

# HOLIDAY DILEMMA AND A SIMPLE SOLUTION FOR THE TURKEY

BY FAITH ANAYA

When Active Years asked me to develop a piece on turkey they unknowingly presented me with quite a cook's dilemma. Knowing that the magazine only has room for three, maybe four recipes, how do I choose from the 30 or 40 that I have gathered over the years? My Thanksgiving folder is literally bulging with years of carefully preserved Thanksgiving recipes. I've had successes and failures and have cooked turkeys every way but by frying. I've cooked it slowly, cooked it fast, cooked it on the barbeque, smoked it and cooked duck and goose instead. Last year for the first time we said "Hey, let's try brining!" We were very surprised and delighted at how easy, and how good, it was.

As I was puzzling over my dilemma, a friend suggested interviewing people about their turkeys to see what their attitudes were. Good idea! I asked a number of people randomly about cooking a turkey. The first said: "Oh, I am so glad that you are writing about turkeys! Mine never comes out!"



The second said: "Turkey. Well, mine seems to come out ok. I just roast it." And the next person said: "Oh, mine is always delicious!" And the next: "I have a smoker grill. I don't know what temperature it is. You just plug it in. It cooks the turkey. It's wonderful." And the next: "I just slip it in that bag." My favorite response was "There is something about cooking a turkey that is so out of control that you just do it and hope it comes out!"

Everyone's answer was different and everyone's goal is the same...a delicious, memorable dinner.

So, in the end, I've decided to offer some tips and a method that make a difference but don't require

you, dear reader, to cook like Emeril Lagasse and will certainly have your guests asking: "What did you do to this turkey?" Here's the menu, taking advantage of fall flavors, and of my new favorite method of brining the turkey. If you would like to add a nice pre-meal offering, you can put out plates of sliced pears with a sprinkling of walnuts and chevre or blue cheese.



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You will not need stuffing if you serve the cornbread! Don't forget to include your kids in the process--kids can make the cornbread or the salad. The salad is crunchy, light and refreshing, and complements the cornbread.

### A Simply Perfect Turkey

If your goal is perfectly moist white meat and perfectly finished dark

meat on the same bird at the same time, here are some things that may seem like heresy but are easy and will make a difference!

1. Brine your bird. Brining, or soaking the turkey in a salt and water solution overnight before you roast it, draws extra moisture into the bird and holds it there so that you can cook it long enough to finish the dark meat without turning the white meat to dust. Brined meats are juicier when

cooked and more forgiving of over cooking. This is key with turkey since the dark meat requires a longer cooking time than the breast. If you are interested in the science of this check out the adjoining text box. For how to do it, read on. A simple method and basic recipe using apple juice as the liquid are provided here. For those who like more complexity and detail and dozens of recipes, do an internet search for "brining turkey."

2. Digital remote meat

### Instructions for Brining a Turkey

**Ingredients:** Salt and Apple Juice. 5 quarts of liquid to ½ cup table salt, enough to cover the turkey. A fresh or frozen turkey, not pre-salted or Kosher.

**Method:** You need a non-reactive pot large enough to hold your turkey, like an enamel lobster pot a canning pot. It should be small enough to go into your refrigerator.

Defrost turkey, unwrap and rinse it thoroughly with cool water. Remove giblets and neck from cavities and reserve for turkey broth. Remove plastic leg truss if there is one. Place the turkey into the pot. Dissolve the salt in the apple juice and pour over turkey to cover. **Put the turkey in the refrigerator. It must be kept below 40 degrees to be safe. The salt does not prohibit the growth of harmful micro-organisms.** Leave the turkey in the brine 12-14 hours. The skin will turn light brown. Take the turkey out of the brine, discard brine, and rinse turkey thoroughly in cool water. Pat dry, set on a tray, cover with a clean kitchen towel and return to refrigerator to rest for 1-2 hours. You can skip this step or add it depending on your timing. When ready to roast, put a stick or two of celery, a carrot or two and 2 onion halves into the cavity for seasoning. You can follow whatever set of roasting instructions you normally use in terms of time and oven temperature. We needed 14 quarts of apple juice to cover an 11 pound turkey in a lobster pot. We roasted the test turkey uncovered and un-stuffed at 325 degrees and tented the breast meat until the last 45 minutes or so. The turkey is done when the internal thigh temperature is 170 degrees.

thermometers are easily available and simplify the process to a stunning degree. No more guessing. No more opening the oven and struggling to get a temperature reading while holding the thermometer with oven mitts so as not to burn yourself. Use a high quality digital remote thermometer, the kind that has a probe that goes inside the turkey and oven with a read-out that sits on the counter, outside the oven. The USDA tells us that any bacteria are killed at 160 degrees in the meat and at 165 degrees in the stuffing. Using an accurate thermometer will help ensure that the meat reaches a safe, bacteria-free temperature, as well as help you to not overcook it. Place the probe into the turkey leg before it goes into the oven so you can easily pick the exact spot on the inner thigh. Shut the door and watch the temperature on the unit on the counter. When it reaches 170

degrees, voila, it is done!

3. Don't truss the legs, in spite of the esthetics. This adds 10-15 minutes to finish the inner thighs while the breast meat is getting drier by the minute.
4. Don't stuff the turkey. Yes, it looks great and the stuffing tastes great that way but you are likely to trade those benefits for dry white meat and the risk of food-borne illness. Stuffing slows the interior cooking process and overcooked breast meat is more likely. And undercooked stuffing (stuffing that has not reached 165 degrees) can contain dangerous bacteria.
5. Use a roasting rack that lifts the turkey off the bottom of the roasting pan. This promotes all around even cooking.
6. Use a foil tent over the breast meat to protect it until the last 45 minutes to an hour.

Turning the turkey periodically is also recommended by *Cook's Illustrated* experts, but you will have to decide for

yourself whether the extra effort is worth it to you.

### **Science: How Does Brining Work?**

As I did the research for this article I found the explanation given by *Cook's Illustrated* to be the most complete and easy to follow. You can also find in depth discussions of brining in Alton Brown's *I'm Just Here For The Food*, in Shirley O. Corriher's *Cookwise* and in *Cook's Illustrated The Best Recipe*. My comments and methods for this article were adapted from *Cook's Illustrated* and personal testing.

## Cornbread with Dried Cranberries, Fennel Seeds and Golden Raisins

### Ingredients

#### Dry:

1 1/3 cups all purpose flour  
2/3 cup yellow cornmeal (not coarse)  
1/3 cup sugar  
1 1/2 teaspoons baking powder  
3/4 teaspoon baking soda  
3/4 teaspoon salt

#### Wet:

1 1/2 sticks (3/4 cup) unsalted butter, melted and cooled  
2 large eggs  
1 1/2 cup well shaken buttermilk

#### Fruit:

1/2 cup golden raisins  
1/2 cup dried cranberries  
1 1/2 Tablespoons fennel seeds

#### Prep:

Melt butter and set aside to cool. Butter and flour 2 medium (8x4x3) loaf pans. Chop raisins, cranberries and fennel seeds with two or three pulses in the food processor. Stir together dry ingredients in a large bowl. Whisk wet ingredients together in a separate bowl. Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

#### Assembly:

Add the wet ingredients to the dry ingredients and stir just to combine. Stir in the chopped fruit and fennel seeds. Divide the batter into the loaf pans, smooth the tops and let stand for 10 minutes. Bake in the middle of the oven until tops are pale golden and a tester comes out clean, about 40 minutes.

Cool in pans about 10 minutes then turn onto a rack and cool completely.

**Notes:** Currants can be substituted for golden raisins. You can use fresh or frozen cranberries if you don't have dried. Don't skip the "let stand 10 minutes" step.

## Apple Walnut Cranberry Salad

8-10 very thin slices of Granny Smith apple, about 1/2 apple  
1/2 stalk of celery, chopped  
1 Tablespoon of dried cranberries  
1 Tablespoon of chopped walnuts  
1 teaspoon of minced parsley  
1 Tablespoon of lemon juice  
1 or 2 lettuce leaves torn into small bits

Toss all the ingredients together in a bowl. This makes enough for one, but is easily increased for whatever number you are serving.

Adapted from Wild Oats Market

## Apple Prune Crostada

This recipe, adapted from *Gourmet Magazine*, is straight forward to make and just tastes great. And you don't have to fuss about making the crust look perfect since it is made in the food processor and then just folds up around the fruit.

### Pastry dough:

1 2/3 cups all-purpose flour  
1 1/2 teaspoons sugar  
3/4 teaspoon salt  
1 1/4 sticks cold unsalted butter, cut into pieces  
4 to 5 tablespoons ice water

### Filling:

1/3 cup water  
2 Tablespoons apple juice or Calvados  
1 cup packed pitted prunes (7 oz) halved  
1 teaspoon cinnamon  
5 tablespoons all-purpose flour  
3/4 cup sugar  
2 lbs. Granny Smith or other tart, firm apples (4-5)  
1 1/2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice  
1/2 cup walnut pieces

### Finish:

1 tablespoon milk  
1 tablespoon sugar  
Parchment paper to cover the baking sheet

### Make pastry:

Pulse together flour, sugar and salt in a food processor. Add butter and pulse until mixture resembles coarse meal. Sprinkle in 4 tablespoons ice water and pulse until pastry start to hold together, adding remaining tablespoon of water if needed. Do not over process. Turn dough out onto floured surface and knead 4 or 5 times. Form dough into a disk and chill, wrapped in plastic, 30 minutes.

### Make filling:

Simmer water, prunes and apple juice or Calvados, uncovered, until most of liquid is absorbed, about 10 minutes. Remove from heat and cool.

Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

Stir together cinnamon, 2 tablespoons flour and 1/2 cup sugar.

Peel, core and slice apples, then halve slices. Add cinnamon mixture and lemon juice, then toss to coat.

Finely grind walnuts with remaining 3 tablespoons flour and remaining 1/4 cup sugar in food processor.

### Assemble & bake tart:

Roll out dough into a 14x18 inch oval. Transfer to a large baking sheet lined with parchment paper.

Spread the walnut mixture in the center of the pastry, leaving a 3 inch border.

Stir prunes into apple mixture, then spoon over walnut mixture. Distribute the prunes evenly among the apples. Fold the edges of the dough up around the fruit, leaving the fruit visible in the center and pleat firmly to finish. Push the fruit firmly into the corners so that the edges don't collapse in the oven. Brush the top with milk and sprinkle on a bit of sugar. Bake, loosely covered in foil, in the center of the oven for 30 minutes. Remove foil and bake until crust and fruit are golden and juices are bubbling, about 30 minutes more. Cool on baking sheet on a rack 20 minutes. Serve with lightly whipped, unsweetened cream. Serves 8.

Adapted from *Gourmet Magazine*, Nov. 1999