

Grilling Stuffed Chicken Breasts

Taking a stuffed chicken breast recipe and adding the smoky flavor of the grill sounds like a good idea—if you can get past the leathery exterior and oozing, flammable filling.

≧ BY BRYAN ROOF ≦

For better or worse, every dish that's a good idea inside the kitchen seems eventually to make its way outside onto the grill. The transition is not always successful. Take the classic dish chicken cordon bleu. Baked in the oven, it deftly solves the problem of dry, bland chicken breasts by stuffing them with a sharp, nutty melted cheese and salty sliced ham, lending both moisture and flavor to this otherwise lean and insipid cut. But try bringing it out to the grill, and that same stuffing introduces more problems than it solves. The threat of leaky cheese causing flare-ups as it drips from the chicken and into the coals compounds the standard grilling difficulties: evenly cooking the meat and avoiding a tough, leathery exterior.

Of the many existing recipes I tried, all called for boneless, skinless breasts, though each had its own stuffing method. One required tediously cramming the filling into a narrow pocket. Another split the breast like a hot dog bun and heaped it with a filling that spilled from the top like a mound of sauerkraut. One notable failure sandwiched the filling between two breasts but neglected to seal it in, producing a brilliant burnt-cheese fireball on the grill. The most successful approach was to butterfly the meat by splitting the breast horizontally and leaving it hinged like a book, but even that didn't completely manage to keep the filling in place.

Still, the promise of moist, smoky chicken wrapped around a meaty, cheesy filling that stayed where it was put was too appealing to pass up. To make good on this dish, I decided to work from the inside out, starting with perfecting my filling.

Simply Stuffed

Grilled chicken, with its smokiness, requires stronger flavors than the deli ham and Swiss cheese in most cordon bleu recipes. I opted instead for more flavorful prosciutto and fontina, a moist melting cheese with moderate tang. Butterflying seemed like my best bet, so I sliced a breast nearly in half horizontally, splayed it open, layered on prosciutto, then sprinkled it with grated fontina. I rolled the breast around the filling like a jellyroll and secured it with kitchen twine. So far, so good, but I was curious to see how it would fare on the grill.

Disaster started as a tiny drop of cheese that



Wrapping the cheese filling in prosciutto prevents it from leaking out.

oozed out the end and grew into a lavalike eruption, dropping onto the coals and flaring up. The result: chicken with a blackened, sooty exterior and no cheese left in the center. Adding more twine to the bundle did nothing to hold the melting cheese in place. Soaking toothpicks in water, then using them to secure the seams of the chicken, was like trying to plug a dam with chewing gum.

Then a thought struck me: Maybe the key was not to rely on the cumbersome chicken to keep the cheese in place, but to use something more flexible: the prosciutto. For my next test, I tightly

wrapped the prosciutto around the cheese before I placed the whole bundle inside the chicken cavity. It worked like a charm. To make wrapping and stuffing even easier, instead of grating the fontina, I cut it into 3-inch-long, 1/2-inch-wide sticks.

As for the stuffing, the only thing remaining was to add a bit of moisture and flavor. A simple compound butter enlivened by shallots and tarragon did the trick: I spread it over the inside of the chicken before adding the prosciutto and cheese. I was now ready to turn my attention to the exterior, which, despite the success of the filling, was still tough to chew.

Throw Me a Bone

The problem was that while boneless, skinless chicken breasts are easy to butterfly and stuff, the lean, exposed meat rapidly dries out in the intense heat of a grill. Brining the chicken in a saltwater solution for 30

minutes can help it retain more moisture with any cooking method, and it certainly helped in this case. Switching from a standard one-level fire to a modified two-level fire (in which all the coals are banked on one side of the grill) was also an improvement, allowing me to first sear the breasts over the hot coals for color and flavor, then finish cooking them over more moderate indirect heat. But the fact remained that my chicken was dry and leathery, and the most flavorful stuffing in the world wasn't going to cure it.

What I needed was some kind of protective wrapping to shield the delicate meat from the direct heat

Building Better Grilled Stuffed Chicken Breasts

Most recipes for grilled stuffed chicken breasts do nothing more than take chicken cordon bleu (the classic dish featuring boneless breasts stuffed with ham and cheese) outdoors, for typically flawed results. Here's how we turned the concept into something a whole lot better.

PROBLEM: Dry, leathery exterior

SOLUTION: Instead of the usual boneless, skinless breasts, we use bone-in, skin-on breasts. Both skin and bone help protect the white meat from the grill's fierce heat.

PROBLEM: Filling that won't stay put

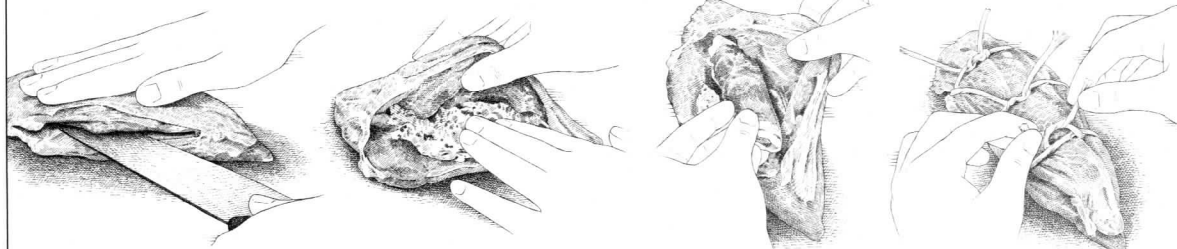
SOLUTION: Most recipes layer a filling of cheese and meat. We roll the prosciutto around the cheese, which helps keep it contained.



PROBLEM: Dry, bland interior

SOLUTION: Even a great filling can't fully compensate for the breast's bland flavor. To add moistness and boost taste, we spread a compound butter inside the butterflied meat before adding the filling.

STEP BY STEP | ASSEMBLING STUFFED CHICKEN BREASTS FOR GRILLING



1. BUTTERFLY BREAST

Starting on thick side closest to breastbone, cut horizontal pocket in each breast, stopping $\frac{1}{2}$ inch from edge.

2. SPREAD BUTTER

Spread equal portion of flavorful compound butter inside each breast.

3. ADD FILLING

Place one prosciutto-wrapped piece of cheese inside each breast and fold breast over to enclose.

4. TIE UP

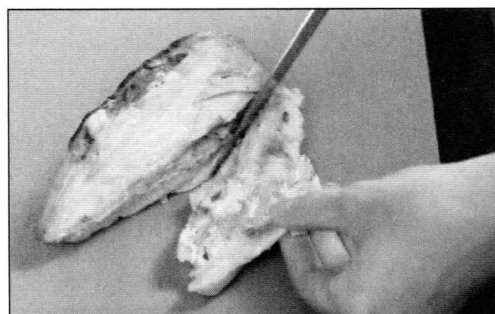
Tie each breast with three 12-inch pieces of kitchen twine at even intervals. (For an alternate method, see page 31.)

of the flames. I tried wrapping the chicken with bacon, pancetta, and some of the prosciutto that I used to wrap the cheese. But on the grill, these fatty meats caused flare-ups, and they also shrank and crumbled off the chicken long before it hit the table. But hold on—why was I spending time trying to create an artificial skin for the chicken? I'd been so focused on the traditional recipe and its use of skinless breasts that the most obvious solution failed to occur to me: starting with skin-on breasts.

Skin-on breasts almost always come bone-in, but any concerns I had that the presence of the bone would make the meat difficult to butterfly proved unfounded: The only modification I needed to make was to slice from the thicker side of the meat, near the breastbone. Since bone-in breasts are larger than their boneless cousins, I anticipated a longer cooking time on the grill. Again I seared the breasts on both sides over the hot side of the grill until well colored, then moved them to the cooler side of the grill to finish cooking. To my delight, the skin protected the exterior of the chicken, releasing fat and basting the breast as it cooked. Even better, the bone also worked to my advantage, helping to prevent shrinkage and shielding the underside of the meat from the direct heat of the grill. While the cooking time had been extended from 15 minutes to about 25, the finished chicken was well worth the wait.

TECHNIQUE

CARVING BONE-IN BREASTS



Using sharp chef's knife, cut with tip of knife against ribs, following their contour, to separate meat from bones.

For serving, I opted to remove the chicken from the breastbone, which allowed me to slice it and display the stuffing. This proved remarkably easy (and didn't disturb the filling at all), requiring just the slide of a knife blade under the meat and against the ribs. Then voilà—a boneless stuffed breast that I could enjoy straight through the grilling season.

CHARCOAL-GRILLED STUFFED CHICKEN BREASTS WITH PROSCIUTTO AND FONTINA

SERVES 4

NOTE: You can serve the chicken on the bone, but we prefer to carve it off and slice it before serving. For our free recipe for Charcoal-Grilled Stuffed Chicken Breasts with Salami and Mozzarella, go to www.cooksillustrated.com/aug10.

- 4 bone-in, skin-on chicken breast halves (about 12 ounces each), trimmed of excess fat and skin
- Table salt
- Vegetable oil for cooking grate
- 4 tablespoons ($\frac{1}{2}$ stick) unsalted butter, softened
- 1 medium shallot, minced (about 3 tablespoons)
- 4 teaspoons chopped fresh tarragon leaves
- 2 ounces fontina cheese, rind removed, cut into four 3 by $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch sticks
- 4 thin slices prosciutto (about 2 ounces)
- Ground black pepper

1. Starting on thick side of breast, closest to breastbone, cut horizontal pocket in each breast, stopping $\frac{1}{2}$ inch from edge so halves remain attached. Dissolve 3 tablespoons salt in 1 quart cold water in large container. Add breasts, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate 30 minutes.

2. Light large chimney starter filled with charcoal (6 quarts, about 100 briquettes) and allow to burn until coals are fully ignited and partially covered with thin layer of ash, about 20 minutes. Arrange all coals over half of grill, leaving other half empty. Position cooking grate over coals, cover grill, and heat grate until hot, about 5 minutes. Scrape grate clean with grill brush. Dip wad of paper towels in vegetable oil; holding wad with tongs, wipe

cooking grate. Grill is ready when coals are hot (you can hold your hand 5 inches above grate for 2 seconds).

3. Meanwhile, combine butter, shallot, and tarragon in small bowl. Roll each piece of cheese in 1 slice prosciutto. Remove breasts from brine, dry thoroughly inside and out with paper towels, and season inside and out with pepper. Spread equal amount of butter mixture inside each breast. Place 1 prosciutto-wrapped piece of cheese inside each breast and fold breast over to enclose. Evenly space 3 pieces kitchen twine (each about

12 inches long) beneath each breast and tie, trimming any excess.

4. Place chicken breasts, skin side down, over hot part of grill and cook until well browned, 3 to 5 minutes. Flip chicken and cook until second side is just opaque, about 2 minutes. Move chicken, skin side up, to cool side of grill, with thicker side of breasts facing fire. Cover grill and continue to cook until instant-read thermometer inserted into thickest part of stuffing registers 160 degrees, 25 to 30 minutes. Transfer chicken to carving board and let rest, tented with foil, 10 minutes. Remove twine, then carve breast meat from bone (see photo, below left). Carve into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-thick slices and serve.

GAS-GRILLED STUFFED CHICKEN BREASTS

Follow recipe for Charcoal-Grilled Stuffed Chicken Breasts with Prosciutto and Fontina through step 1. Turn all burners to high, close lid, and heat until hot, about 15 minutes. Scrape grate clean with grill brush. Dip wad of paper towels in vegetable oil; holding wad with tongs, wipe cooking grate. Leave primary burner (burner that will stay on during grilling) on high and turn off other burner(s). Proceed with recipe from step 3, cooking chicken with lid closed and increasing cooking time on cooler side of grill to 30 to 40 minutes.

GRILLED STUFFED CHICKEN BREASTS WITH BLACK FOREST HAM AND GRUYÈRE

Follow recipe for Charcoal-Grilled Stuffed Chicken Breasts with Prosciutto and Fontina, substituting 1 teaspoon minced fresh thyme for tarragon and adding 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard to butter in step 3. Substitute 4 slices Black Forest ham for prosciutto and Gruyère cheese for fontina.

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HOW TO MAKE

- Charcoal-Grilled Stuffed Chicken Breasts with Prosciutto and Fontina

VIDEO TIP

- How cheese melts