

Italian Grilled Chicken

What do a pair of bricks have to do with juicy, crisp-skinned chicken?

≧ BY MATTHEW CARD ≦

Almost every cuisine that cooks over a live fire has developed a method for overcoming the stiff challenge of grilling a whole chicken. Americans spike their chickens on tallboys of Schlitz and bathe them in low, smoky heat. Brits “spatchcock” their birds, or chop out the backbones and squash them flat. Italians take the British approach one step further by grilling butterflied poultry *al mattone*, or literally, “under a brick.” The weight squishing the chicken coal-ward is supposed to accomplish two goals: Compressing the bird for even, quick cooking, and producing perfectly crisp skin by maximizing contact with the grill.

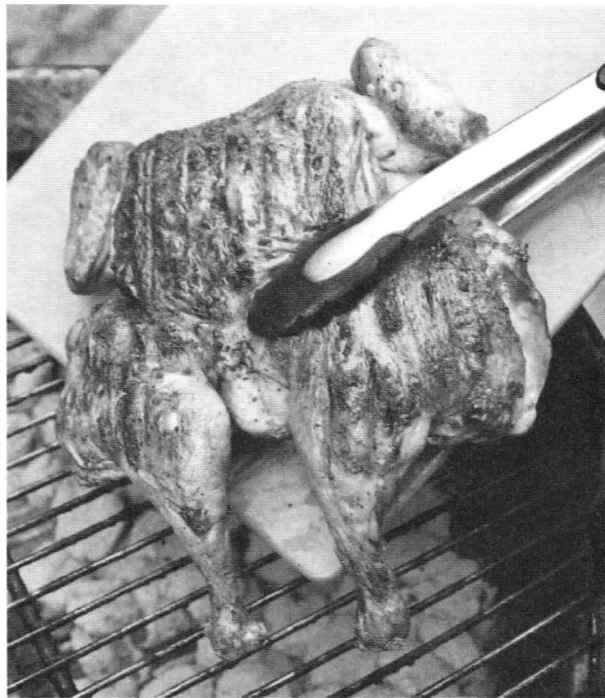
Intrigued? I was, but the recipes I tried nearly dissuaded me. The photos of grill-bronzed chickens in the cookbooks were alluring, but the recipes turned out either greasy, pink, and charred birds or dry, tough, and blackened ones. However, I saw potential: Each chicken had a few edible bits of juicy, browned meat and crisp, crackly skin.

Getting Salty

Most classic Italian recipes do little more than apply salt, pepper, and a liberal wash of olive oil to the meat. Italian chickens might all be juicy and flavorful, but American supermarket chickens—even “natural” or “organic” birds—need more help.

Through the years, the test kitchen has typically brined poultry destined for the grill. A soak in salted water floods the meat with moisture to prevent overcooking and seasons it to the bone. But in this case, all that moisture proved problematic. The brined, butterflied birds emerged from the grill not just charred but burned to black. Risking singed eyebrows, I got level with the grill grate, where I watched torrents of greasy liquid spurt from the seams between chicken and skin and onto the coals beneath, generating flames. All that purged liquid also apparently soaked the skin and prevented it from effectively crisping, even after I cut slits in the skin to provide more channels for moisture to escape. Bricks and brining just don't mix.

We've also discovered that salting can accomplish nearly the same results as brining. Salt, liberally applied beneath the skin, first draws out moisture from inside the bird that, over time, gets reabsorbed with the



Following Italian tradition, we butterfly our chicken to ensure that it cooks evenly under the bricks.

salt, helping the meat retain its juices during cooking. A quick test proved that a salted bird could be grilled under a brick with none of the problems of brining. While an hour of salting sufficed, double that was better yet.

Salting requires loosening the chicken's skin from the meat, which increases its crispness because of improved airflow. As for the olive oil applied by most recipes, I thought it added little flavor, prevented the skin from crisping, and promoted smoky flare-ups. Tradition aside, it had to go.

stick.) The differences were pronounced: The meat was juicier thanks to the slower cooking method, and flare-ups were virtually eliminated. As for even cooking, turning the slower-cooking legs toward the coals (and the breast away from them) was a better position for the first stage of grilling.

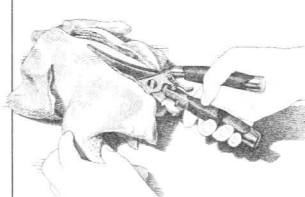
However, the nooks and crannies of meat closest to the bone remained a bit undercooked. Revisiting previous tests, I remembered one recipe in which the chicken was flipped and cooked skin-side up for a portion of the time. I'd ruled this out as cum-

Double Flipping

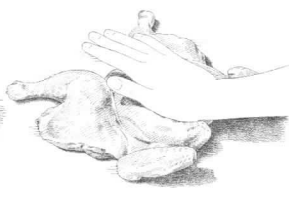
Most recipes for chicken under a brick place the bird skin-side down over a moderate fire, drop the bricks on top, and grill the bird until cooked through. Simple, yes, but far from successful: The breast meat was done well in advance of the inner thigh meat, plus there were those flare-ups to fight. I preheated my bricks to provide heat from above as well as below, but this slight improvement did nothing to reduce charring. It became clear that I needed to first render some of the juices and fat over cooler temperatures before the chicken could be set directly over the hot fire.

To that end, a modified two-level fire made sense. I spread coals over half of the grill bottom and left the other half empty. I plopped the chicken skin-side down over the side without coals, balanced the preheated bricks on top, covered the grill, and grilled the bird long enough to firm the flesh, about 20 minutes. I then slid the chicken—bricks and all—to the hot side of the grill to brown and crisp. (Not once, out of the 20 chickens I cooked, did the skin

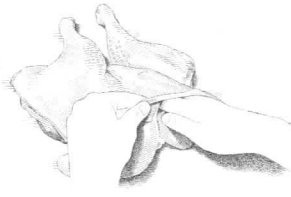
STEP-BY-STEP | PREPPING CHICKEN FOR THE GRILL



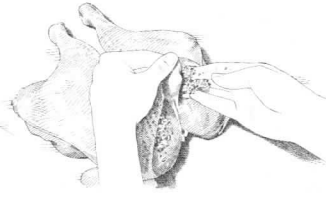
1. BUTTERFLY Cut through bones on either side of backbone, then discard backbone.



2. PRESS Flip chicken over, then flatten breastbone and tuck wings behind back.



3. SEPARATE Loosen skin over breast and thighs and remove any excess fat.



4. SALT Spread salt-garlic mixture under skin of breast and thighs. Spread salt mixture on meat of bone side.

bersome—it meant removing the bricks, turning the bird, then replacing the bricks—but I decided it was worth another try. Starting over, I cooked the chicken skin-side down over the cooler side of the grill for about 20 minutes, flipped it, and then moved it to the hot side of the grill to cook skin-side up over direct heat for about 15 minutes. The interior was just what I wanted: chicken that was evenly cooked in all parts, from wings to breast, thighs, and drumsticks. Could the skin be even crisper with one final flip? Absolutely. All it took was an extra 5 to 10 minutes on the hot side of the grill. Up until now, the brick had been pressing the bird to the grate to evenly cook and crisp the skin, but at this point I took off the brick to avoid last-minute flare-ups.

Rub It In

Simply seasoned with salt, you would never know this chicken was “Italian.” It clearly needed lashings of bold Mediterranean flavor. A couple of the recipes that I had collected rubbed raw garlic, herbs, red pepper flakes, and lemon zest under the chicken’s skin, but this approach steamed the flavorings in the chicken’s juices and tasted awful.

Some tasters suggested that the seasonings might not taste steamed if they were briefly sautéed before I slid them under the skin. I sizzled minced garlic, zest, red pepper flakes, and herbs (thyme and rosemary tasted best) in olive oil, strained them to remove the oil, and cooled the mixture before spreading it over the salted meat beneath the skin. This infused the chicken with rich flavor without reducing the skin’s crispness. It took me a couple of tests before I realized I could simply combine the paste with the salt and thereby eliminate a step.

So what about that olive oil strained from the garlic? Redolent of garlic, zest, and herbs, it was a resource. I had a denuded lemon and plenty of herbs left on my cutting board, so I made a quick vinaigrette to serve with the cooked bird. This chicken would have its olive oil after all.

ITALIAN-STYLE CHARCOAL-GRILLED CHICKEN

SERVES 4

Note: For the best flavor, use a high-quality chicken, such as Bell & Evans. Use an oven mitt or dish towel to safely grip and maneuver the hot bricks. If you’re using table salt, reduce the amount to 1½ teaspoons in step 2. You will need two standard-sized bricks for this recipe. Placing the bricks on the chicken while it cooks ensures that the skin will be evenly browned and well rendered—don’t skip this step. A cast-iron skillet or other heavy pan can be used in place of the bricks.

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HOW TO MAKE

- Italian-Style Grilled Chicken

VIDEO TIP

- Do I need to use bricks for Italian-Style Grilled Chicken?

- ⅓ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 8 medium garlic cloves, minced or pressed through garlic press (about 2½ tablespoons)
- 1 teaspoon finely grated zest plus 2 tablespoons juice from 1 lemon
- Pinch crushed red pepper flakes
- 4 teaspoons chopped fresh thyme leaves
- 3 teaspoons chopped fresh rosemary leaves
- Kosher salt (see note)
- Ground black pepper
- 1 (3¾- to 4¼-pound) whole chicken (see note)
- Vegetable oil for cooking grate

1. Combine oil, garlic, lemon zest, and pepper flakes in small saucepan. Bring to simmer, stirring frequently, over medium-low heat, about 3 minutes. Once simmering, add 3 teaspoons thyme and 2 teaspoons rosemary and cook 30 seconds longer. Strain mixture through fine-mesh strainer set over small bowl, pushing on solids to extract oil. Transfer solids to small bowl and cool; set oil and solids aside.

2. Following illustrations on page 6, butterfly chicken, flatten breastbone, and tuck wings behind back. Using hands or handle of wooden spoon, loosen skin over breast and thighs and remove any excess fat. Combine 1 tablespoon salt and 1 teaspoon pepper in small bowl. Mix 3 teaspoons salt mixture with cooled garlic solids. Spread salt-garlic mixture evenly under skin over chicken breast and thighs. Sprinkle remaining teaspoon salt mixture on exposed meat of bone side. Place chicken skin-side up on wire rack set in rimmed baking sheet and refrigerate 1 to 2 hours.

3. Wrap 2 bricks tightly in aluminum foil. Light large chimney starter filled three-quarters with charcoal (4½ quarts, or about 75 briquettes) and burn until coals are covered with layer of fine gray ash, about 20 minutes. Build modified two-level fire by arranging all coals over half of grill, leaving other half empty. Position cooking grate over coals, place bricks on grate over coals, cover grill, and heat about 5 minutes. Scrape cooking grate clean with grill brush. Lightly dip wad of paper towels in vegetable oil; holding wad with tongs, wipe cooking grate. Grill is ready when side with coals is medium-hot (you can hold your hand 5 inches above grate for 3 to 4 seconds).

4. Place chicken skin-side down over cooler side of grill with legs facing fire, place hot bricks lengthwise over each breast half, cover grill, and cook until skin is lightly browned and faint grill marks appear, 22 to 25 minutes. Remove bricks from chicken. Using tongs or towel, grip legs and flip chicken (chicken should release freely from grill; use thin metal spatula to loosen if stuck) and transfer to hot side of grill, skin-side up, with breast facing center of grill. Place bricks over breast, cover grill, and cook until chicken is well browned, 12 to 15 minutes.

5. Remove bricks, flip chicken skin-side down over hot coals, and cook until chicken skin is well crisped and instant-read thermometer inserted into

EQUIPMENT TESTING

Grill Presses

The key to preparing the Italian classic *pollo al mattone*—chicken under a brick—is the brick itself. The weight (we used two 6-pounders wrapped in foil) holds the bird flat on the grill, helping the chicken to cook faster and the fat to render for crisp, golden skin. Do cast-iron grill presses do the job any better? We tested four brands priced from \$14.99 to a whopping \$70. Presses that were too light or small left the skin flabby and prolonged the cooking time. We preferred the heaviest model for its comfortable handle and nearly five pounds of chicken-pressing weight. But at \$27.95, we can’t recommend it over two bricks, which weigh more, press better, and cost far, far less. For complete testing results, go to www.cooksillustrated.com/jun09. —Meredith Butcher



BARGAIN BEAUTIES BRICKS

Price: 70 cents (35 cents each)

Comments: Two foil-wrapped bricks, each 6 pounds, do the best job of pressing chicken against the grill for crisp skin and quick cooking.

SOLID CHOICE EMERILWARE BY ALL-CLAD

Cast-Iron Square Grill Press

Price: \$27.95

Comments: Weighing in at 4 pounds and 10 ounces, this press yields deep grill marks, rendered skin, and relatively evenly cooked chicken.



LIGHTWEIGHT LOSER LE CREUSET Grill Press

Price: \$69.95

Comments: Too lightweight (just over 3 pounds) to properly press the chicken. At such a high price, it should at least weigh as much as a brick.



thickest part of thigh registers 165 degrees, 5 to 10 minutes, moving chicken as necessary to prevent flare-ups. Transfer chicken to cutting board and let rest 10 minutes. Whisk lemon juice and remaining thyme and rosemary into reserved oil; season with salt and pepper. Carve chicken and serve, passing sauce separately.

ITALIAN-STYLE GAS-GRILLED CHICKEN

Follow instructions for Italian-Style Charcoal-Grilled Chicken through step 2. Turn all burners to high, place bricks on cooking grate, and heat with lid down until very hot, about 15 minutes. Scrape cooking grate clean. Leave primary burner on high and turn off other burner(s). Proceed with recipe from step 4, cooking with lid down.