


David Kradel Herbert Jordan Milton Madison John Schwartz

Penn State
Poultry Pointers

Tom Dimick Ag Engineering

Bill Weaver Donald Singletary Andrew Yersin



TRADITIONAL TURKEY DINNER IN LESS THAN THE TRADITIONAL TIME

Alan McConnell
Poultry Products
Extension Aide
Dept. of
Food Science

Thanksgiving is past, but Christmas is only days away. And of the holiday meals enjoyed throughout the year, those of Thanksgiving and Christmas share the most in common.

Turkey, with all the fixings, is the common denominator between these meals for many families. However, today's families are busier than ever, and the thought of "slaving away" in a hot kitchen all day, to produce a succulent,

golden-brown bird, may be a bit intimidating to some.

Not to fear, though. There are many easy-to-prepare alternatives which will allow you to present a tantalizing turkey feast to your family and friends, even with only a "shoe-string" of time.

You can buy a turkey frozen with a seasoned stuffing already in the body cavity. The stuffing is prepared under sanitary conditions and is ideal for those who don't have the time to prepare one. You roast a pre-stuffed turkey in its frozen state with little advance preparation.

Of course, you pay more for this convenience in two ways — the initial higher cost per pound and the cost of the extra energy required for the longer cooking of the frozen bird. It must be stressed,

however, that you *must not* try to save energy by defrosting the pre-stuffed bird before roasting. Slow thawing can cause bacterial growth in the stuffing and on the bird that may lead to food poisoning.

Besides the ready-stuffed birds, you can select self-basting birds, ones with built-in thermometers, boil-in-the-bag turkey slices, or even boneless turkey rolls and roasts.

In the self-basting turkey, an oil-type product (such as corn oil, margarine, or butter), is added to the turkey meat to add succulence and greater flavor. In the self-basting process, the mixture bastes the meat and skin surface, leaving you free to enjoy your guests while the turkey bastes itself to a golden brown.

If you prefer just breast or just dark meat or want additional meat to go along with the whole bird, you can buy turkey parts in the frozen meat section of your grocery store. Because of the added labor costs and meat content, turkey parts cost a little more than whole turkeys. Since there is little or no waste in turkey parts, they are ideal for the small family.

The boned and tied turkey consists of light and dark meat surrounded by a natural skin cover. The advantages of this are shorter

cooking time and no bones or trimmable waste. Because of the labor involved in separating the meat from the bone and the processing necessary to put the product into final form, boned and tied turkeys also cost more per pound than whole turkeys.

Another no-bones, no-waste, faster-cooking product is the turkey pan roast. The meat consists of a light and dark meat portion which has been mixed with binding materials and formed in an aluminum pan with a natural skin covering on top. You may also like the idea of a boneless turkey ham — low-fat, no waste, a taste nearly identical to that of pork ham, and able to be roasted with little advance preparation.

Even with all these mouth-watering, labor-saving turkey options, some will still opt for a fresh, unfrozen bird; and of course, there are those special touches and "secret recipes" that only your time and energy can provide.

Expect to pay a premium price for fresh, unfrozen turkeys since they must be processed during the rush period immediately before a holiday. Fresh turkey can be safely

held in the coldest part of your refrigerator for about one week after slaughter. Be sure any wrappings are loose enough to allow some air circulation.

Before cooking, wash a fresh-killed bird thoroughly and check carefully for any off-odors. The "sniff test" is a very reliable indicator of fresh quality with raw poultry — if it smells bad, it is bad — don't take a chance and cook it anyway.

Since frozen turkeys have been rapidly frozen immediately after slaughter, they retain their quality well during storage. Taste tests have repeatedly shown little or no flavor difference between fresh and properly defrosted frozen birds. In addition, nutritional value varies little between the two.

Remember, though, *never* thaw a frozen turkey (or any meat) at room temperature; thaw it in the refrigerator or in cold water that is changed frequently.

This holiday season, enjoy yourselves! You can still bring the traditional flavor and fun of a turkey dinner to your table whether you have two days or two hours to devote to the task.

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