

# Tandoori Chicken, Reworked

We weren't going to let a 24-hour marinade or the lack of a 900-degree oven keep us from turning this great Indian classic into an easy weeknight dinner.

≧ BY FRANCISCO J. ROBERT ≦

When I'm craving the taste of a good piece of chicken and another plain, boring breast or thigh just won't cut it, there's no better balm than tandoori chicken. The best renditions of this famous Indian specialty feature lightly charred pieces of juicy chicken infused with smoke, garlic, ginger, and spices for a dish that manages to be exotic and homey at the same time.

Authentic versions call for a 24-hour marinade and a tandoor, the traditional beehive-shaped clay oven that fires up to 900 degrees—requirements that keep the dish mainly in the realm of restaurants, even in India. As much as I love the dish, I've often wondered: Do you really need either of these things to create great-tasting chicken full of the same robust flavors?

I decided to take on the challenge of reinventing this Indian classic. But instead of an adaptation geared for the grill—the most obvious means to approximate the tandoor's fierce heat—I wanted a recipe I could make year-round. My tandoori-less chicken would have to be cooked in the oven.

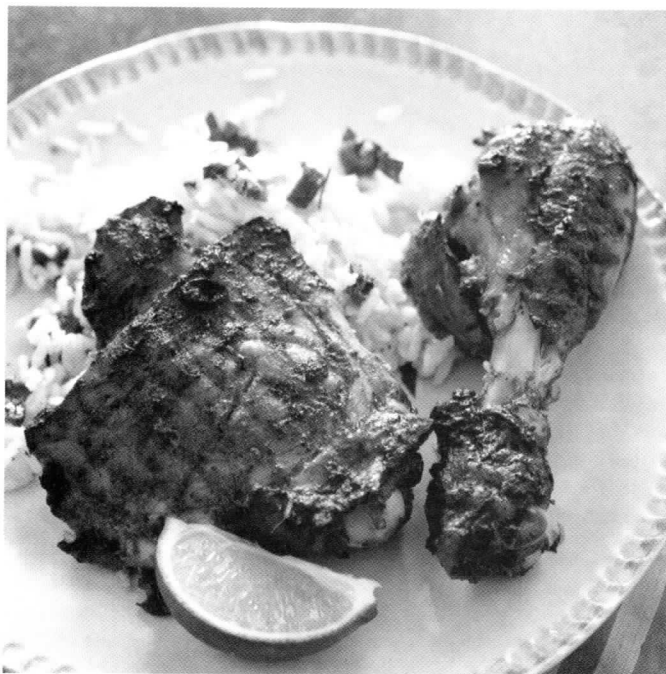
## Tandoori Pyrotechnics

Searching through Indian cookbooks, I found that traditional recipes for the dish are all fairly similar. They start with skinless pieces of bone-in chicken marinated in yogurt flavored with ginger, garlic, and garam masala, a mix of spices that typically includes ground cumin, cardamom, coriander, cinnamon, and black pepper. Many call for food coloring to give the meat its characteristic orange cast. And almost all call for a 24-hour soak.

## Test-Driving a Tandoor

How would our recipe for Tandoori Chicken—which forgoes the typical daylong marinade and searing heat for a low oven and a quick pass under the broiler—stand up to the real thing?

To find out, I hauled back a tandoor from an Indian specialty store and fired it up in the test kitchen's outdoor grilling area. When its temperature reached 780 degrees (the highest reading my laser thermometer would record), I skewered chicken pieces I'd marinated for 24 hours the traditional way and placed them inside. Fifteen minutes later, I pulled them out and tasted them alongside a batch of chicken baked in the oven according to our recipe. Other than finding the tandoor-cooked chicken smokier, tasters could detect few differences. Given the convenience of cooking in a conventional oven (not to mention the fact that a 140-pound tandoor will set you back \$600), we're sticking with our method. —F.J.R.



Our chicken gets its crisp char from just a brief stint under the broiler.

Before I started meddling with the marinating time and the cooking method, I needed to get a better handle on how the traditional approach worked. I prepped some chicken pieces according to a standard recipe and placed them in the refrigerator to marinate for a day. While I waited, I did some research on the tandoor. This simple clay vessel originated thousands of years ago as a means to bake bread. The clay is capable of maintaining extraordinarily high temperatures from the burning charcoal or wood spread over its bottom, while the oblong shape ensures that heat radiates evenly.



**WHO NEEDS IT?**  
This tandoor costs \$600 and weighs 140 pounds. We did fine without it.

When meat encounters this fierce heat, the protein molecules on its surface cross-link and contract, trapping moisture inside. Any juices that escape fall to the coals along with rendered fat, creating smoke that flavors the food inside.

## Oven Heat: The Highs and Lows

Since the tandoor cooks through ambient versus direct heat, my first thought was to simply crank my oven as high as it would go. I took out my long-marinated chicken pieces, placed them on a wire rack set inside a baking sheet (to prevent the chicken from braising in its own juices), and slid them into a 500-degree oven. The chicken that emerged 30 minutes later was a big disappointment: pasty and hopelessly dry.

Maybe the direct heat of the broiler would work better. This approach proved to be an even greater failure: The placement of the broiler coils gave me some chicken pieces that were browned, some that were undercooked, and others that were dry

to the bone. Even worse, each broiler in the test kitchen performed differently. (See "When Older Is Better: Oven Broilers," page 7.) I then tried baking the chicken first at 500 degrees, switching to the broiler just at the end, but the results were still dry.

Maybe it was time to stop mimicking a tandoor and go for something radically different. In the test kitchen, we've preserved the juiciness of thick-cut steaks by starting them in a low oven and searing them at the end. Following this approach, I baked the chicken until almost done in a 325-degree oven, then gave it a quick broil to char the exterior.

This was the winning method—but only if I treated the chicken with extreme care. After several tests, I found it best to remove the chicken pieces just before they were fully cooked (an internal temperature of 125 degrees for the white meat and 130 for the dark meat). I let them rest while the broiler reached temperature, then slid them back into the oven to broil for 10 minutes. Success! The meat was nicely charred on the outside and succulent within.

But two problems remained: The dish took more than 24 hours to make and though the meat was juicy, some tasters thought its texture was too tender, even mushy.

## Going for a Dip

Could the mushiness have something to do with the marinade? Not only did most of the recipes I consulted call for a 24-hour soak, many even insisted that longer marinating meant better flavor. Testing this advice, I marinated the chicken for different lengths of time, from 72 hours down to just a brief dip. Surprisingly, my colleagues strongly preferred the chicken that had been dipped versus soaked for any length of time—even just 30 minutes. This outcome actually made sense. Yogurt

contains acid, which breaks down proteins to “tenderize” meat. But the longer meat is exposed to acid, the more its proteins break down, to the point where they can actually become soluble. This leads to a texture some might call tender, but my tasters found mushy.

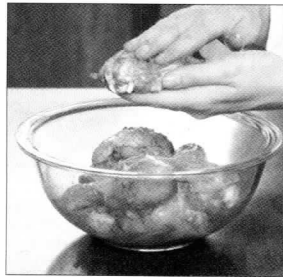
I didn’t want to abandon the yogurt altogether, as it adds a distinctive tang. To avoid mushiness, I would stick with just a dip. But now I had a new problem: Without a lengthy soak, how was I going to get the other flavors into the meat? I first tried brining the chicken in a solution of salt and spices, but not enough of the spice flavor made it into the cooked meat. Then a fellow test cook suggested trying a salt-spice rub. The idea seemed promising: Salt draws juices out of the meat, then the reverse happens and the salt, along with the spices and moisture, flows back in, bringing flavor deep into the meat.

I created a rub with the same spices I’d used in the marinade—garam masala, ground cumin, and a little chili powder—then cooked them in oil with ginger and garlic to amplify their flavor. I added a couple of teaspoons of salt and some lime juice to the mix, massaged the rub into the chicken pieces, and then left them to sit for half an hour. After a dunk

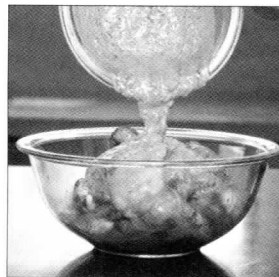
### When Older Is Better: Oven Broilers

Snazzy high-tech ovens are handy for a lot of tasks, but we found them to be a hindrance in our Tandoori Chicken recipe, taking almost double the time to char the meat than the older ovens in our kitchen. To find out why, we flipped through the manual for one of our so-called smart ovens and found it has an internal monitor that temporarily shuts off the broiler element if the temperature climbs too high. The constantly rising and falling temperature slows the oven down, making it less effective at broiling than older appliances without the feature. To see if your broiler has this safety measure, check the manual. —F.J.R.

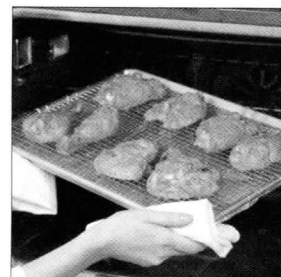
## STEP-BY-STEP TANDOORI CHICKEN WITHOUT THE TANDOOR



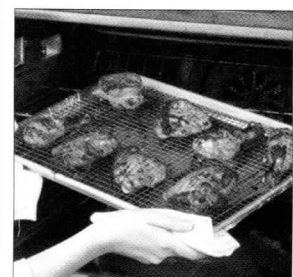
**1. SALT RUB** Massage chicken pieces with salt-spice rub to lock in juices and infuse flavor.



**2. YOGURT COATING** Toss chicken in spiced yogurt for another layer of flavor.



**3. LOW OVEN** To ensure juicy meat, bake chicken slowly in 325-degree oven until not quite cooked through.



**4. BROILER** For smoky flavor, briefly broil chicken until lightly charred and fully cooked.

in yogurt flavored with the same spice mixture, the chicken was ready for the oven. The results were terrific: juicy, lightly charred, well-seasoned meat with concentrated flavor and just the right degree of tenderness. That clay oven and 24-hour marinade were finally history. But for the fact that my tandoori-less chicken wasn’t orange (I opted not to use food coloring), I’d be willing to bet that few people would notice the difference.

### TANDOORI CHICKEN

SERVES 4

We prefer this dish with whole-milk yogurt, but low-fat yogurt can be substituted. If garam masala is unavailable, substitute 2 teaspoons ground coriander, ¼ teaspoon ground cardamom, ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon, and ½ teaspoon ground black pepper. It is important to remove the chicken from the oven before switching to the broiler setting to allow the broiler element to come up to temperature. Serve with basmati rice and a few chutneys or relishes. Our free recipes for Basmati Rice, Pilaf-Style; Cilantro-Mint Chutney; Onion Relish; and Raita are available at [www.cooksillustrated.com/feb09](http://www.cooksillustrated.com/feb09).

- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 6 medium garlic cloves, minced or pressed through garlic press (about 2 tablespoons)
- 2 tablespoons grated fresh ginger
- 1 tablespoon garam masala (see note)
- 2 teaspoons ground cumin
- 2 teaspoons chili powder
- 1 cup plain whole-milk yogurt (see note)
- 4 tablespoons juice from 2 limes, plus 1 lime, cut into wedges
- 2 teaspoons table salt
- 3 pounds bone-in, skin-on chicken parts (breasts, thighs, drumsticks, or mix with breasts cut in half), skin removed and trimmed of excess fat

1. Heat oil in small skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add garlic and ginger and cook

until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add garam masala, cumin, and chili powder; continue to cook until fragrant, 30 to 60 seconds longer. Transfer half of garlic-spice mixture to medium bowl; stir in yogurt and 2 tablespoons lime juice and set aside.

2. In large bowl, combine remaining garlic-spice mixture, remaining 2 tablespoons lime juice, and salt. Using sharp knife, lightly score skinned side of each piece of chicken, making 2 or 3 shallow cuts about 1 inch apart and about ⅛ inch deep; transfer to bowl. Using hands, gently massage salt-spice mixture into chicken until all pieces are evenly coated; let stand at room temperature 30 minutes.

3. Adjust oven rack to upper-middle position (about 6 inches from heating element) and heat oven to 325 degrees. Pour yogurt mixture over chicken and toss until chicken is evenly coated with thick layer. Arrange chicken pieces, scored-side down, on wire rack set in foil-lined, rimmed baking sheet or broiler pan. Discard excess yogurt mixture. Bake chicken until instant-read thermometer inserted into thickest part of chicken registers 125 degrees for breasts and 130 for legs and thighs, 15 to 25 minutes. (Smaller pieces may cook faster than larger pieces. Transfer chicken pieces to plate as they reach correct temperature.)

4. After removing chicken from oven, turn oven to broil and heat 10 minutes. Once broiler is heated, flip chicken pieces over and broil until chicken is lightly charred in spots and instant-read thermometer inserted into thickest part of chicken registers 165 degrees for breasts and 175 for legs and thighs, 8 to 15 minutes. Transfer chicken to large plate, tent loosely with foil, and rest 5 minutes. Serve with chutney or relish, passing lime wedges separately.

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#### HOW TO MAKE

- Tandoori Chicken

#### BEHIND THE SCENES

- How we developed our Tandoori Chicken recipe

#### VIDEO TIP

- Getting to know your broiler