

Pastured Turkey Cooking Tips

By Shannon Hayes

Shannon Hayes is the host of grassfedcooking.com and the author of [The Farmer and the Grill](#) and [The Grassfed Gourmet](#). She works with her family on Sap Bush Hollow Farm in Upstate New York. Her newest book, [Radical Homemakers: Reclaiming Domesticity from a Consumer Culture](#), is now out!

1. **Please be flexible.** If you are buying your pasture-raised turkey from a small, local, sustainable farmer, thank you VERY much for supporting us. That said, please remember that pasture-raised turkeys are not like factory-farmed birds. Outside of conscientious animal husbandry, we are unable to control the size of our Thanksgiving turkeys. Please be forgiving if the bird we have for you is a little larger or a little smaller than you anticipated. Cook a sizeable quantity of sausage stuffing if it is too small (a recipe appears below), or enjoy the leftovers if it is too large. If the bird is so large that it cannot fit in your oven, simply remove the legs before roasting it.
2. **Know what you are buying.** If you don't personally know the farmer who is growing your turkey, take the time to know what you are buying! "Pastured" is not necessarily the same as "free-range." Some grass-based farmers use the word "free-range" to describe their pasture-raised birds, but any conventional factory farm can also label their birds "free-range" if they are not in individual cages, and if they have "access" to the outdoors – even if the "outdoors" happens to be feces-laden penned-in concrete pads outside the barn door, with no access to grass. "Pastured" implies that the bird was out on grass for most of its life, where it ate grass and foraged for bugs, in addition to receiving some grain.
3. **Brining optional.** If tradition dictates that you season your meat by brining your bird, by all means, do so. However, many people brine in order to keep the bird from drying out. This is not at all necessary. Pastured birds are significantly juicier and more flavorful than factory farmed birds. You can spare yourself this extra step as a reward for making the sustainable holiday choice!
4. **Monitor the internal temperature.** Somewhere, a lot of folks came to believe that turkeys needed to be roasted until they had an internal temperature of 180 degrees Fahrenheit. Yuck. You don't need to do that. Your turkey need only be cooked to 165 degrees. If the breast is done and the thighs are not, take the bird out of the oven, carve off the legs and thighs, and put them back in to cook while you carve the breast and make your gravy. That entire holiday myth about coming to the table with a perfect whole bird and then engaging in exposition carving is about as realistic as expecting our daughters will grow up to look like Barbie (and who'd want that, anyhow?). Just have fun and enjoy the good food.

5. **Cook the stuffing separately.** I know a lot of folks like to put the stuffing inside their holiday birds, and if Thanksgiving will be positively ruined if you break tradition, then stuff away. However, for a couple reasons, I recommend cooking your stuffing separately. First, everyone's stuffing recipe is different. Therefore, the density will not be consistent, which means that cooking times will vary dramatically. I am unable to recommend a cooking time, since I cannot control what stuffing each person uses. Also, due to food safety concerns, I happen to think it is safer to cook the stuffing outside the bird. Plus, it is much easier to lift and move both the bird and the stuffing when prepared separately, and to monitor the doneness of each. Rather than putting stuffing in my bird's cavity, I put in aromatics, like an onion, carrot, garlic and some fresh herbs. When the bird is cooked, I add these aromatics to my compost heap. The aromatics perfume the meat beautifully, and the only seasoning I wind up using on the surface is butter, salt and pepper.

6. **No need to flip.** I used to ascribe to that crazy method of first roasting the bird upside down, then flipping it over to brown the breast. The idea was that the bird would cook more evenly, and the breast wouldn't dry out. When I did this, the turkey came out fine. But I suffered 2nd degree burns, threw out my back, ruined two sets of potholders and nearly dropped the thing on the floor. Pasture-raised turkeys are naturally juicy. Don't make yourself crazy with this stunt. Just put it in the oven breast-side up like you would a whole chicken, and don't over-cook it. Take it out when the breast is 165 degrees (see #2, above). If, despite the disparaging comments in item 2, above, you still want to show off the whole bird, then bring it into the dining room, allow everyone to ooh and aah, then scuttle back to the kitchen, and proceed as explained above.

7. **Be ready for faster cook times.** Pasture-raised turkeys will cook faster than factory-farmed birds. Figure on 12-15 minutes per pound, uncovered, at 325 degrees as you plan your dinner. That said, oven temperatures and individual birds will always vary. Use an internal meat thermometer to know for sure when the bird is cooked. For more help with cooking your turkey, don't forget to refer to *The Grassfed Gourmet Cookbook* by Shannon Hayes. What?!? You don't own a copy yet? [Click here to buy one immediately!](#) (or see [Maureen - we still have a few left at the farm subsidized price of \\$12 \(Retail price is \\$20\)](#), because we think they are an important part of our customer education.

8. **Use a good-quality roasting pan.** If this is your first Thanksgiving and you do not yet own a turkey roasting pan and cannot find one to borrow, treat yourself to a really top-quality roaster, especially if you have a sizeable bird. (I don't like to endorse products, but I must say that my favorite is the large stainless All-Clad roaster. Last I knew they were still made in the U.S.A. – but then, I bought mine ten years ago, so that may have changed. My mom has other name-brand roasting pans, and they are shabby in comparison to mine. Please don't tell her I said that....) Cheap aluminum pans from the grocery store can easily buckle when you

remove the bird from the oven, potentially causing the cook serious burns or myriad other injuries in efforts to catch the falling fowl. Plus, they often end up in the recycling bin, or worse, landfills. If you buy a good quality large roasting pan, and you happen to have a copy of The Grassfed Gourmet Cookbook (another shameless hint), I guarantee you will have multiple uses for the pan!

9. **Pick the meat off the bird before making stock.** If you plan to make soup from your turkey leftovers, be sure to remove all the meat from the bones before you boil the carcass for stock. Add the chunks of turkey back to the broth just before serving the soup. This prevents the meat from getting rubbery and stringy. For an extra-nutritious stock, follow the advice offered in Nourishing Traditions, by Sally Fallon, and add a tablespoon of vinegar to the water 30 minutes before you begin boiling the carcass or, better still, use the recipe for chicken stock in The Grassfed Gourmet Cookbook (again, you still have time to order a copy!!). The process of adding acid to the stock draws more minerals from the bones and releases them into the liquid.

10. **Help is available.** In recent years, our home seems to have become the unofficial Sustainable Thanksgiving Hotline. Please do not hesitate to write to me with your questions at feedback@shannonhayes.info. I make a point of checking email often right up through Thanksgiving Day (I stop around noon), so that I can promptly respond to your questions or concerns. If you are in dire straights, you can call me at 518 827 7595 before 8pm most evenings, but I do prefer email. Enjoy your holiday!

And finally, here's my favorite recipe for walnut sausage stuffing:

Walnut Sausage Stuffing (serves 8)

- 1 whole baguette, chopped into ½ inch cubes and allowed to sit out overnight
- 2 Tablespoons fennel seeds
- 1 cup walnuts, mildly crushed
- 2 Tablespoons olive oil
- 1# Sweet Italian, Hot Italian, or Breakfast sausage
- 4 Tablespoons butter
- 4 onions, chopped
- 2 carrots, peeled and diced
- 1/2 cup dried cranberries (or use one cup fresh)
- ½ cup raisins
- 2 T rubbed sage
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons brandy
- 6 eggs
- 3 cups chicken broth
- 1 teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon black pepper

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.

1. Bring a mid-sized skillet up to a medium-hot temperature.
Add the fennel seeds and allow them to toast until fragrant.
Remove the seeds to a small dish, then add the walnuts to the same hot, dry skillet and allow them to toast 3-5 minutes, taking care to stir them constantly to prevent burning. Pour the walnuts off into a large bowl.
2. Add olive oil to the same skillet, then fry the sausage until it is cooked through (about 8-10 minutes).
3. Remove the sausage to the same large bowl containing the walnuts. Add the butter to the skillet, allowing it to melt and blend with the sausage drippings. Add the onions and carrots, sauté 2 minutes, then add the cranberries and raisins and sauté two minutes longer.
4. Sprinkle the sage over the vegetables, sauté 1 minute, then add the garlic and toasted fennel seeds.
Sauté two minutes longer, then add the entire mixture into the large bowl with the walnuts and sausage.
5. To the same big bowl, add the bread, chicken broth, eggs, salt, pepper and brandy, and prepare to get messy.
Using your hands (or salad servers), thoroughly mix all the ingredients.
Butter a 13 x 9 inch baking pan, add the stuffing, then cover tightly with a piece of buttered aluminum foil.

Allow the stuffing to cook 35 minutes, then remove the foil and allow it to bake 30 minutes longer, until the top is nicely crisped and lightly browned.

I'm sure I left a few questions unanswered. Please feel free to write to me at feedback@shannonhayes.info. When you send your email, write "**turkey question**" in the heading so that I'll know to respond as quickly as possible (otherwise, we're so busy on the farm right now, I tend to fall behind with e-correspondence).

Happy Thanksgiving!!!