delicious stuffing on the side.

There are also important food safety concerns, as many people forget to check that the stuffing has come up to the required internal temperature of 165° F. All those flavorful juices basting the stuffing can harbor bacteria if not brought up to a high enough temperature. Food poisoning is no joke, and is not the kind of Thanksgiving memories you were hoping for! For this reason, cooking the stuffing inside the turkey is not recommended by the USDA.

While it's true that stuffing will expand while it cooks, as far as I can tell, the fear of stuffing causing your turkey to explode is little more than rural legend. But after a lifetime of hearing my grandmother fret about turkey combustion, I'm not taking any chances.

Bottom line, stuff the turkey at your own risk. If you must, be sure it's all cooked to 165° F, don't stuff your bird the night before, and don't overpack the cavity.

*Want to learn more about stuffing? Read our companion piece, **Stuff It! A Thanksgiving Primer for Getting Turkey Dressing Right**.*

Getting To First Baste

Wait to begin basting for an hour, to let the skin crisp up.

With prep complete, you're ready to pop your turkey in the oven! Place the turkey in the oven with the legs towards to back to help the darker meat cook faster (the back of the oven is hotter than the front). To help brown and crisp the skin, many recipes will call for you to start your turkey at a relatively high oven temperature (anywhere from 425-500° F) for the first 15-30 minutes. During this initial stage of cooking, avoid opening the door to your oven, and don't start basting. You want the high heat to finish drying out the skin so it can develop a satisfying crunch. After this first high-heat blast, you'll then drop the temperature to 325-350° F. Once the turkey has been in the oven for an hour, you can start basting once every 30 minutes.

How Do I Know When My Turkey Is Done?

You'll hear a lot of ways to test your turkey for doneness, but the answer to this one is cut and dry (unlike your slowly roasting turkey). **Take the temperature with an accurate meat thermometer.** It should read 165°F when taken in the thickest part of the thigh. Be sure not to touch the bone with your thermometer, as this can result in an inaccurate reading.

Once up to temperature, you'll need to let your turkey rest so it can reabsorb its juices. Don't put a foil tent on top while it rests, or the skin can become soggy. You'll want to wait at least a half an hour before carving your turkey; a quick test is that your bird shouldn't be too hot to touch when you're ready to carve. Larger turkeys will stay warm for quite some time — they can safely rest for up to 90 minutes. This gives you plenty of time to put together your gravy and finish off your side dishes.

Carving isn't hard to do, but it could be helpful to check out **our turkey-carving video** first to learn how (or to refresh your memory). Turkey pros all seem to agree that carving your turkey is best left for the kitchen, not the dining table, so get your platter ready. Once you're done carving, don't throw away that carcass! Making your own **turkey stock** is easy, delicious, and gives you a head start on a tasty leftover turkey soup.

Now sit back and enjoy your meal! And let someone else do the dishes. Got more questions? Check out the following list of Frequently Asked Questions.

FAQs

How long does it take to cook a turkey?

The answer, unfortunately, is "it depends." There are several factors that influence the total time it takes your turkey to cook fully, including:

- *Temperature*: Did you start at a higher temp for the first half hour? Are you baking it at 350° F? 325° F? How accurate is your oven? Are you maintaining a consistent temperature, or are you frequently opening the oven door and letting heat escape? Did your bird come to room temperature before going in the oven, or did it still have frost in the cavity?
- *Weight*: An 8-pound turkey will take less time to cook than a 16-pound turkey. But not half as long.
- *Preparation*: Is your turkey stuffed or unstuffed? Stuffed turkeys will generally take half an hour or more longer to cook than their unstuffed counterparts. Are you using aluminum foil? A dark pan or a reflective pan? All of these will affect the total amount of time your bird takes to cook.

But don't despair! Use these general guidelines to help gauge the timing so you can plan ahead.

WEIGHT	SERVINGS	COOK TIME (UNSTUFFED)*	COOK TIME (STUFFED)*
8-12 lb. turkey	8-12	2 1/2 to 3	3 to 3 1/2
12-16 lb. turkey	12-16	3 to 3 1/2	3 1/2 to 4 1/4
16-20 lb. turkey	16-20	3 1/2 to 4 1/2	4 1/4 to 5 1/4
20-24 lb. turkey	20-24	4 to 4 1/2	4 1/2 to 5 1/2
24+ lb. turkey	1 serving per pound	5+	5 1/2 +

* *Approximate times based on 325° F oven*

Should I baste my turkey?

The main purpose of basting is to brown the skin. If you've slathered your turkey with plenty of butter or olive oil, you may not need to. Want to make sure the turkey has enough moisture? Again, if you've brined your turkey or used other methods to avoid a dry breast, then you won't need to baste. In fact, all that opening and closing the oven door to baste will extend your cooking time, which can actually lead to a *drier* breast.

Myself, I just like basting. It's kinda fun, to be honest. My game plan? I'll baste when I have to open the oven door to put something else in, but otherwise let it be. If you do want to baste regularly, you're best off waiting until the turkey has been in the oven for a full hour and then basting every 30 minutes.

How can I avoid a dry turkey?

At the risk of sounding obvious, the most important tip is not to overcook it! This can be easier said than done, however. The challenge is that the white meat is done between 150-160° F, whereas the darkest meat needs to come up to 175° F to finish. Maintaining a 20+ degree difference in temperature is not easy. The name of the game is to slow down the cooking of the white meat while speeding up the cooking of the dark meat. Here are some options to consider, and what they do:

METHOD	WHY IT WORKS
Cover the breast with foil	Slows cooking of white meat
Leave the bird untrussed	Speeds up cooking of dark meat
Cook breast side down	Slows cooking of white meat; self-bastes breast
Brine the turkey	Adds moisture; helps turkey self-baste
Position legs towards back of oven	Speeds up cooking of dark meat (back of the oven is hotter)
Cover with wet cheesecloth	Slows cooking of white meat; retains moisture
Break down turkey and cook in parts	Allows parts to cook to different temperatures

How do I get brown, crispy skin?

There are several ways to achieve this. Some methods include:

- Get the skin as dry as possible. Pat with towels and/or leave uncovered in the refrigerator for several hours to let the cold air dry out the skin.
- Brush the skin with a mixture of baking powder and oil. Use 1 1/2 tsp. oil for each tsp. of baking powder.
- Slather the turkey skin with butter on both sides.
- Baste your turkey.
- Avoid covering the breast with foil until browning is complete; do not tent bird with foil while resting.

Our Recipe Picks

Looking for recipe ideas? You've come to the right place. Of course, you can use Yummly to search for even more, but here's a list of several different styles of turkey recipes to get you started. (For more tried-and-true recipe ideas, check out Yummly's **most popular turkey recipes**.)

Traditional Whole Turkey

Herb Roasted Turkey Recipe by **Epicurious**

Citrus Turkey Brine

My Favorite Turkey Brine Recipe by The Pioneer Woman

Dry-Brined Roast Turkey with Garlic Sage Butter

Dry-Brined Roast Turkey with Garlic Sage Butter by Yummly

Quick Instant Pot Turkey Breast for Six

Instant Pot Turkey Breast Recipe by Yummly

Deep-Fried Turkey

Deep-Fried Turkey Recipe by Leite's Culinaria

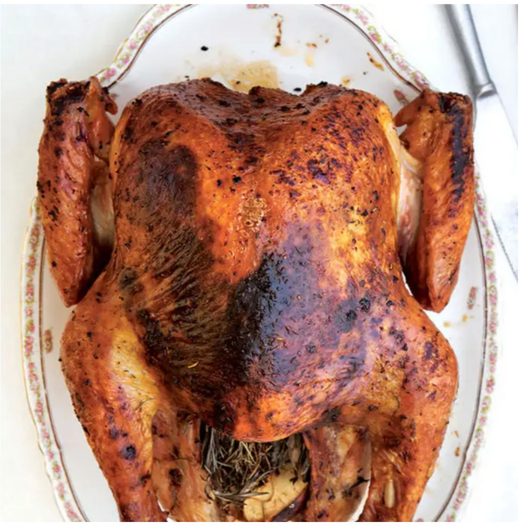
Quick Butterflied Roast Turkey

Quick Butterflied Roast Turkey by Yummly

Roast Turkey In Parts

Roast Turkey in Parts Recipe by Serious Eats

Turkey On The Grill



Herbes de Provence Grilled Turkey Recipe by Saveur

Smoked Turkey

Smoked Turkey Recipe by Chowhound

Thanksgiving Christmas Dinner Fall Main Dish Guide