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## Herb-Roasted Cornish Game Hens

From *America's Test Kitchen* Season 15: Classic Fare with Flair

### WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS:

In order to achieve crispy skin on our roasted Cornish game hens in the short period of time they spend in the oven, we give them a rub with baking powder and salt, air-dry them overnight, and poke holes in the skin to allow fat to drain away. We then cook them on a hot baking sheet to jump-start the browning process. Then we flip them over and set them under the broiler to finish the job. To season them inside and out, we give them a light coating of kosher salt on their undersides.

### Serves 4

This recipe requires refrigerating the salted meat for at least 4 hours or up to 24 hours before cooking (a longer salting time is preferable). If your hens weigh 1 1/2 to 2 pounds, cook three instead of four, and extend the initial cooking time in step 5 to 15 minutes. We prefer Bell & Evans Cornish Game Hens.

### INGREDIENTS

- 4 (1 1/4- to 1 1/2-pound) Cornish game hens, giblets discarded
- Kosher salt and pepper
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1 teaspoon dried marjoram
- 1 teaspoon dried rosemary, crushed
- 1/4 teaspoon vegetable oil
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- Vegetable oil spray

### INSTRUCTIONS

1. Using kitchen shears and working with 1 hen at a time, with hen breast side down, cut through bones on either side of backbone; discard backbone. Flatten hens and lay them breast side up on counter. Using sharp chef's knife, cut through center of breast to make 2 halves.
2. Using your fingers, carefully separate skin from breasts and thighs. Using metal skewer or tip of paring knife, poke 10 to 15 holes in fat deposits on top of breasts and thighs. Tuck wingtips underneath hens. Pat hens dry with paper towels.
3. Combine 2 tablespoons salt, thyme, marjoram, and rosemary in bowl. Sprinkle half of salt-herb mixture on underside (bone side) of hens. Add oil to remaining salt-herb mixture and stir until mixture is evenly coated with oil. Add baking powder and stir until well combined. Turn hens skin side up and rub salt-baking powder mixture evenly over surface. Arrange hens skin side up and in single layer on large platter or plates and refrigerate, uncovered, for at least 4 hours or up to 24 hours.
4. Adjust oven racks to upper-middle and lower positions, place rimmed baking sheet on lower rack, and heat oven to 500 degrees.

**5.** Once oven is fully heated, spray skin side of hens with oil spray and season with pepper. Carefully transfer hens, skin side down, to preheated sheet and cook for 10 minutes.

**6.** Remove hens from oven and heat broiler. Flip hens skin side up. Transfer sheet to upper rack and broil until well browned and breasts register 160 degrees and drumsticks/thighs register 175 degrees, about 5 minutes, rotating sheet as needed to promote even browning. Transfer to platter or individual plates and serve.

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## TECHNIQUE

### STEP BY STEP: GETTING CORNISH GAME HENS TO CRISP QUICKLY AND EVENLY

Because the meat on Cornish game hens finishes cooking long before their skin crisps, we devised a few tricks to accelerate the skin's progress.

**SPATCHCOCK:** For each bird, cut through the bones on either side of the backbone; discard the backbone.



**SPLIT:** Cutting through the center of the breast makes two halves that lie flat for better browning.



**SEPARATE AND POKE:** Loosening and poking holes in the skin allows the fat to drain during cooking, aiding crisping.



**SALT AND AIR-DRY:** Rubbing the birds with salt and baking powder and then chilling them evaporates moisture.



**SEAR:** Starting the birds skin side down on a preheated baking sheet effectively (and efficiently) crisps their skin.



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## TECHNIQUE

### NOT JUST A LITTLE CHICKEN

Cornish game hens are neither from Cornwall nor wild game, and they can be hens or roosters. They were reportedly first bred in the 1950s by a Connecticut couple, Jacques and Alphonsine Makowsky, who crossed breeds of domestic chickens with a Cornish gamecock and sold the hybrid when it was very young. As a result, Cornish game hens typically weigh less than 2 pounds, so they cook faster than larger chickens and look nice on a plate—traits that make them popular with consumers. They also feature small breasts and a high ratio of fatty skin to meat. The fatty underside bastes the meat as it cooks, which might explain why we found both their white and dark portions more tender, juicy, and flavorful than those on regular chickens.



**SMALL STATURE, BIG FLAVOR:** Cornish game hens deliver more flavor and juiciness than regular chickens.

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