

Pastured Turkey Cooking Tips 9/11/2013

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Thanksgiving is powerful, isn't it? Two or three generations prepare a meal together. Families come together to sit down, break bread and say what they are thankful for.

If we're going to the trouble of coming together in this way for one meal, doesn't it make sense to fill the table thoughtfully, with ingredients that inspire true gratefulness? Opting for a pastured turkey instead of an industrial turkey is one of the best ways to anchor your meal in gratitude.

Industrial vs. Pastured Turkey

Industrial turkey is bland and flaccid, pumped with watery solutions in an attempt to improve texture and add "flavor." The meat comes from birds bred with breasts so big they can't

reproduce naturally, let alone fly. They are debeaked, deprived of outdoor access, fed an unnatural diet, and can't survive without controversial antibiotics.

Pastured turkey meat is richly flavored, lean and nutritious. It comes from animals that don't need hormones and antibiotics to survive or cruel debeaking to prevent them from harming each other. They are allowed ample access to sunshine, fresh air, and a nourishing diet of grasses, bugs and worms.



The crowded, inhumane, unsanitary conditions of industrial turkey farms have led to a host of food safety



concerns. In April 2013, *Consumer Reports* analyzed industrial ground turkey products for enterococcus, E. coli, staphylococcus, salmonella and campylobacter. Of the 257 samples tested from stores nationwide, 90 percent were contaminated.

Pastured Turkey Safety

Humane animal treatment is an important reason to choose pastured turkeys. In addition to being free of unnecessary antibiotics, pastured turkey is also more nutritious. Conjugated linoleic acid (CLA) is a fatty acid that has many health benefits, including lowering the risk of heart disease and cancer, and helping people maintain healthy weight. Most people look to grass-fed beef for CLA, but turkey is a surprisingly good source as well.

Pastured Turkey Flavor

Pastured turkeys “showcase real flavor,” says Hank Will, American Livestock Breed Conservancy (ALBC) board member and Editor-in-Chief of *Grit* magazine. “There’s nothing like fresh air, exercise, grasshoppers, ticks, flies and other insects, wild seeds, clovers and the

like to develop awesome flavor in the turkey’s flesh.” Properly prepared, pastured turkey is lean and juicy, firm yet tender. The turkey just tastes more like turkey, with naturally larger thighs and smaller breasts, writes Deborah Krasner in *Good Meat*, a cookbook dedicated to pastured meats.



If you buy a pastured turkey, you may have the added benefit of enjoying a fine-flavored heritage breed, such as American Bronze or Bourbon Red.

Conscientious farmers are saving these rare breeds from extinction. In 2008, the ALBC conducted a blind taste test of industrial and heritage turkeys. Judges evaluated flavor, texture, tenderness and aroma in eight heritage breeds and one industrially raised Butterball. The winner was the Midget White turkey. All the heritage breeds beat the Butterball. (Read more about [Midget Whites](#).)

How to Buy

Buy direct. “Free-range” doesn’t always mean that a turkey spent its life outside foraging. It can mean that the turkey was not caged and had access to a concrete pad with no grass in sight. Similarly, “organic” turkeys may get organic grain, but they weren’t necessarily reared on pasture.

The best way to buy a real pastured turkey is to get it directly from the farmer. You can find a source near you via [Local Harvest](#) or [Eat Wild](#).

Plan ahead. Most pastured-poultry producers require an advance order, which allows them to raise and harvest an appropriate number of birds.

Plan to pay more. Raising finer-flavored breeds naturally isn’t as efficient or predictable as in industrial systems. Expect to pay \$2 to \$5 per pound.

Be fair to your farmer. Shannon Hayes, who raises pastured turkeys in upstate New York, encourages customers to be flexible about the size of their birds. Farmers cannot completely control the final weight of turkeys. If your bird is smaller than you’d like, make extra stuffing.



If your turkey won't fit into the oven, simply remove the legs before roasting it. (Hayes' forthcoming book, *Long Way on a Little*, has instructions for a sustainable Thanksgiving dinner.)

13 Tips You Should Know for Buying and Cooking Your Turkey

You'll find many more tips and tricks for cooking pastured birds in the books mentioned here.

- 1.** Hank Will, a Kansas turkey farmer and Editor-in-Chief of *Grit* magazine, recommends buying a bird processed one to four days before you receive it. Keep the bird in a cooler on ice for at least 24 hours. Shannon Hayes, who raises pastured turkeys in upstate New York, says this aging time in a "cold chill tank" is necessary for enzymes to break down the meat and make it tender. Aging turkeys is also a great way to deepen flavors. For instructions on aging a turkey in your refrigerator, visit [How to Roast a Heritage Turkey](#).
- 2.** Many people will be surprised to hear that pastured birds cook faster than industrial birds, but this point is crucial. "Since they tend to be leaner, cooking them hot and quick is a sure bet, in the range of at least 425 to 475 degrees Fahrenheit," Will says. "Some folks cook small heritage turkeys at about 650 degrees in a wood-fired oven for 35 minutes."
- 3.** If you must employ slow cooking, Will says to push as much herbed butter or olive oil as you can under the skin, which creates a self-basting bird. Also keep an inch or two of liquid beneath the bird.
- 4.** Because white meat cooks faster than dark meat, many people cover the breast as turkeys cook. William Rubel, author of the now out-of-print *The Magic of Fire*, says this step is not necessary with heritage birds, because the breast is not oversized. "The closer the balance between white and dark meat, the easier it is to roast the whole bird to perfection," he says. If you'd like to cover the entire bird to prevent it from browning too quickly, Rubel prefers to use oiled parchment paper rather than aluminum foil, because this technique prevents the steaming that happens underneath foil.
- 5.** Always use internal muscle temperature (taken in the breast) as your guide to doneness. The U.S. Department of Agriculture says a turkey is safely cooked when it reaches 165 degrees. Will says this will surely destroy your bird, however, and recommends cooking to a temperature of 140 to 145 degrees. Rubel agrees that 140 degrees is best if you don't want to dry out the meat. If the breast is done, but the thighs are not, Hayes says you should simply cut off the legs and put them back in the oven while you make your gravy.

6. Because smoking turkeys requires low-and-slow instead of fast-and-hot cooking, Danny Williamson of online pastured turkey retailer [Good Shepherd Poultry Ranch](#) recommends keeping a pan of water (or beer or cider) in the smoker to keep the turkey juicy.

7. Hayes' favorite way to cook pastured birds is on the spit. Learn more about spit-roasting in her book *The Farmer and the Grill* and in Rubel's *The Magic of Fire*.

8. *The New York Times* editor Sam Sifton, author of *Thanksgiving: How to Cook It Well*, and grass-fed cooking expert Deborah Krasner agree that brines improve even free-ranging birds. But Will and Hayes say pastured turkeys need no such treatment. "Pastured birds are significantly juicier and more flavorful than factory-farmed birds," says Hayes. Consider trying a pastured bird sans brine the first time.

9. Krasner coats turkeys with a spice paste and pairs them with rich sauces. Find her recipe for Roast Turkey With Ancho Paste and Maple-Coffee Sauce in *Good Meat*. Will says pushing fat under the skin is especially useful with older birds, as these can be tough and can benefit from the basting.

10. You'll pay good money for a pastured Thanksgiving turkey, so try to use the whole thing. Turkey carcasses yield delicious stock, which freezes well and can substitute for chicken stock in any recipe.

11. If you need ideas for using fat, feet, giblets, gizzards, hearts, kidneys, livers and necks, Jennifer McLagan's cookbook *Odd Bits* has them in spades.

12. Will saves well-formed tail feathers of pastured turkeys for use in holiday decorations. Breast and neck feathers find their way into his fishing flies and jigs.

13. Will and Hayes both prefer to cook stuffing separately. They fill the turkey cavity with aromatics — onion, carrot, garlic and herbs for Hayes; orange juice and herbs for Will.



Photos By [Tim Nauman](#)