

Easy Roast Turkey Breast

Achieving crisp skin without drying out the delicate white meat is easier said than done when roasting a whole turkey breast.

BY CHARLES KELSEY

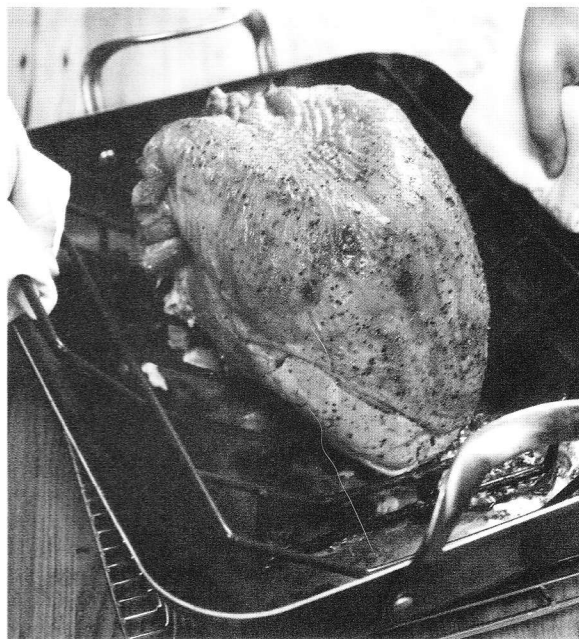
Roasting a whole turkey breast should be easy. The biggest challenge with the holiday bird is that the dark meat takes longer to cook than the white meat; this is neatly avoided by the all-white breast. And the stuffing, which slows down the whole process and makes it much more cumbersome, is a nonissue. You have no choice but to bake the holiday dressing separately. So why have I had such trouble with this seemingly easy recipe?

I like turkey and roast a whole breast several times a year. Sometimes the meat is moist and juicy, but more often than not the lean white meat comes out chalky and dry. The layers closest to the skin get especially parched as the meat near the bone takes its time coming up to temperature, and the skin is never as crisp as I'd like.

Back to Basics

Over the years, the test kitchen has discovered that brining (soaking in a saltwater solution for several hours) makes turkey moister. The salt changes the protein structure in the meat and helps it hold on to more moisture. Brining is especially helpful with delicate white meat, so it came as no surprise that brined turkey breasts were clearly juicier than unbrined turkey breasts. But brining is not enough. The right roasting technique is a must, too.

Thinking that a turkey breast is little more than a giant chicken breast, I looked to a method the test kitchen developed several years ago for roasting whole bone-in, skin-on chicken breasts. For this recipe, the skin on the whole chicken breasts is loosened and the meat is rubbed with softened butter. Loosening the skin helps it to



Loosening the skin and rubbing butter underneath help ensure flavorful, juicy results.

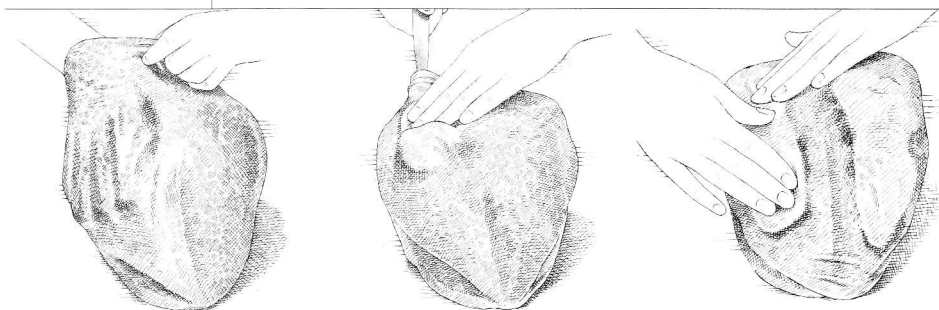
lift and separate from the meat, which promotes even browning and creates crisper skin. The fat in the butter also keeps the breast meat moist and adds much-needed flavor. We found that roasting the chicken breasts skin-side up in a 450-degree oven delivered excellent results. Could I apply the same technique to a whole turkey breast that weighed four times as much?

I brined a turkey breast, loosened the skin, rubbed the meat with butter, and set the breast skin-side up in a V-rack placed inside a roasting pan. (While chicken breasts can be roasted on a broiler-pan top, larger cuts like a bone-in turkey breast do better in a V-rack, which promotes better air circulation.) At 450 degrees, the skin scorched and the meat was much too dry. I tried the opposite approach and reduced the oven temperature to 325 degrees. After a couple of hours in the oven, my turkey breast emerged with flabby, straw-colored skin—certainly not the look I was going for. The meat, however, was a different story: It was tender and flavorful.

Desiring browner, crisper skin meant trying higher oven temperatures. I hoped that starting the turkey breast out at 325 degrees would conserve moisture in the meat and that a last-minute blast of heat would crisp the skin. But it was difficult to know when to crank up the heat. More worrisome, I found it hard to control the amount of browning, and the meat had a slightly leathery exterior. Not the best results, but I felt like I was getting somewhere using dual oven temperatures.

After testing several more oven temperature combinations, I finally found the best method: Starting the turkey breast in a 425-degree oven for the first half hour of cooking and then

STEP-BY-STEP | PREPARING A TURKEY BREAST FOR ROASTING



1. Using hands, separate skin from meat, taking care to not tear membrane around perimeter of breast; release skin on either side of breastbone.

2. Using spoon, work half of softened butter under skin on one side of breast. Repeat with remaining butter on other side of breast.

3. Using hands, gently rub turkey skin to evenly distribute butter over entire breast.

How to Brine a Turkey Breast

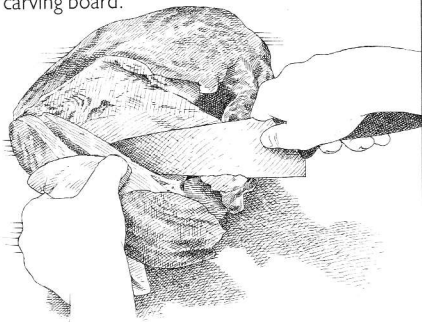
A natural turkey breast works just fine for this recipe; however, to ensure that the meat turns out moist and well-seasoned, we suggest that you brine a natural turkey breast following the directions below. Do not brine a kosher or self-basting turkey breast.

Dissolve ½ cup of table salt (or ¾ cup of kosher salt) in 4 quarts of cold water in a large container; submerge the turkey breast in brine, cover it with plastic wrap, and refrigerate it for three to six hours. (Do not brine the turkey breast any longer, or it will be too salty.) Rinse the turkey breast under cold water and dry it thoroughly with paper towels.

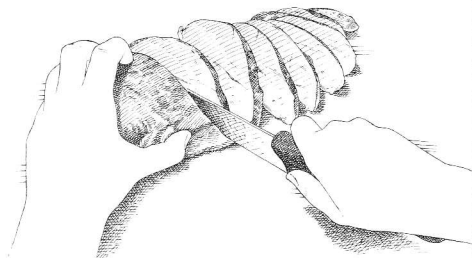
TECHNIQUE | CARVING A

TURKEY BREAST

To ensure that the juices in the meat have time to redistribute, let the roasted turkey breast rest for 20 minutes before attempting to carve it. Skipping this step will result in a flood of turkey juices on your carving board.



1. Run carving or chef's knife along one side of breastbone. Use other hand (with towel to protect it from heat) to pry entire breast half from bone while cutting, being mindful to keep skin intact.



2. Slice breast meat on bias. Repeat process with meat on other side of breastbone.

reducing the heat to 325 degrees for the remaining hour. The initial blast of heat kick-starts the browning, ensuring the skin is beautifully golden by the end of the cooking time. And the low temperature gently finishes the turkey meat, helping it stay moist and tender.

One minor problem, though: During the high-heat roasting, the minimal drippings in the pan burned, smoking up the oven and, eventually, the test kitchen. A quick solution was to add water to the roasting pan before cooking. A cup was the perfect amount; any more and too much steam formed, prohibiting parts of the skin from browning properly.

Buttery Goodness

I had one last round of tests to conduct. I was adding salt and pepper to the 4 tablespoons of butter I was rubbing over the turkey meat, and I wondered what other flavors might work. Fresh herbs, citrus zest, garlic, and even ground spices were easy to incorporate into the softened butter mixture and gave the turkey a significant flavor boost. In order to make sure these flavors didn't overwhelm small patches of the turkey breast, I found it imperative to massage the

butter evenly into the meat. Dividing the butter mixture in half and working each portion over one side of the breast guaranteed that the butter and seasonings were evenly applied.

My final recipe isn't any harder than the failed recipes I tried. But the butter and dual oven temperatures ensure that the skin is really crisp and the meat is flavorful and moist. I now have a recipe I look forward to making several times a year.

EASY ROAST TURKEY BREAST

SERVES 8 TO 10

This recipe works equally well with any type of turkey breast. We recommend brining (see page 14) if using a natural turkey breast (no salt added). Using a kosher turkey breast (soaked in salt water during processing) or self-basting turkey breast (injected with salt and water) eliminates the need for brining. The ingredient list on the turkey breast's package will say whether it's been treated with salt. If brining the turkey, omit the salt from the recipe. If the breast has a pop-up timer, do not remove it. Just ignore it (they pop too late) and follow the times and temperatures in the recipe. A turkey breast doesn't yield much in the way of drippings, so a classic pan gravy recipe is not an option. Instead, try our All-Purpose Gravy, available free at www.cooksillustrated.com/december, which doesn't require any drippings. Our Oven-Baked Holiday Stuffing recipes are also available free at www.cooksillustrated.com/december.

- 4 tablespoons (½ stick) unsalted butter, softened
- ¾ teaspoon table salt
- ¼ teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1 whole bone-in, skin-on turkey breast (6 to 7 pounds), trimmed of excess fat and patted dry with paper towels (see note above)
- 1 cup water

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 425 degrees. Mix butter, salt, and pepper in medium bowl with rubber spatula until thoroughly combined. Following illustration 1 on page 14, carefully separate turkey skin from meat over breast; avoid breaking skin.

2. Following illustrations 2 and 3, work butter mixture under skin on both sides of breast and rub skin of turkey to evenly distribute butter over breast. Spray V-rack with nonstick cooking spray and set inside large roasting pan. Place turkey in rack with skin side facing up; pour water into roasting pan.

3. Roast turkey for 30 minutes. Reduce oven temperature to 325 degrees. Continue to roast turkey until thickest part of breast registers 160 degrees on instant-read thermometer, about 1 hour longer. Transfer turkey to carving board and let rest for 20 minutes. Carve (see illustrations above) and serve.

EQUIPMENT TESTING:

Refrigerator Thermometers

Holiday cooking means constantly opening your refrigerator and freezer, which can cause the temperatures to rise. To monitor the safety of our cold storage, we use refrigerator and freezer thermometers. We recently tested six models and ranked the Maverick Cold Check Digital Refrigerator/Freezer Thermometer (\$34.95) first. Though relatively pricey, it is the only model that simultaneously monitors the temperature in both the freezer and refrigerator, thanks to a 75-inch wire probe that runs from the display (which you keep in the refrigerator) to the freezer. For complete results of this testing,

go to www.cooksillustrated.com/december.

—Elizabeth Bomze



DOUBLE-DUTY THERMOMETER

EASY ROAST TURKEY BREAST WITH LEMON AND THYME

Follow recipe for Easy Roast Turkey Breast, adding 3 medium garlic cloves, minced or pressed through garlic press (about 1 tablespoon), 2 tablespoons minced fresh thyme leaves, and 1 teaspoon grated zest from 1 lemon to butter mixture in step 1.

EASY ROAST TURKEY BREAST WITH ORANGE AND ROSEMARY

Follow recipe for Easy Roast Turkey Breast, adding 3 medium garlic cloves, minced or pressed through garlic press (about 1 tablespoon), 1 tablespoon minced fresh rosemary, 1 teaspoon grated zest from 1 orange, and ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes to butter mixture in step 1.

EASY ROAST TURKEY BREAST WITH SOUTHWESTERN FLAVORS

Follow recipe for Easy Roast Turkey Breast, adding 3 medium garlic cloves, minced or pressed through garlic press (about 1 tablespoon), 1 tablespoon minced fresh oregano leaves, 2 teaspoons ground cumin, 2 teaspoons chili powder, ¾ teaspoon cocoa powder, and ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper to butter mixture in step 1.

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HOW TO MAKE

- Easy Roast Turkey Breast

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