

## Holiday Tips, Tricks and Techniques

courtesy of Keith Myers, Holiday's 1996

Guaranteed to make your guests say, "Hey, this meal doesn't suck that much." Immediately they will ask you the brand name of the turkey, where you bought it, etc. It will be incomprehensible that the moist, delectable texture is due to your proper preparation.

Turkey Tip #1 - Step 1. Remove plastic pop-up thermometer from turkey

Step 2. Throw it into the street and hope a passing semi crushes it

These stupid little plastic things are designed to pop up at about 180F and are planted into the breast meat of your turkey. When they pop they might as well play a recorded message such as "this turkey is now inedible" or "all of the moistness has now left this bird." Instead, go buy yourself a nice instant read meat thermometer (available at any Lechter's or restaurant supply store). Use this new toy judiciously near the end of the estimated cooking time for your turkey. Cook until the thigh reaches about 160F. These devices are used much like human anal thermometers - you do NOT want to leave them in place for a very long time. Simply insert into the thickest part of the thigh (do not touch the bone) and hold in place for about thirty seconds. Read temperature then remove. Never leave an instant read thermometer in place during cooking.

Turkey Tip #2 - Never cook anything in a plastic bag

If your primary concern is easy clean up then by all means use a roasting bag. If you are more concerned with flavor and texture then save the bag to dispose the turkey carcass after you carve it. Roasting in a bag essentially steam cooks the bird. That doesn't even sound good does it? Turkeys have plenty of fat to protect them during dry roasting thanks to the nice poultry farmers that feed them constantly during their brief lives. Place a wire rack into a large roasting pan and place bird in pan. The rack keeps the bird from getting soggy in its own juices. Throw a mire poix (onions, celery, carrots) and a bouquet garni (herb mixture - primarily sage for today) into the pan. These will flavor the basting juices. How would you baste in a bag?

Turkey Tip #3 - Time and Temperature

There are many methods to achieve the end result of a nicely browned bird that has not been dried out like a banana chip. Large birds will brown at lower temperatures due to longer cooking times while smaller birds require higher heat to brown sufficiently. Here's a guideline you might start with - 10#/400F, 15#/350 and 20#/325. Total roasting time will be about 2 to 4 hours or more depending on the bird. Roast until the thigh is about 160F. The best time to check temperature is when you remove the bird to baste it.

*Factoid: Stanley Hiemlich credits his mother's Thanksgiving turkey as the primary inspiration behind inventing his famous maneuver.*

Turkey Tip #4 - Basting: the one time each year you get to use that stupid gigantic eye dropper thingy

Baste early and baste often. I avoid opening the oven for about an hour and at this early phase there is usually precious little pan drippings to baste with. I prefer to use rich, creamery grade AA butter at this point. Remove the pan from the oven and close the oven door - this conserves the oven temperature and makes basting much more fun and enjoyable. As you begin to suck up juices to baste with try to get only the fat as this enhances browning without drying out the bird - or stick to using the butter. When basting a little squirt goes along way - your just trying to coat the skin with a little fat not irrigate a left ventricle during a triple bypass. Baste about every 30 minutes after the first time.

Holiday Etiquette Tip

*For the love of God get off your fat ass and help clean up the kitchen. Watching a football game in another room until the pie is served is not an effective to clean up the enormous mess left behind after your glutinous*

Turkey Tip #5 - Rest before carving

Not you silly, the turkey! Allowing 20 minutes of rest prior to carving will enhance the quality of the meat and the juices will exude into the pan for gravy making. There are some scientific things that happen during this process with the proteins molecular structure but basically it stops cooking and firms up. During this time the internal temperature will continue to rise about 5F. If you've stuffed the bird you'll want to remove the stuffing prior to the resting phase.

Turkey Tip #5 - Don't stuff the bird

Stuffing the bird hinders the cooking process by essentially increasing the size of your turkey thus causing the interior cavity to require greater time to raise the temperature. This is amplified when the bird and stuffing are all at refrigerator temperature - which is advisable as stuffing a turkey and leaving it at room temperature is like placing swamp water on an agar plate and leaving it in an incubator. "Gamma-globulin for dessert anyone?"

Gravy - actually an esophageal lubricant rather than a tasty sauce

I could go on and on about gravy. Gravy is the ultimate in denial. Millions of people convince themselves that it is not too lumpy, too thick, or more importantly that it tastes like something other than beige glue. Gravy can be great - but it requires a great stock and very little FAT! Fat, especially turkey fat, does NOT equate to more flavor. Stock is very simple to make but it does require a bit of time and advance planning - this is *not* something to do on the holiday itself. For a turkey gravy you can substitute turkey or chicken necks and giblets for the bones - necks make great stock.

Rule #1 - One pound of bones/quart of water (don't skimp here)

Rule #2 - Mire poix (onions, celery, carrots) a bouquet garni and spices (peppercorns, allspice, cloves, etc. - go light on the salt until the final seasoning)

Rule #3 - Simmer for at least four hours

It's easy - add it all to a pot and simmer. Strain. Cool. Skim fat.

### **Roux Method**

Now that you have a delicious stock all made you don't have to dink around with the pan drippings to ensure enough tasty gravy for your guests. While the turkey is resting you may make the gravy. Pour the pan juices into a container and let them start cooling. Add butter to a hot sauce pan, add flour and cook for a few minutes. You just made a roux - cool, huh? Continue cooking until its golden brown. Add the desired amount of stock and the juices only from the pan dripping (remove the fat). Stir until it boils. You have just made the tastiest, lumplesiest gravy your guest have ever had. Here is the roux rule - equal amounts of fat and flour (if you know what high gluten flour is use it, if not AP will work just fine). This means one T. of butter and one T. of flour, 2 T. butter and 2 T. flour, etc.

*Your pie should not come in a box unless  
you own a bakery*

This is the thickness guideline - one to two tablespoon of flour per pint of stock depending on how thick you like your gravy. I prefer to just tighten it up so I will use a bit less than a tablespoon per pint. Experiment with small batches or make some up in advance.

### **Cornstarch Method**

You could also thicken with cornstarch - this is a good technique if you don't want to add any fat to your gravy. Cornstarch requires that it be in a slurry prior to addition to a hot liquid. During this method the stock will be boiling first. The desired amount of cornstarch is added to a cold liquid (wine or water will work fine - don't use milk) and stirred vigorously to force into suspension then quickly poured into the stock. First remove the stock from the direct flame. Begin stirring and place back over the flame - once boiling these will have reached peak thickening power. Cornstarch has about twice the thickening power of flour and the amount of liquid used to create the suspension is irrelevant (use just enough to easily make the slurry). It's a little easier to control thickness with the cornstarch and the texture is more silky. No fat is added so the gravy isn't as rich - you make the call but both will be lumpless. Taste and adjust seasoning as necessary (this means add more salt).

### **Other Tips**

#### **Flip the Bird**

If you're feeling bold start the bird breast side down. At each subsequent basting flip it on each side and then finally breast up for the final phase of roasting. Careful because it will be very hot - handle with kitchen towels and a second person to hold the roasting pan. Another option is to just start the bird breast side down and then flip it breast up at the first basting. The sides won't be as nicely browned but for a first time flipper this is a good option.

Good luck and a have a happy holiday season.