

BLAME NORMAN

BY CLAUD MANN



I was talking with a Turkish friend recently about Thanksgiving dinner. At one point she confided that, even after years of preparing this traditional American spread for her family, she still never felt quite comfortable about the whole thing. Assuming that she needed my help coordinating the delivery of so many items to the table at one time, I annoyingly offered to come to the rescue this year if so required.

She laughed and explained, “No, no, that’s not at all what I meant—it just seems like so little food to serve, especially for a holiday. In Turkey, there are usually more dishes in an everyday family meal, and on special occasions we serve dozens of dishes.” It got me thinking. Perhaps our Anglo-Saxon custom of serving one main protein course accompanied by a starch and vegetable doesn’t leave the average cook primed to, once a year, whip up multiple courses, relishes, a stuffing or two, an assortment of picture-perfect pies, and that virtually unattainable grail: lumpless gravy made *a la minute* from real or imagined pan drippings. Another factor that can’t help is the pressure of being outnumbered by drunken in-laws (one of whom is usually halfway hoping that this year you’ll drop the ball and forget something crucial so they don’t feel quite so inept for forgetting to remove that little nuclear baggie of duplicate mystery organs from the bird when it was their turn to host dinner last year).

And then there is the turkey. Empty adages notwithstanding, the simplest things really *can* often be the most difficult to accomplish. A perfectly roasted bird is truly a thing to behold (and should be mastered early on by anyone building a cooking repertoire). And in my experience the larger the bird, the trickier it is to get its various parts to pass the finish line at the same time. Too often the results can be painfully dry, throat-lodging splinters of breast meat or equally disturbing knife-resistant thigh quarters that pool blood deep on the serving platter, chew like rubber bands and

cause young children to cry.

A quail cooks in minutes, a game hen in well under an hour. A large turkey can take longer than a Wim Wenders retrospective and the more time it spends in the oven, the less likely that dark and light cuts will reach their zenith simultaneously. I think that over the years, many of the trendy turkey cooking methods were attempts to address this fundamental dilemma. My grandmother’s generation was fond of larding the breast meat with raw bacon and butter patties for moistness; my mother was known to slip a whole turkey into an enormous paper bag before roasting it, and the past two decades alone have borne witness to a wide range of techniques, each with its own passionate army of well-fed enthusiasts.

The most disturbing of these (and for this I’ll get a lot of flack from my Southern cousins) is the testosterone-charged cult of the deep-fried turkey. I know I sound like a stick-in-the-mud, but to me no matter how tasty the result, combining a precariously perched 60-quart stockpot of screaming hot oil over open flame, a partially frozen turkey, a tank of liquid propane, giant marinade-filled hypodermic needles and a half dozen beer swilling guys in someone’s garage has a risk-benefit calculus analogous to running with the bulls as part of a basic cardio fitness regimen. Even if at the end of the day your house is still standing and nobody has checked into a burn ward, you’re left with zero drippings for gravy and a heck of a lot of dirty oil that can’t be poured down the sink (unless, of course, you’re renting).

Although I’m as big a fan of a good portmanteau as the next guy (brunch anyone?), the *turducken* is another concept turkey with which I’m still not fully comfortable. On its surface the layered idea is ingenious—almost an edible Russian doll arrangement: a small chicken nested cozily inside a duck, which is in turn placed inside a turkey. (In the much rarer *volturducken*, the turkey is ultimately nested inside a classic Volkswagen.) But anyone who has ever attempted to glove-bone poultry knows just how long each bird spends at incubation temperature while being relieved of its skeleton (which, until removed, naturally provides both moistness and flavor). And unless you really know your stuff, the final product of this labor-intensive exercise can be, as they say in the business, a lot more sizzle than steak.

Of all the cooking methods aimed at mitigating dry breast meat, the most scientifically analytical approach is one that I have affectionately come to know as the Briners Club. Easily identifiable, Briners Club members can usually be found gathered around a submerged turkey discussing yummy-sounding topics like osmosis, diffusion, semipermeable membranes and spontaneous thermal agitation. The upside to brining: It works; the breast meat stays moist while the dark roasts to a succulent finish. The downside: finding a vessel large enough to submerge a 22-pound turkey in a saltwater solution and then somehow holding everything below 40° for the 12 to 36 hours it needs for the brine to work its magic. A large cooler with plenty of ice works well, but I've seen people use nonreactive stockpots, giant Ziploc bags or even communal brining arrangements with multiple birds bobbing merrily in a bathtub (which is always a little shocking at first glance).

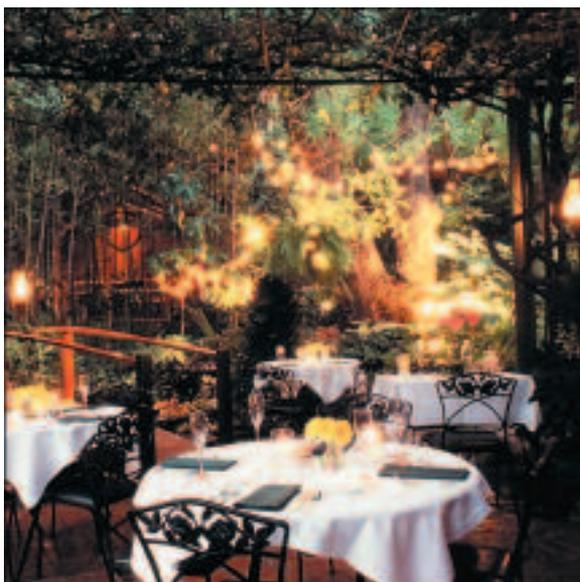
Over-brining is definitely a danger, especially if your turkey is kosher or self-basting—another good reason for purchasing an organic or heirloom bird. Telltale signs that a turkey might be over-brined: pinkish, almost ham-like meat, pan drippings and stuffing too salty for human consumption, and salt sensitive or hypertensive family members dramatically clutching their chests or popping nitroglycerin tablets like after-dinner mints. I hold Norman Rockwell responsible for most of these unnecessary culinary contortions. His iconic depiction of the kindly über-grandma presenting that legendary glistening and impossibly perfect turkey to a table full of adoring family members has become the unfair standard against which all other roast turkeys will forever be measured. It is almost as if the *idea* of the bounteous bird and its tableside 15 minutes of fame has come to overshadow its original purpose, which is simply to be eaten and enjoyed. It is in this original spirit that I suggest the unthinkable: Do what restaurants have done for years and take your turkey

apart. Do it yourself or have your butcher do it for you, leave the breastbone and skin on and keep the carcass. It will be juicier and more flavorful if the turkey has never been frozen.

Brush the various parts with herbed melted butter or olive oil, season as desired and then arrange the breasts, legs and thighs skin-side-up over a bed of aromatic vegetables and herbs like carrot, celery, onion, shallots, fennel, garlic, thyme, sage, etc. (Leave plenty of room between pieces or use two pans for maximum browning.), roast for 20 minutes at 450° and then moisten the vegetable bed with a little white wine, reduce heat to 325° and continue roasting another 60 to 90 minutes (depending on the turkey's size) until the breast registers 155–160°, and the thighs 175–180° on an instant-read thermometer. Let the meat rest 20 minutes before carving across the grain. Serve the roasted veggies as a side dish or combine them with the reserved carcass and giblets in a stockpot and cover with cold water to make a fabulously rich stock for gravy.

If you absolutely can't imagine your Thanksgiving table without a celebrity presentation turkey, there is still hope: Go the fishes and loaves route and buy a tiny "stunt turkey stand in" to brown off and briefly present to the table, leaving your guests to gasp at how you served so many with so little. Another creative alternative is the one-time investment in a piece of genuine food art. For only \$160 + tax and shipping (auntbubbiesfakefood.com) you can own an authentic turkey replica to be trayed and displayed proudly year in and year out. Tell 'em Norman sent you.

Claud Mann has cooked professionally for more than 25 years. His recipes and/or rambling essays have been featured in the New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Daily News, USA Today and Cooking Light. He is the co-publisher of Edible Ojai.



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