

## Mom's Roast Turkey

Posted by Elise Bauer on November 24, 2009



*From the recipe archive, originally posted November, 2003.*



My mom's turkey is unlike others. The breast meat isn't dried out, requiring cupfuls of gravy to taste good, but moist and flavorful. I've been watching her make our family turkey for years. Finally a few years ago she let me make it, giving instructions the entire time. Here I am, ready to put it in the oven. Mom's method is to buy the best quality turkey available (organic, free-range, etc.) and cook it **breast-side down**. She also cooks the [turkey stuffing](#) separately, not in the cavity, which makes it easier to cook the turkey more evenly.

*Turkey ready to go in the oven*

## Mom's Roast Turkey Recipe

**Prep time: 15 minutes**

**Cook time: 4 hours**

## INGREDIENTS

- 1 turkey, approx. 15 lbs.\*
- Juice of a lemon
- Salt and pepper
- Olive oil or melted butter
- 1/2 yellow onion, peeled and quartered
- Tops and bottoms of a bunch of celery
- 2 carrots
- Parsley
- Sprigs of fresh rosemary, thyme

*\* Need help figuring out how big a turkey to get? Butterball has a [turkey calculator](#) that helps you figure out just how many pounds you need. In general, plan for:*

12-15 lb turkey for 10-12 people  
15-18 lb turkey for 14-16 people  
18-22 lb turkey for 20-22 people

## METHOD

**1** To start, if the turkey has been refrigerated, bring it to room temperature before cooking. Keep it in its plastic wrapping until you are ready to cook it. While in the refrigerator, and or while you are bringing it to room temp, have the bird resting in a pan, so that if the plastic covering leaks for any reason, you are confining the juices to the pan. If you get a frozen turkey, you will need to defrost it in the refrigerator for several days first. Allow approximately 5 hours of defrosting for every pound. So, if you have a 15 pound turkey, it will take about 75 hours to defrost it in the refrigerator, or around 3 days.

Handle a raw turkey with the same amount of caution as when you handle raw chicken - use a separate cutting board and utensils to avoid contaminating other foods. Wash you hands with soap before touching anything else in the kitchen. Use paper towels to clean up.

Remove the neck and [giblets](#) (heart, gizzard, liver). Use the heart and gizzard for making stock for the [stuffing](#). The neck can be cooked along side the turkey or saved for turkey soup. Or all of the giblets can be used for making [giblet gravy](#).

*Note that if your turkey comes with a plastic piece holding the legs together, check the instructions on the turkey's package. Most likely you do not need to remove those plastic ties for cooking (unless you plan to cook your turkey at a very high temperature). If you remove the plastic ties, you will need to use kitchen string to tie the legs together.*

**2** Preheat the oven to 400 degrees F.

**3** Wash out the turkey with water. Pull out any remaining feather stubs in the turkey skin. Pat the turkey dry with paper towels. Lather the inside of the cavity with the juice of half a lemon. Take a small handful of salt and rub all over the inside of the turkey.

**4** In this method of cooking a turkey, we don't make the stuffing in the turkey because doing so adds too much to the cooking time. For flavor, put in inside the turkey a half a yellow onion, peeled and quartered, a bunch of parsley, a couple of carrots, and some tops and bottoms of celery. You may need to cap the body cavity with some aluminum foil so that the stuffing doesn't easily fall out. Close up the turkey cavity with either string (not nylon string!) or metal skewers. Make sure that the turkey's legs are tied together, held close to the body, and tie a string around the turkey body to hold

the wings in close. (Here's a good video on trussing: [how to truss a turkey.](#))

The neck cavity can be stuffed with parsley and tied closed with thin skewers and string.

**5** Rub either melted butter or olive oil all over the outside of the turkey. Sprinkle salt generously all over the outside of the turkey (or have had it soaking in salt-water brine before starting this process). Sprinkle pepper over the turkey.

**6** Place turkey BREAST DOWN on the bottom of a rack over a sturdy roasting pan big enough to catch all the drippings. This is the main difference between the way mom makes turkey and everyone else. Cooking the turkey breast down means the skin over the breast will not get so brown. However, all of the juices from the cooking turkey will fall down into the breast while cooking. And the resulting bird will have the most succulent turkey breast imaginable.

Add several sprigs of fresh (if possible) thyme and rosemary to the outside of the turkey.

**7** Chop up the turkey giblets (gizzard, heart). Put into a small saucepan, cover with water, add salt. Bring to simmer for an hour or so to help make stock for the stuffing ([see stuffing recipe](#)).

**8** Put the turkey in the oven. Check the cooking directions on the turkey packaging. Gourmet turkeys often don't take as long to cook. With the turkeys mom gets, she recommends cooking time of about 15 minutes for every pound. For the 15 lb turkey, start the cooking at 400 F for the first 1/2 hour. Then reduce the heat to 350 F for the next 2 hours. Then reduce the heat further to 225 F for the next hour to hour and a half.

If you want the breast to be browned as well, you can turn the bird over so that the breast is on top, and put it in a 500°F oven or under the broiler for 4-5 minutes, just enough to brown the breast. Note that if you do this, you will have a higher risk of overcooking the turkey breast.

Start taking temperature readings with a meat thermometer, inserted deep into the thickest part of the turkey breast and thigh, an hour before the turkey should be done. You want a resulting temperature of 175°F for the dark meat (thighs and legs) and 165°F for the white meat (breast). The temperature of the bird will continue to rise once you take it out of the oven, so take it out when the temperature reading for the thigh is 170°F, and for the breast 160°F. If you don't have a meat thermometer, spear the breast with a knife. The turkey juices should be clear, not pink.

**9** Once you remove the turkey from the oven, let it rest for 15-20 minutes. Turn the turkey breast side up to carve it. (See [Alton Brown video on how to carve a turkey.](#))

## Making Turkey Gravy

Scrape all the drippings off of the bottom of the roasting pan. Pour drippings into a smaller skillet. Ladle off excess fat with a gravy spoon and save for possible use later. In a separate small bowl take a quarter cup of corn starch and add just enough water to dissolve the corn starch. Beat cornstarch with a spoon to remove lumps. Slowly add the cornstarch mixture to the drippings, stirring constantly. You may not end up using all of the cornstarch mixture. Only add as much as you need to get the desired thickness. Allow time for the cornstarch to thicken the gravy. Add salt, pepper, sage, thyme, or other seasonings to taste. (See [gravy recipe](#) for step-by-step photos.)

## Save Bones for Stock

When you are finished with your turkey, save the bones from the carcass to make a delicious [turkey soup](#).

