

Cook's Illustrated Turkey 101

What can the label tell me about my turkey?

Not all turkeys are the same, and the differences are spelled out on the label. The most common commercial turkey, the Broad-Breasted White, contains up to 70 percent white meat. Other breeds of turkey, call heritage birds, contain more dark meat.

The terms “kosher” and “prebasted” refer to the way the turkey was prepared. Prebasted turkeys have been injected with a mixture of salt, turkey broth, oil, sugar, and sodium phosphate to enhance flavor. Kosher birds are processed according to Jewish dietary law and under rabbinical supervision. The carcasses are covered in kosher salt and then rinsed multiple times in cold water, which works to season the meat, improve its texture, and help it retain moisture. (The Shelton's turkeys that the Co-op carries are neither kosher or prebasted.)

What's the best way to thaw a frozen turkey?

Defrost the turkey in the refrigerator, calculating one day of defrosting for every 4 pounds of turkey. Say you're cooking a 12 pound turkey. The frozen bird should be placed in the refrigerator on Monday so that it's defrosted and ready to cook on Thanksgiving Day. If you plan on brining your bird the night before the big day (see question below), start thawing that 12 pound bird on Sunday.

What if I don't thaw ahead of time?

Don't panic. You can still save the situation. Fill a large bucket with **cold** water. Place the turkey (still in its original wrapper) in the bucket and let thaw for 30 minutes per pound; a 12 pound bird, for example, would take 6 to 8 hours. Change the cold water **every half hour** to guard against bacteria growth.

What are the turkey parts included with my bird? Do I use them or throw them away?

The turkey's cavities often contain the neck, heart, gizzard (part of the bird's stomach), and liver. Don't be intimidated: The heart, neck and gizzard are flavor powerhouses that can greatly enhance your gravy. We brown, then sweat and discard them to extract meaty flavor. The liver, however, has a potent, unpleasant flavor that can ruin a good gravy; do not use it.

How should I brine a turkey?

We sometimes brine turkey to make it moist and flavorful. Our overnight brine (12 to 14 hours) uses half a cup of table salt per gallon of cold water. For a quicker brine (4 to 6 hours), we use a whole cup of table salt per gallon of water. Depending on the size of the bird and your brining bucket, you will need 2 to 3 gallons of water. Keep the turkey in the refrigerator while brining to keep it at a safe temperature. If your refrigerator is full, use a big cooler and ice packs. Don't leave the turkey in the brine longer than we suggest or it will be too salty. At the recommended hour, rinse off the salty water and pat the turkey dry with paper towels.

Is it better to stuff the turkey or serve dressing?

In the test kitchen, we prefer to cook the stuffing, or dressing, separately. Cooking the stuffing inside the bird to a safe internal temperature takes too long: By the time the stuffing is safe to eat, the meat is overcooked. Instead we bake our dressing in a dish alongside the turkey, or while the turkey rests. The crisp crust is a bonus. Still, we recognize that every family has its own Thanksgiving traditions. If your demands a stuffed bird, take the turkey out of the oven when the meat is done, scoop out the stuffing,

and finish baking it in a dish while the turkey rests. Stuffing should reach a minimum temperature of 165 degrees.

Do I need to truss the bird?

To prevent the legs from splaying open, which could make them cook unevenly, we tuck them into the pocket of skin at the tail end. Not all turkeys have such a pocket. If yours doesn't, tie the ankles together with kitchen twine. There's no need to fuss with trussing.

What about basting?

Despite what you've been told, basting does nothing to moisten dry breast meat. The liquid simply runs off the turkey, at the same time turning the skin chewy and leathery. Basting also requires that you incessantly open and close the oven, which means you won't be sitting down for Thanksgiving dinner anytime soon.

How do I know if my turkey is done?

Many supermarket turkeys come with a preinserted timer set to pop when the temperature of the bird reaches 178 degrees Fahrenheit. But if you wait that long your breast meat will be dry and overcooked. We recommend that you remove the bird from the oven when the breast temperature reaches 165 degrees and the thickest part of the thighs reaches between 170 and 175 degrees.

To take the temperature of the breast, insert the thermometer into the deepest part of the breast, holding it parallel to the bird at the neck end. Confirm the temperature by inserting the thermometer in both sides of the breast, being careful to not go so deep as to hit the bone (which can compromise the reading).

To take the temperature of the thigh, insert the thermometer into the thickest portion of the thigh away from the bone. Confirm the temperature by inserting the thermometer in both thighs.

Why is turkey meat still pink sometimes, despite being fully cooked?

Just because a slice of turkey has a pinkish tint doesn't necessarily mean it's underdone. In general, the red or pink color in meat comes from the red protein pigment called myoglobin in the muscle cells that store oxygen. When oxygen is attached to myoglobin in the cells, it is bright red. As turkey (or chicken) roasts in the oven, the oxygen attached to the myoglobin is released, and the meat becomes lighter and browner in color. However, if there are trace amounts of other gases formed in a hot oven or grill, they may react to the myoglobin to produce a pink color, even if the turkey is fully cooked. When cooking turkey or other poultry, don't be afraid if you see a little bit of pink. As long as the meat has registered the prescribed temperature on your thermometer, it's perfectly safe to eat.

Why does it take longer for chicken's or turkey's dark meat to cook than the white meat?

Dark meat stores and uses oxygen differently than white meat. It consists of dark cells, which make up what are known as slow-twitch fibers and are necessary for long, slow, continuous activity. Thus the legs of chickens and turkeys, composed of long, slow, active muscles, are fattier and denser and require more time to cook.

Does the turkey really need to rest before I carve it?

Yes. Thirty minutes or so gives it time to reabsorb the juices; otherwise they'll dribble out when you slice, and the meat will be dry. Don't tent the turkey with foil to keep it warm while it's resting; it's unnecessary and will make the skin soggy. As long as the turkey is intact, it will cool quite slowly.

What's the best way to carve a turkey?

Despite the clichéd image of a proud father slicing at the table, carving is a messy job. Better to get down and dirty in the kitchen, where you can break down the turkey and carve neat, picture-perfect slices without anyone seeing.

1. Slice through the skin between the breast and leg and, using your hands, pull the leg quarters down until the joint between breast and leg is exposed. Remove the leg by cutting between the hip joint and any attached skin. Repeat with the opposite leg. Remove the wings by cutting through the wing joints.
2. Separate the thighs from the drumsticks by cutting between the joint that connects the two. Leave the drumsticks whole and slice the thigh meat off the bone.
3. Remove the breast meat from the carcass by running the tip of the knife along the breastbone.
4. Use your other hand to hold and pry meat from the bone as you cut.