

Thai Grilled Chicken

You don't need a well-stocked Asian pantry or specialty equipment to make this street-food classic. Just a low fire, a bold marinade, and Cornish hens.

≧ BY ANNIE PETITO ≦

I can't think of a cuisine that doesn't lay claim to a grilled chicken dish, but the Thai version might be my favorite. Called *gai yang*, it's street food that originated in Thailand's northeastern Isan region but has become ubiquitous throughout the country. Countless variations exist, but the most popular features small whole chickens that are butterflied, flattened, and marinated in a garlic-herb paste. To keep the hens flat, cooks position them between bamboo clips that look like giant clothespins; they then grill the hens over a low charcoal fire so that their fat renders and their skin crisps. What you get is the best version of grilled chicken—juicy meat, bronzed skin, and smoky char—made extraordinary by the flavor-packed marinade. The chicken is cut into pieces and served with a tangy-sweet-spicy dipping sauce and sticky rice, which soaks up the assertive flavors.

As a bonus, this dish can be prepared using mostly pantry staples. The only ingredient I'd have to work around was the bird itself. Thai chickens typically weigh between 1 and 3 pounds, so I'd have to find an alternative. After that, it would be a matter of ironing out the marinade and the fire setup, as many recipes are vague on the grill instructions.

Flat Out

I discovered that the Thai chickens are often replaced with whole conventional chickens, while other recipes call for parts or Cornish hens. Cornish hens offer a few unique benefits that make them ideal for this recipe: They have a high ratio of skin to meat, so both the dark and white portions cook up juicy; they weigh 1¼ pounds or so (about the same size as the Thai chickens) and cook in about 30 minutes when butterflied; and they're convenient and elegant for portioning—one bird per person.

Gai yang vendors typically butterfly chickens along the breastbone, but I found that this method



Cornish hens are a good substitute for small Thai chickens. Plus, they're easy to portion when entertaining—one bird per person.

caused the skin to pull away from the breast, leaving the lean white meat exposed and at greater risk of drying out. Butterflying by cutting out the backbones with kitchen shears and flattening the birds was the better approach. The skin stayed intact on one side, so it browned evenly, and the hens were uniformly flat, so they cooked at the same rate. As for the bamboo “clothespins,” they flatten the birds and function as handles that make them easier to flip. But as long as I handled the hens carefully with tongs, I could move them on the grill without skewering.

Cut and Paste

I marinated the hens overnight in a paste made from garlic, cilantro stems (a substitute for the traditional cilantro root), white pepper, and fish sauce—the four marinade components I found in every recipe. Then I grilled the hens skin side up over the cooler side of a half-grill fire. Just before the meat was done, I placed them over the coals to crisp the skin.

They cooked up juicy and savory, thanks in large part to the salty fish sauce, which essentially brined

the meat, seasoning it and helping it retain moisture during cooking. To bolster that effect, I added a couple of teaspoons of salt. But many recipes further season the marinade with soy sauce, ginger, lemon grass, ground coriander, or sugar (usually Thai palm sugar or brown sugar). When I added some of these to the base ingredients for evaluation, I liked the nutty, citrusy flavor of ground coriander (made from the seeds of the cilantro plant) and the malty sweetness of brown sugar, so these were in. I also thickened the marinade, which tended to slide off the meat, to a clingy, pesto-like consistency by adding cilantro leaves along with the stems.

Sweet and Hot

On to fixing the flavor and consistency of the dipping sauces, which ranged from sticky and cloyingly sweet to thin and fiery. I wanted a balance of sweetness and tang, so I simmered white vinegar and sugar until the mixture thickened to a light syrup. Minced raw garlic and Thai chiles gave the sauce a fruity burn that red pepper flakes just couldn't match.

I set out the hens and sauce along with sticky rice, which I made by mimicking the equipment used in Thailand (see “The Traditional Sticky Rice Setup”). As my colleagues tore into the burnished hens, sweet-tangy sauce dripping from their fingers, they joked (sort of) that I should set up a gai yang stand of my own.

Stick 'em Up

Street vendors all over Thailand hawk grilled chicken (called *gai yang*) from setups like this, with the bird pinned between bamboo holders positioned over a low fire. That way, the meat stays moist as the skin renders and browns.



▶ Annie Grills the Birds

A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/aug17

a must for traditional meatloaf, a glaze seemed in order here—not only to bump up its looks but also to add another layer of flavor. I whisked together ketchup, brown sugar, cider vinegar, and hot sauce. Cooking the mixture for 5 minutes reduced it to the right consistency. To ensure that the glaze stayed put, I turned to a two-step technique we’ve used in the past. I applied half the glaze to the loaf before popping it into the oven. After 40 minutes, at which point the glaze had become firm and tacky, I brushed on another coat.

By the time the meatloaf reached 160 degrees, the glaze was starting to brown in spots and the meatloaf looked and smelled great. In fact, my tasters’ only request was that I come up with another glaze option to give the dish some variety. For a lighter, brighter flavor, I warmed some apricot preserves until fluid, strained them, and combined them with ketchup and Dijon mustard. The preserves helped thicken the glaze, so I didn’t even have to reduce it before applying it to the meatloaf. My turkey meatloaf might be perfect warmer-weather fare, but it’s so good that I’ll be making it year-round.

TURKEY MEATLOAF WITH KETCHUP-BROWN SUGAR GLAZE

SERVES 4 TO 6

Do not use 99 percent lean ground turkey in this recipe; it will make a dry meatloaf. Three tablespoons of rolled oats, chopped fine, can be substituted for the quick oats; do not use steel-cut oats.

Meatloaf

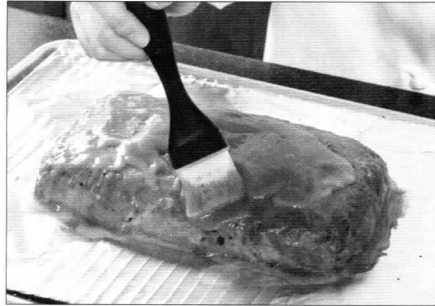
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- Pinch baking soda
- ½ onion, chopped fine
- Salt and pepper
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh thyme
- 2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
- 3 tablespoons quick oats
- 2 teaspoons cornstarch
- 2 large egg yolks
- 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- 2 pounds 85 or 93 percent lean ground turkey
- 1 ounce Parmesan cheese, grated (½ cup)
- ⅓ cup chopped fresh parsley

Glaze

- 1 cup ketchup
- ¼ cup packed brown sugar
- 2½ teaspoons cider vinegar
- ½ teaspoon hot sauce

1. FOR THE MEATLOAF: Adjust oven rack to upper-middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Line wire rack with aluminum foil and set in rimmed baking sheet. Melt butter in 10-inch skillet over low heat. Stir baking soda into melted butter. Add onion and ¼ teaspoon salt, increase heat to medium, and

Glaze: Twice Is Nicer



We brush our meatloaf with glaze twice to get a thick, uniform application. The first coat needs to dry slightly before the second coat is applied so that the second coat has something to stick to.

cook, stirring frequently, until onion is softened and beginning to brown, 3 to 4 minutes. Add garlic and thyme and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Stir in Worcestershire and continue to cook until slightly reduced, about 1 minute longer. Transfer onion mixture to large bowl and set aside. Combine oats, cornstarch, ¾ teaspoon salt, and ½ teaspoon pepper in second bowl.

2. FOR THE GLAZE: Whisk all ingredients in saucepan until sugar dissolves. Bring mixture to simmer over medium heat and cook until slightly thickened, about 5 minutes; set aside.

3. Stir egg yolks and mustard into cooled onion mixture until well combined. Add turkey, Parmesan, parsley, and oat mixture; using your hands, mix until well combined. Transfer turkey mixture to center of prepared rack. Using your wet hands, shape into 9 by 5-inch loaf. Using pastry brush, spread half of glaze evenly over top and sides of meatloaf. Bake meatloaf for 40 minutes.

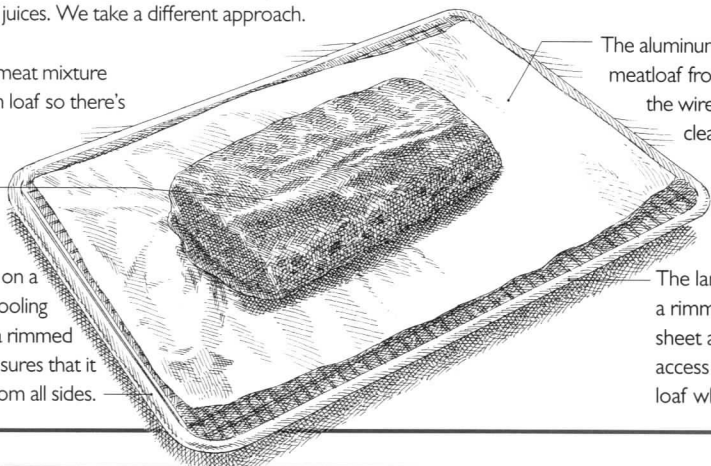
4. Brush remaining glaze onto top and sides of meatloaf and continue to bake until meatloaf registers 160 degrees, 35 to 40 minutes longer. Let meatloaf cool for 20 minutes before slicing and serving.

A Setup for Better Meatloaf

Many recipes call for cooking meatloaf in a loaf pan, but we found that this method causes the meat to steam and stew in its own juices. We take a different approach.

We shape the meat mixture into a free-form loaf so there’s more surface area available for glazing.

Placing the loaf on a foil-lined wire cooling rack set inside a rimmed baking sheet ensures that it cooks evenly from all sides.



The aluminum foil keeps the meatloaf from sticking to the wire rack, making cleanup easier.

The large size of a rimmed baking sheet allows for easy access to the meatloaf while glazing.

Firming up Ground Turkey

Compared with ground beef and pork, ground turkey can cook up pasty, even mushy, and its juices are more watery and thin. Why the difference? Poultry has less fat than most ground red meat, of course, but it also has less connective tissue. Connective tissue provides support and texture to meat, so with less of it, meat becomes mushy and compact when cooked. Also, less-fatty poultry juices lack the unctuous viscosity of red meat juices.

To address these issues, we turned to three pantry ingredients: oats, which we mixed into the turkey to help give the loaf more structure and make it less dense, and cornstarch and butter, which added appealing body to the juices.



TURKEY MEATLOAF WITH APRICOT-MUSTARD GLAZE

Microwave ¼ cup apricot preserves until hot and fluid, about 30 seconds. Strain preserves through fine-mesh strainer into bowl; discard solids. Stir in 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard, 2 tablespoons ketchup, and pinch salt. Proceed with recipe, substituting apricot mixture for glaze.