

Roast Chicken (according to Mimi)

Draft

For an authoritative source, see *The All New All Purpose Joy of Cooking*, Rombauer, Becker, and Becker, Scribner, 1997, Poultry, 567 and Roasted Chicken, 579. I try to tell you WHY each fussy thing is done so you can decide whether to do it. I promise the second chicken will not be complicated. Note that after you master chicken, a turkey or Cornish game hen is only a matter of timing.

First, steal a chicken. What the supermarket calls a "roasting" chicken weighs about 7 pounds and is much tastier and more festive than a "young" chicken, which weighs 3 to 4 pounds. A young chicken will do, but if you are going to the trouble, you might as well do two of those. If you don't need so much you can freeze one, either cleaned and ready to put in the oven or fully cooked. (Conversely, you can freeze half a 7 pounder. The store will saw it in half vertically for you but the whole point of a whole chicken is that it is moister if cooked whole and protected by its skin.) Big brands are Tyson and Perdue. I find of the two, Tyson tends to be more neatly prepared. I will leave it to you if you want to buy a politically correct chicken. You don't want a fowl or stewing hen for roasting. Note that a "fresh" chicken may feel frozen: federal standard is that if it is frozen down to 27 degrees F, it may be called "fresh."

Then, the hardest part, preparing the chicken for roasting. What makes this hard is the need for sanitation. Consumer's Report says that the incidence of salmonella is so high in processed chickens that one must assume that one's chicken is contaminated. (Other meats are probably also contaminated but one generally does not handle them as much before cooking.) While hands are clean and dry, prepare a shallow (2 inches) roasting pan by lining it with 2 layers of heavy foil. Push foil into corners so rack won't tear it. Or, if you don't believe in foil, spray pan with PAM to make clean up easier. Place shallow rack in pan to keep chicken out of its own dripping fat and spray that. (Don't rush out and buy a high rack for poultry. With one you cannot put a second shelf in the oven for side dishes. Birds do brown nicely in them if you have two ovens.) Prepare wrappings for second bird and/or for giblets if you are not going to use them immediately. Include separate wrappings for liver because it is not prepared in the same way as rest of giblets. If using the giblets with the bird, prepare small bowel for them during preparation. Prepare a saucer with seasonings, some of which are suggested below, and a cup with a small amount of oil. Prepare a small, sharp knife and/or kitchen shears. Place a large bowl or strainer in sink (not a wire strainer as they are too hard to clean). Put on an apron, and if desired, plastic or disposable gloves. Remove everything you won't need from the sink and adjoining counter. If you have a sous chef or operating room nurse, you don't have to prepare all this ahead.

Now, you are ready for the wet and messy work. Remove the wrapping and rest bird in bowl or strainer. Remove giblets. Hypothetically, you will have a neck, heart, gizzard, and liver, all of which you will recognize if you have had comparative anatomy. Cut fat and skin off giblets (scissors are easier than knives) and rinse. Pat dry with paper towels. Wrap giblets or set aside, liver separated. Remove as much visible fat from chicken as possible: around cavity, to inside of thighs, and under neck skin. If you don't care about looks, you can remove the tail and wing tips and add to giblets. You can also remove the skin around the neck and treat either as fat or giblet. Reach inside bird and between its lower back ribs is a soft, dark tissue. If you are big on comparative anatomy, this is the kidney tissue, 'though that is not what it is called in birds. My mother always scratched it out. I have never seen it mentioned in any recipe and it probably doesn't matter if you are not stuffing the bird. (Cooking stuffing inside the chicken is tricky and is frowned upon in recent cookbooks.) Remove anything else inside that does not look appealing. Examine outside of bird and remove any feathers (check wings), quills (check tail), and downy feathers. My mother used matches or even a candle to burn the downy feathers off the wings. If you are not going to eat the skin (which is very fatty, even if crisp) and if you don't care about looks, you needn't be too fussy about feathers. Now, rinse bird thoroughly, inside and out. (Julia Child used hot water, which is probably a good idea if you are going to cook it immediately.) Pat dry with paper towels inside and out. If you don't like paper towels, I don't recommend cloth towels, which will be re-used. Place bird on rack in pan or on wrapping. (If this sounds like a bit much, remember that Grandma Dasha bought fresh killed chickens that needed further plucking and gutting. She also scrapped the scales off the feet to add them to the soup to intensify the flavor and

thicken the texture. Think of dim sum.)

Season not only the skin but also the inside of the cavity and the meat under the neck and breast skin and under the thigh skin, as far as it is loose. Lightly oil the bird inside and out. Lightly salt inside and out before you put on other seasonings so you can see how much salt you are getting. Some ideas for other seasonings: Basic grandmother: white pepper and sweet paprika. Paprika is nice for the finished color. If you want it "tasty," add more salt. Northern Italian: black pepper or red pepper flakes, grated lemon peel, chopped rosemary, and chopped garlic. For tradition, roast potatoes with same seasoning. Tex/Mex: white pepper, powdered ancho chili, and crushed oregano. French: rub with lemon juice and fresh ground black pepper and crushed dried thyme or chopped fresh. Or use tarragon or almost any available herb. Other: Easy on salt if using something salty, such as soy or hoisin sauce or dijon mustard. If using something with sugar, such as ketchup or barbecue sauce or hoisin sauce, use a minimum of seasoning to roast bird and then add sweetened seasoning when bird is almost ready or sugar will burn.

Pre-heat oven to 400 degrees F. Arrange bird on rack in pan. Put wings down and tuck tips under back (sort of like a bully twisting arms on playground). This keeps the wings from burning and makes a platform that thrusts the legs up and encourages their browning. Can put slices of onion, apple, lemon, celery, garlic, etc. inside chicken cavity and under neck skin. Can tie ends of drumsticks together for a nicer presentation or let them go where they will. Legs and thighs cook faster if loose. Can use butcher string if well-equipped or dental floss if it is not mint flavored. Put water in pan under rack to keep drippings from burning. Start bird breast up in pan so breast hardens some before you turn it. Uncooked breast will pick up ridges from rack.

Either season the giblets and add to roasting pan, or wrap and put them in freezer. One can accumulate giblets over several chickens. Giblets can later be used in soup or in Goldberg-style tzimmi, which is another day's story. If the liver is very dark colored (sort of a dark, mahogany color), keep it; if it is medium brown and soft, discard it. (If you remember the German Shieffers in the Mansfield apartments, the father was a veterinarian and animal pathologist whose specialty was identifying signs of disease in slaughtered animals. He said that light livers meant fat had accumulated in the liver, which was a sign of disease.) Liver can be added to pan later in roasting or kept for later chopped liver. Mimi's reduced fat chopped liver is another story still. Those with high cholesterol should minimize exposure to liver and other organ meats. They are high in iron and other minerals but also high in cholesterol (which is actually not as bad for you as saturated fat). (Alternately, the cat might like cut up liver and giblets, raw or cooked, but not the neck.)

Either go on to roasting the bird or first do clean up. Put everything in dishwasher that can go in dishwasher. With fresh, hot sudsy water, wash everything that has come in contact with chicken juice: hands or gloves if using them, counter, sink, faucets, front of apron if vinyl, handle of dishwasher, handle of refrigerator, any utensils not in dishwasher. Throw away disposable gloves. Put sponge in dishwasher. Change apron if cloth. Ideally, one should use chlorine bleach for clean up, but I have never used it without getting it on my clothes. Your audience should be of age for maximum immunity. The care needed with sanitation is one reason to do a second chicken at the same time; it is no more work to clean up after two birds than one. All this can be done ahead of roasting.

Roasting! The temperature and times are from Joy, 579. Now the tricky part is balancing the doneness of breast and thighs. Breast cooks faster and dries out by the time thighs are done. Part of bird facing up is getting more heat reflected from the top of the oven, so as soon as breast skin has an appealing color, baste it with wine or water or broth or pan drippings and turn the breast down away from the heat. Fattier back and thighs need the heat. If it is a 3 or 4 pounder, flip it breast down. If it is a 7 pounder, it may balance on its side with one thigh up and then the other. Joy puts a wad of foil behind it to help balance. You might try something like a custard cup sprayed with PAM. Baste approximately every half an hour and turn as needed. Turn with a large fork or tongs or hands protected by wad of paper towels. Wash anything that touches raw chicken before you use it on better done chicken. If the skin is getting too brown and you think the chicken needs to cook longer, cover lightly with foil with shiny side out. If giblets are getting too brown, cover them with foil or tuck them inside the cavity. If desired, add liver to pan about a half hour before the expected end of roasting. If the chicken has a plastic pop-up doneness indicator, don't depend on it.

Quoting Joy: "if you prize moist breast meat, consider the chicken done when the thickest part of the thigh exudes clear juices [not pink] when pricked with a fork and registers 170 deg f to 175 deg F on an instant read thermometer. If you like the dark meat falling off the bone and are willing to risk a dry breast, roast until the thigh registers 180 deg F. The total roasting time for a 4-pound bird will be 55 to 65 minutes. For larger birds, figure 1 hour for the first 4 pounds, plus about 8 minutes for each additional pound. Remove chicken to a platter and let rest for 10 to 15 minutes." During the rest, the inside temperature is supposed to rise a bit from the hotter outside of the bird and the juices are supposed to be reabsorbed into the meat. At any rate, the cutting will be neater the cooler the bird is when you go at it. The bird is the guest of honor in this meal; everything else should be ready and waiting. While it is resting, pour off the pan juices into a glass container through a strainer if desired and try to skim as much of the fat as possible. Taste for seasoning. Heat in microwave when ready and serve as sauce. There are more complicated ways to make gravy but it is 11:22 as I am typing this.

Presenting You can cut up the bird in the kitchen and arrange it attractively on a platter or take it into the dining room and cut it up on stage. I recommend at least the first time in the kitchen. Forget Norman Rockwell! In either case, you need a very large platter or cutting board with a rim to catch juices, a large sharp knife, chicken shears if available, a large fork, and a second platter for the cut meat. New disposable gloves are good if you are cutting in the kitchen. Forget the garnish on the platter on which you will cut the bird - you need the room. Start by pressing the thigh away from the body and cutting at the joint. (Don't worry if there are dark red places on the bone; this just means the bird is young. Worry only if the meat looks raw and the juices are pink. Then put it back in the oven or microwave it.) Cut the drumstick from the thigh and put the two pieces on second platter. Repeat on other side. This gets more complicated the bigger the bird. Cut off the wings. On a small bird, try to get a bit of breast meat along with each wing. Try to cut the back from the breast, using shears if available. Cut the back into two pieces across the middle. These pieces are not pretty but they are my favorite. Now you should have the double breast. For a small bird, with a large knife, you should be able to cut it sort of in half vertically to one side of the keel. Then cut each half in half across. If the bird is larger or the knife smaller, you may have to resort to cutting the breast meat off the bone. Cut it off in one piece on each side of the keel and then slice it. (If you are doing a turkey, you will need to get out a serious cookbook and read up.) Add any drippings to gravy. Showtime!

Sorry to have to tell you this, but someone will need to do the hot, sudsy thing over again.

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