

How to roast a  
**TURKEY**  
a **BETTER** way  
using the  
**CHEF WOLFE**  
Method

**INSIDE:** How you too can roast a  
24 lbs **TURKEY** in just **2-1/4 hours!**

## CHEF WOLFE'S METHOD FOR ROAST TURKEY

A number of years ago I had the pleasure of studying Culinary Arts under the direction of Chef Kenneth C. Wolfe. Chef Wolfe was the founder and chair of the Culinary Arts Department at Contra Costa College in California and was one of the best teachers I've ever had and he both taught and inspired many of the great Chefs working in the San Francisco bay area and beyond.

One of the key techniques that Chef Wolfe's students learned was his method for roasting turkey. One of the greatest culinary travesties that has been adopted as tradition by most Americans is the way we cook our traditional thanksgiving dinners.

The problem is, a 20-plus pound turkey is not 'designed' to be effectively roasted whole, and especially not whole AND filled with stuffing. If you just look at the geometry of a turkey you will see that some parts are thick, some are thin and in order for the heat of your oven to penetrate far enough through the thick parts of the breast and legs to cook the stuffing to a safe degree, well, by the time that happens, significant parts of the outside of the bird will be overdone. This is why most people's idea of a traditional roast turkey involves dry white meat, and barely moist dark meat (as the Turkey's legs and thighs tend to dry out less quickly than the breast).

Yet this "mal-cooking" of turkeys happens time and again in millions of households across the country every year come November. Why? Well, it has to do with a thing called tradition. Here is a story that Chef Wolfe told his students each year about tradition:

*"How do traditions in cooking develop? Let me tell you a story. A young husband was seated at dinner and asked his wife why she cut off the ends of the ham. She replied, 'Because my mother always did it that way' When he next saw his mother-in-law, he asked her why she cut off the ends of the ham. She answered, 'Because my mother always did it that way.' Fortunately, the old grandmother was still alive, so the next time he saw her he asked, 'Grandmother, why do you cut the ends off your ham?' 'So it will fit in my pan,' she replied."*

In order to try and get around the physics of the problem, and the subsequent overdone turkeys, people have engaged any number of methods and devices to try and keep their Thanksgiving turkeys moist....foil tents, basting, cooking breast side down, basting, pop-up thermometers, basting...etc....ad nauseum. All of this effort and the turkeys STILL turn out FAR less moist than they could, if only folks actually learned to cook the darned things correctly. Chef Wolfe taught his students that instead of trying to fight a losing battle against physics, if you are willing to let go of a little tradition, and take that unwieldy, uneven cooking whole turkey and cut it into relatively even-sized pieces which will cook evenly, instead of from the outside in, you will end up with a perfectly cooked turkey that is far better than what you've been accustomed to.

Here then, is Chef Wolfe's Turkey Roasting Method. The text and images are excerpted from the book, Chef Wolfe's New American Turkey Cookery with a few minor edits and additions from yours truly.

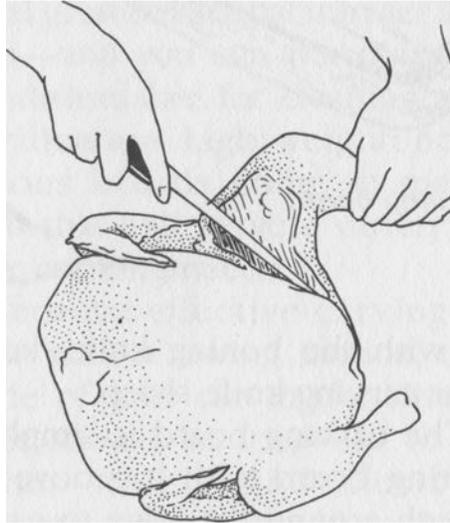
Enjoy,

-Patrice

## THE BASIC CUTS

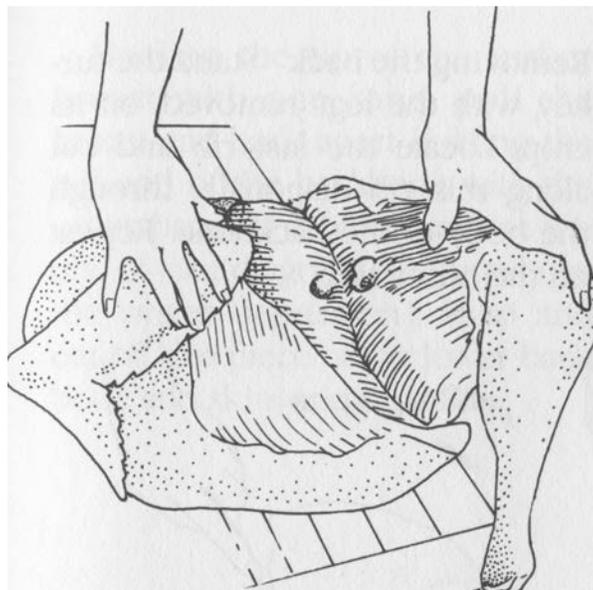
### Removing the legs:

Pull drumstick and thigh away from body. With boning knife, slit skin to separate thigh from body. Do not cut into the flesh.



**Figure 1: Removing the legs 1**

Slide the turkey to the edge of the cutting board or table. Hold the breast down firmly with one hand, and with the other hand press the leg down over the edge until the hip joint snaps, projecting the head of the thigh bone up and out of the socket.



**Figure 2 Removing the legs 2**

Turn the turkey breast on its side with the disjointed leg on top and separate the leg more completely from the body.

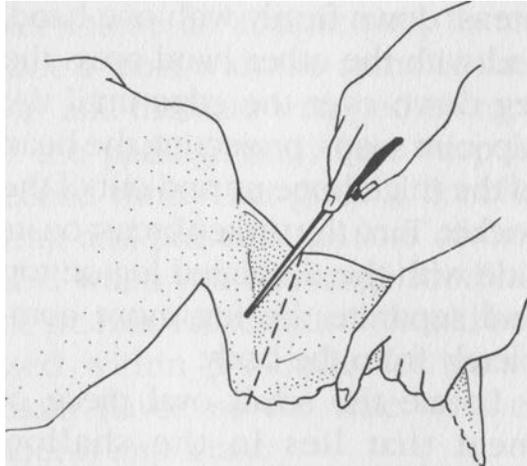
Locate the small oval piece of meat that lies in the shallow basinlike depression of the lower back next to the backbone. This tender bit of flesh is called the oyster. With the tip of your boning knife, carefully

cut around this choice bit of meat. Cut the leg free along the backbone, pulling the leg away gently as you cut.

Repeat the procedure to remove the other leg.

### **Removing the wings:**

Pull the wing firmly away from the body and stretch it to its full length. Cut at the second joint, leaving the first section attached to the breast.



Cut the wing tip off at the last joint and set the two pieces from each wing (the tip and middle section) aside.

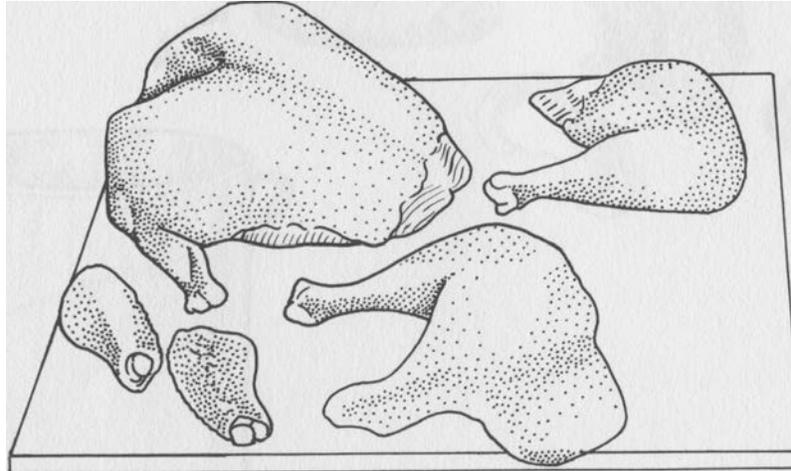
### **Removing the back:**

Stand the turkey, with the legs removed, on its crop. Locate the last rib and cut along this rib diagonally through the body to the backbone. Repeat on the other side. Snap and cut off lower back bone and skin.



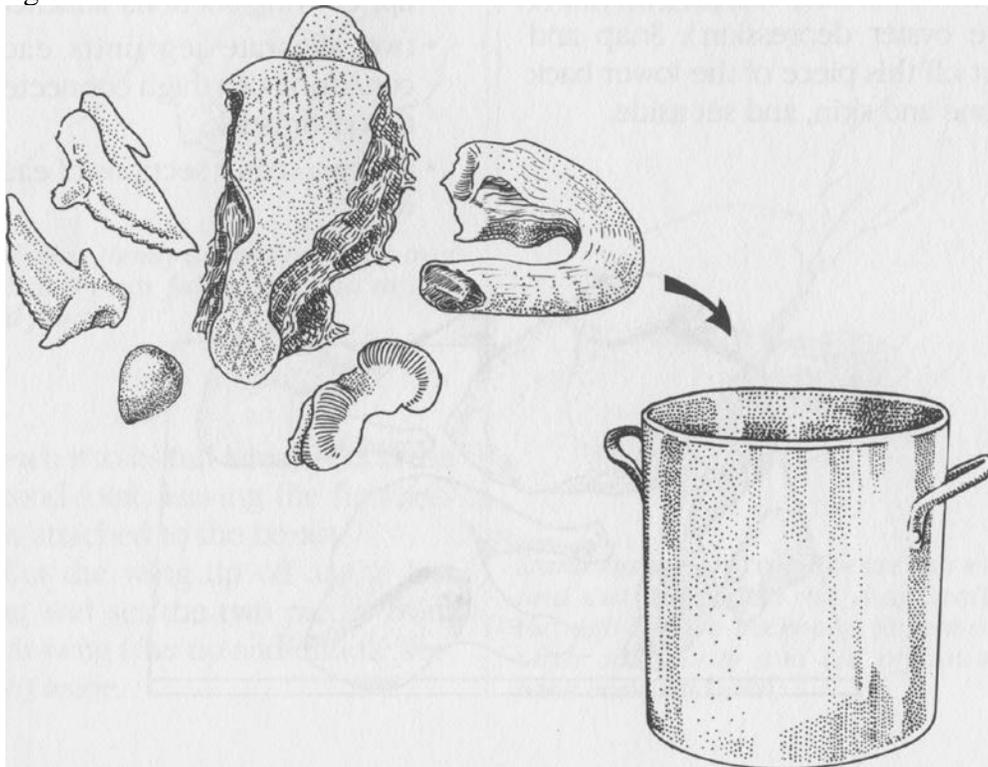
At this point, you should have the following parts from which we will be making the recipes in this book:

- 1) The breast on the bone, cut in the new manner, with only the upper wing sections attached
- 2) Two separate leg units each consisting of a thigh connected to a drumstick
- 3) The two center sections of each wing.



**Figure 3: Finished parts for Roasting**

The two wing tips, the backbone of the carcass, and the neck, gizzard, heart, and skin trimmings will be used for making stock.



**Figure 4: Parts for Stock**

## THE TRADITIONAL "WHOLE TURKEY:

### MASTER RESCIPE FOR THE TURKEY ROAST

If the ceremonial presentation of the whole turkey is part of your family's holiday tradition and if carving at the table is important to the occasion, you can roast a handsome "whole" turkey using the techniques of the new turkey cookery, with one major exception: it will take only 2-1/4 hours to cook!

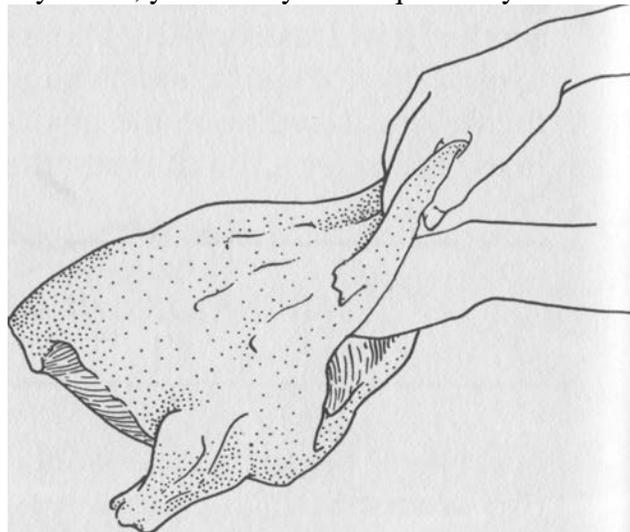
By disjuncting and dividing the turkey according to the guidelines of Chapter 1, you can roast the bird (whole breast on the bone and two drumstick-thigh pieces), reassemble it on a platter, garnish it, and present it for carving at the head of the table. With the legs repositioned on each side of the base of the breast, the turkey will look like Grandma's, but your family and guests will enjoy white meat that is more moist and tender than ever before. The dark meat will be juicy and rich and the whole turkey will be easier to carve off the bone.

### SEASONING

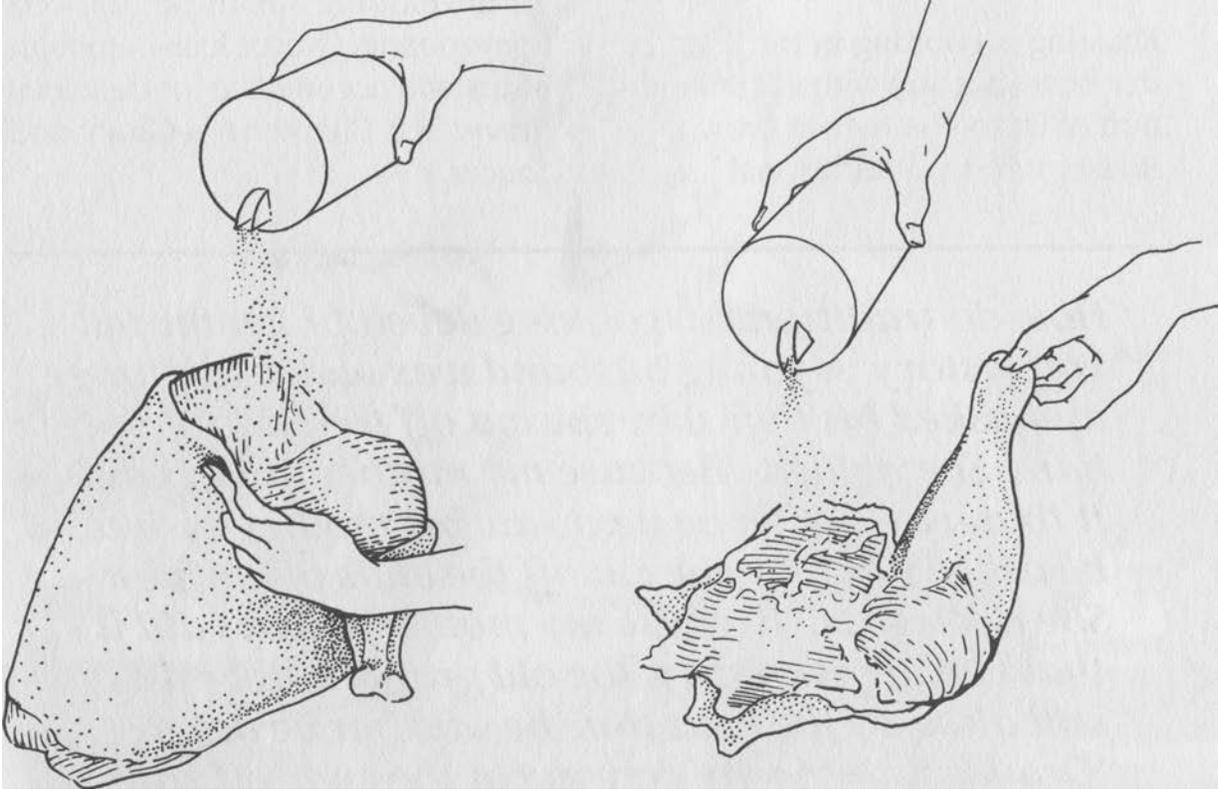
A light brushing with oil is needed to help start the browning of the bird.

You may salt the skin of the breast and drumstick-thigh pieces if you wish, even though most of the salt will flow off the turkey with the melting fat of the skin.

The best way to season the turkey is to salt the uncovered flesh on the underside of the breast and legs. Place your hand inside the neck cavity and, with your fingers, gently loosen the skin away from the flesh. Stand the carcass crop-side up, pull the skin back, and salt the breast meat. Preferably, do this several hours before roasting for maximum penetration. Penetration is more effective when salt is applied to a moist surface. So, after you wash the meat, do not dry it; salt it while it is wet. The use of additional seasoning is optional—some cooks like to lay a bouquet of fresh herbs in the hollow under the breast—but, when properly salted, your turkey will require very little additional flavoring.



**Figure 5: Salting the Breast and Thigh-Drumstick:  
Place hand inside crop; gently loosen skin**



**Figure 6: Stand carcass crop-side up, pull skin back, salt breast meat.**

## **THE ROASTING PROCESS**

Roasting is cooking in the oven by dry heat (hot air) with a light addition of fat to commence browning. Roasts need no additional water.

In fact, it is important to use a low-rimmed pan to assure that all developing steam be allowed to evaporate. (Never fear—enough juices will accumulate for delicious gravy)

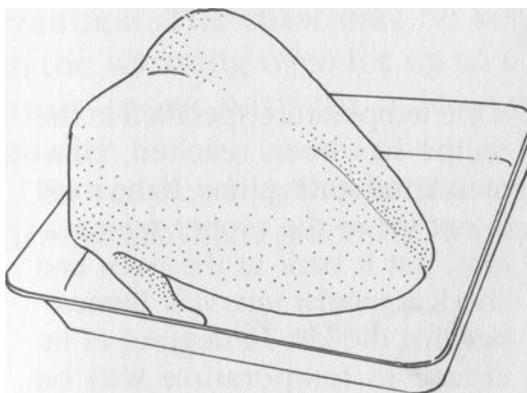
Contrary to popular guidelines, the length of roasting time should not depend on the weight of the turkey. Roasting time depends on the size and type of roast, as well as the temperature of the oven and the temperature of the meat at the time it is put into the oven. It is the understanding of this principle that enables us to roast our turkey to perfection in a much shorter time than roasting a turkey without having disjointed it.

After you have disjointed the turkey, preheat your oven to 450° F - 100° hotter than the temperature required for your roast.' The higher temperature will help compensate for the heat lost when you open the oven door and put in the cold turkey in its cold (oiled) pan.

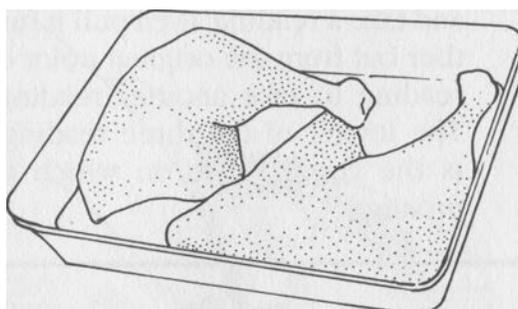
*It is very important to note that oven temperatures tend to vary in each stove. Therefore, it is essential that you determine the accuracy of your oven temperature. Oven thermometers are available at all cookware stores. Remember that your oven dial does not necessarily reflect the oven's true temperature.*

Position the now-trimmed breast section in the oiled pan, neck-cavity side up. In that position it becomes self-basting because the fat in the skin will melt and flow over the breast during roasting. The fat skin covered neck cavity sticks up into the air. The breast sits on its large cavity in its pan and creates the hollow in which the heat can circulate to cook the meat faster.

Lay the disjointed drumstick- thigh pieces skin-side up (and underside salted) in the same pan with the breast. If an additional oven is available, these pieces can be roasted separately in another oiled pan. This is especially helpful when using the larger birds.



**Figure 7: Trimmed breast, in self basting position, ready for the oven.**



**Figure 8: Thigh-drumstick pieces ready for the oven.**

Put the turkey into the oven,, close the door, then adjust the temperature to 350° F, and begin timing. The breast of a large 22- to 24-pound torn turkey still on the carcass, along with the drumstick-thigh pieces, will now cook in approximately 2-1/4 hours.

After roasting for 2 to 2-1/4 hours, check the turkey for internal temperature. The target temperature for the thickest part of the breast of the turkey should be 150° F and any juices from the turkey should run clear

**NOTE:**

While some internal temperature guidelines for turkey quote 165° as the target minimum internal temperature, testing has shown that a better and equally safe temperature that results in a much juicier breast is 150° F. For information on the 150° F recommendation and comparative food safety, please see:

["The Last Thanksgiving Turkey Video You Need to Watch"](#)

#### USING THE MEAT THERMOMETER

- 1) Use only professional style thermometers which have only degrees marked on the dial.
- 2) When the approximate roasting time has been reached, remove the roast and its pan from the oven and search out the thickest part of the meat.
- 3) Insert the thermometer quickly in the center of the thickest part and take a reading at once.
- 4) Push the thermometer further in and take a reading, then pull it further out from the original point of reading to take another reading. The lowest of the three readings is the correct one on which to proceed.
- 5) If the temperature specified in the recipe has been reached, commence the setting time. If the roast is not yet at the proper temperature, put it back in the oven and check at regular intervals. Remember that the last 10 degrees of increase in temperature will be achieved very quickly. A roast that checks at 125° F may need only 5 minutes more in the oven to reach the proper temperature.
- 6) If the roast is overcooked, place it on a cold plate and in a cool spot to prevent further heat penetration.

If the Turkey has reached the desired temperature, the turkey pieces should be removed from the oven. Remember that no roast should be carved immediately upon removal from the oven. For this size turkey, a minimum of 20 minutes for "setting" or recirculation is absolutely essential. (This allows the juices to redistribute themselves and equalize their pressure and heat throughout the tissues of the meat.)

During the first 10 minutes at room temperature, the roast stops cooking. During the next 10 minutes, the roast may be kept in a warming oven that does not exceed 140° F. At higher temperatures, the roasting process will continue. The roast may be kept in the warming oven for up to 1/2 hour more without a loss of quality.

To reassemble the breast and drumstick-thigh pieces on a platter for presentation, place the breast, crop-side up, in the center of the plate. Position the drumstick-thighs on each side in as natural a position as possible. Garnish with small bunches of parsley and cherry tomatoes.



## NOTES

**11/24/2020**

A lot has changed in the world of culinary science (and home cooking habits of regular folks) since I first studied with Chef Wolfe in 1982. There are new methods and approaches to cooking such as the Modernist Cuisine school, which focus on science over culinary tradition to explore new and sometimes better ways to achieve excellent results in cooking. Along the way, reexamination of long-held traditions (see Chef Wolfe's admonition about "tradition" near the beginning) through a scientific lens, has again changed some of what we know and should apply to what was, 30+ years ago, Chef Wolfe's then-new approach to roasting a turkey.

When I originally wrote up this excerpt from Chef Wolfe's book on Turkey Cookery, I stuck to the text of the original. In recognition that the old-fashioned Weight/Time/Temperature model was out of date I've updated the temperature target to a more modest, but still equally safe 150° F.

I have also added a few additional links and changed some of the wording to be a little clearer. I hope these changes help you in your search for a perfect roast turkey.

Thanks to Mark Pankratz and Gregory Sutter for their input and feedback.

-Patrice Mackey aka Chef Juke