

# Old-Fashioned Stuffed Turkey

We read up on American cookery to rescue a rare bird from the brink of extinction—namely, the holiday turkey that has it all.

≧ BY MARCUS WALSER ≦

Nothing has immortalized the Thanksgiving feast quite like Norman Rockwell's iconic painting of a perfectly bronzed turkey glistening on a serving platter. Originally splayed across the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* as a wartime call to action, it's had the unintentional effect of raising the bar for holiday tables ever since.

But the skeptic in me has always wanted a peek beneath the surface of that mahogany-hued bird. Like anyone who's ever roasted a turkey, I know even the best recipes involve compromise. Cook a turkey long enough to get the skin immaculately burnished and the white meat is usually dry as sawdust. Brining adds moisture to the meat, but it can turn skin soggy. Salting (dry-brining) solves the crisping woes, but the drippings get too seasoned to make a proper gravy. Stuffing the cavity compounds the headaches, slowing the roasting time to a crawl and upping the chance for uneven cooking.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder: Could an old-fashioned secret to a turkey with everything in one package—juicy meat, crisply burnished skin, rich-flavored stuffing that cooked inside the bird, and drippings suitable for gravy—actually exist? I went into the test kitchen to find out, once and for all.

## Roastin' to the Oldies

If the key to compromise-free turkey was lost somewhere in time, I had a good idea where to find it: the old-school cookbooks in our library. But as I surveyed bygone wisdom, my heart sank. The oldest recipes were barely recipes at all. "Stuff the craw..., spit it, and lay it down a good distance from the fire, which should be clear and brisk," advised *The Virginia Housewife* (1838). One by one, I discarded recipes for being too vague, too live-fire-specific, or too close to the basic (and unreliable) roast-and-baste method popular to this day. Only one technique, from the classic *Boston Cooking School Cook Book* (1896) by Fannie Farmer, which promised crispier skin on roast chicken, piqued my interest enough to convince me to give it a whirl: rubbing the entire bird with a flour-butter paste. Alas, it was a bust on turkey; the skin was tough, not crisp.

## The Tried and True

It was time to return to proven techniques. First decision: salting or brining? Unwilling to compromise on skin, I opted for salting, which initially draws moisture out of the meat, but after a 24-hour rest in the fridge, all this moisture gets slowly drawn back



For uncommonly rich flavor, we roasted this turkey with strips of salt pork draped over its back.

in, seasoning the meat and helping it retain moisture. In the past we've used as many as 5 tablespoons of salt on the bird—a nonstarter for making gravy from drippings. Reducing to 3 tablespoons allowed for gravy that didn't make tasters wince, but the meat was not quite as juicy and tender.

Maybe I needed to reconsider the roasting method. I'd been using a test-kitchen favorite developed in 1994, where you start the turkey in a blazing hot oven breast-side down, flip it once, and finish at a lower, gentler pace. Since then, we've proved that, across the board, meats from pork chops to roast beef cook more evenly when you reverse the order and start out at a lower oven temperature. Why not whole turkey? I cooked the bird in a gentle 325-degree oven for a couple of hours, then cranked up the temperature to 450 to give it a final blast of skin-crisping heat and to bring the center up to temperature. It worked beautifully, yielding breast meat that was as moist and tender as I could hope for.

As for the skin, some might call it crisp—but I wanted it brittle enough to crunch. I brought out a secret weapon we developed recently for chicken: massaging the skin with a baking powder and salt rub. The baking powder has a twofold effect: It helps skin dehydrate more readily and raises its pH, making it more conducive to browning. At the same time, we poke holes in the skin to help rendering fat escape. This technique was just the ticket, producing skin as crackling-crisp as pork rinds.

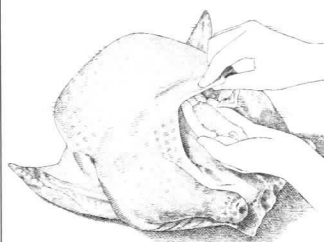
## The Stuff of Dreams

All that was left was the stuffing. I made a basic recipe (toasted cubes of sandwich bread mixed with sautéed celery, onions, herbs, broth, and eggs) and shoehorned as much of it into the turkey as I could, placing the remainder in a baking dish to be cooked separately. For due diligence, I kept the bird in the oven until the stuffing was cooked to a safe 165 degrees—at which point the breast had reached a bone-dry 180 degrees.

To get around this, some recipes have you preheat the stuffing in the microwave before it goes into the bird, so it cooks more or less in tandem with the white meat. I had a different idea. Since my turkey needed to rest a good 30 minutes after roasting anyway, why not remove the undercooked stuffing and finish cooking it on its own as the bird rested? As I took the stuffing out of the bird for my next go-round, I remembered the bland "poor relation" batch waiting to go in the oven. I had a new brainstorm: The parcooked stuffing was saturated with turkey juices, with plenty to spare. If I combined this with the uncooked batch, all the stuffing would get a flavor boost. But with eggs in the mix, the cooked stuffing had firmed up and wouldn't blend easily into the uncooked portion. The solution? I moistened the batch that went in the turkey with broth alone, then waited to add the eggs until I took it out of the bird and combined it with the uncooked portion.

In theory, I now had it all: moist breast meat, crisp skin, and rich stuffing in every bite. Still, today's

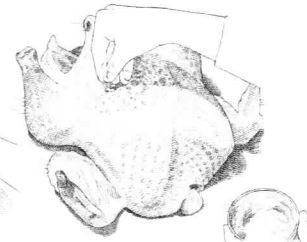
## AT-A-GLANCE | SECRETS TO OLD-FASHIONED STUFFED TURKEY



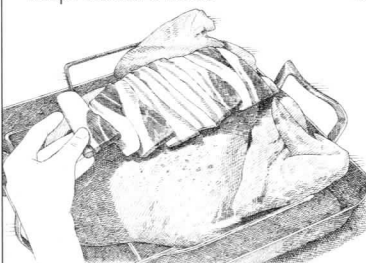
**1. DRY BRINE** Salting turkey 24 to 48 hours seasons meat and keeps moisture inside.



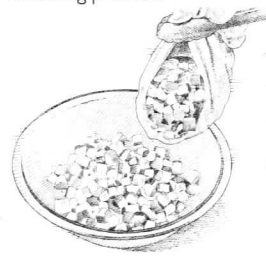
**2. STAB THE FAT** Poking holes in fatty deposits speeds up fat-rendering process.



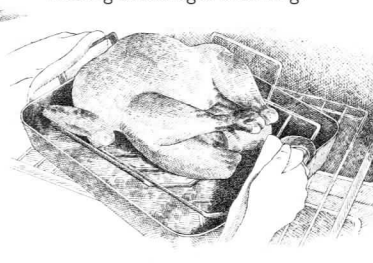
**3. DRY RUB** Rubbing skin with baking powder and salt just before roasting encourages browning.



**4. BARD** Draping strips of salt pork on turkey as it roasts enriches it with deep flavor.



**5. INSIDE/OUTSIDE** Combining stuffing cooked inside bird with uncooked stuffing, then baking, yields best flavor.



**6. HIGH-HEAT FINISH** Blasting bird with intense heat for last 45 minutes of roasting helps crisp skin.

turkeys are milder in flavor, and I couldn't get rid of the nagging feeling that the meat was bland. But short of mail-ordering a heritage bird, what could I do? For inspiration, I went back to our library. This time I grabbed a more contemporary classic: *James Beard's American Cookery* (1972). A variation on the once-popular technique of barding—wrapping lean meat with fattier meat—caught my eye. I salted another turkey, applied the baking powder-salt rub, added the stuffing, and then draped the bird with meaty salt pork. The barded bird smoked heavily in the oven, but its flavor was unbelievably intense. Not unlike the way adding a ham bone to a pot of beans can impart a meaty flavor without making them taste outright porky, the salt pork enhanced the turkey without making its presence too clear. To fix the smoking problem, I removed the salt pork and drained the drippings from the roasting pan before cranking up the heat and returning the bird to the oven.

The resulting meal was perfect—stuffing with crisp edges and a savory flavor from the turkey; tender, juicy breast meat with unparalleled richness; and crackling, golden-brown skin. I even had gravy! I'm not sure if a stuffed Thanksgiving turkey was ever this good in the past, but I know it'll be part of my future.

### OLD-FASHIONED STUFFED TURKEY

SERVES 10 TO 12

**NOTE:** Table salt is not recommended for this recipe because it is too fine. To roast a kosher or self-basting turkey (such as a frozen Butterball), do not salt it in step 1. Look for salt pork that is roughly equal parts fat and lean meat. The bread can be toasted up to 1 day in advance. For our free recipes for Best Turkey Gravy, Sausage and Fennel Stuffing, and Dried Fruit and Nut Stuffing, go to [www.cooksillustrated.com/dec09](http://www.cooksillustrated.com/dec09).

#### Turkey

- 1 turkey (12 to 15 pounds), giblets and neck reserved for gravy, if making (see note)
- 3 tablespoons plus 2 teaspoons kosher salt (see note)
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 12 ounces salt pork, cut into ¼-inch-thick slices and rinsed (see note)

#### Stuffing

- 1½ pounds (about 15 slices) white sandwich bread, cut into ½-inch cubes (about 12 cups)
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, plus extra for baking dish
- 1 medium onion, chopped fine (about 1 cup)
- 2 celery ribs, chopped fine (about 1 cup)
- Kosher salt and ground black pepper
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh thyme leaves
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh marjoram leaves
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh sage leaves
- 1½ cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 1 36-inch square cheesecloth, folded in quarters
- 2 large eggs

**1. FOR THE TURKEY:** Using fingers or handle of wooden spoon, separate turkey skin from meat on breast, legs, thighs, and back; avoid breaking skin. Rub 1 tablespoon salt evenly inside cavity of turkey, 1½ teaspoons salt under skin of each breast, and 1½ teaspoons salt under skin of each leg. Wrap turkey tightly with plastic wrap; refrigerate 24 to 48 hours.

**2. FOR THE STUFFING:** Adjust oven rack to lowest position and heat oven to 250 degrees. Spread bread cubes in single layer on baking sheet; bake until edges have dried but centers are slightly moist (cubes should yield to pressure), about 45 minutes, stirring several times during baking. Transfer to large bowl and increase oven temperature to 325 degrees.

3. While bread dries, heat 4 tablespoons butter in 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat; when foaming subsides, add onion, celery, 2 teaspoons salt, and 1 teaspoon pepper; cook, stirring occasionally, until vegetables begin to soften and brown slightly, 7 to 10 minutes. Stir in herbs; cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add vegetables to bowl with dried bread; add 1 cup broth and toss until evenly moistened.

**4. TO ROAST THE TURKEY:** Combine remaining 2 teaspoons kosher salt and baking powder in small bowl. Remove turkey from refrigerator and unwrap. Thoroughly dry inside and out with paper towels. Using skewer, poke 15 to 20 holes in fat deposits on top of breast halves and thighs, 4 to 5 holes in each deposit. Sprinkle surface of turkey with salt-baking powder mixture and rub in mixture with hands, coating skin evenly. Tuck wings underneath turkey. Line turkey cavity with cheesecloth, pack with 4 to 5 cups stuffing, tie ends of cheesecloth together. Cover remaining stuffing with plastic wrap

and refrigerate. Using twine, loosely tie turkey legs together. Place turkey breast-side down in V-rack set in roasting pan and drape salt pork slices over back.

5. Roast turkey breast-side down until thickest part of breast registers 130 degrees on instant-read thermometer, 2 to 2½ hours. Remove roasting pan from oven (close oven door) and increase oven temperature to 450 degrees. Transfer turkey in V-rack to rimmed baking sheet. Remove and discard salt pork. Using clean potholders or kitchen towels, rotate turkey breast-side up. Cut twine binding legs and remove stuffing bag; empty into reserved stuffing in bowl. Pour drippings from roasting pan into fat separator and reserve for gravy, if making.

6. Once oven has come to temperature, return turkey in V-rack to roasting pan and roast until skin is golden brown and crisp, thickest part of breast registers 160 degrees, and thickest part of thigh registers 175 degrees, about 45 minutes, rotating pan halfway through. Transfer turkey to carving board and let rest, uncovered, 30 minutes.

7. While turkey rests, reduce oven temperature to 400 degrees. Whisk eggs and remaining ½ cup broth together in small bowl. Pour egg mixture over stuffing and toss to combine, breaking up any large chunks; spread in buttered 13- by 9-inch baking dish. Bake until stuffing registers 165 degrees and top is golden brown, about 15 minutes. Carve turkey and serve with stuffing.

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#### HOW TO MAKE

- Old-Fashioned Stuffed Turkey