Roast Turkey: from the Freezer to the Oven to the Table

I love turkey! While I especially favor dark meat, moist white meat makes excellent sandwiches, turkey salad and is vital to turkey noodle soup. After buying a bunch of white meat deli turkey for sandwiches, it occurred to me that I could be doing my own turkey at home and get the part I really love: make a gallon or so of Industrial Strength Turkey Noodle Soup.

I roasted my first frozen turkey back in January, 2014, after agonizing over the defrosting of the bird for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Boy, was I surprised and pleased! The white meat and dark meat actually come out better, as it's almost impossible to overcook the dark meat. The white meat needs to be cooked to 165°F and no hotter!

The bird I buy has been brined with turkey stock, salt, sugar, sodium phosphate and 'flavoring'. This process tends to cause fluid to remain in the bird's meat IF the chef remembers to let the bird rest after cooking and doesn't overcook the meat. Also, I don't do regular stuffing in the bird, but will add 'aromatics' during cooking (see below).

Another advantage of cooking a frozen bird is minimal contamination of the kitchen with nasty bacteria. Those of you that defrost your bird have to hassle with separate counters, cutting boards and a bunch of disinfectant after the bird goes into the oven. Not me!

Cookware & Ingredients:
Shallow roasting pan with drainage. NEVER use those big aluminum pans without a rack!
Oven thermometer
Kitchen/poultry shears
Meat thermometer (I use a Lavatools Javelin instant read Thermo-wand)

Frozen turkey
Medium onion
2-3 stalks of celery
Salt
Cooking spray for the roaster. I use Pam.
Water (I prefer Chateau Faucet) – up to two cups of hot tap water for the bottom of the roaster

Here's the process:

Get home from shopping and preheat the oven to at least 450° F. I turn mine up to 575°F. Put the bird on a shallow roaster with drainage that you've sprayed with Pam cooking spray. The bird goes in breast side DOWN (back side up).

Salt the bird. Add two cups of water to the bottom of the roaster and keep adding water as the bird cooks. The steam it creates enhances the defrosting. Don't worry about it overflowing. If your roaster is shallow and allows hot air to circulate around the entire bird, you won't lose much juice. Cook at 450° F (or higher) until you hear sizzling (about 5-10 minutes), then lower the heat to 325° F. *Use an oven thermometer to confirm the temps*. That first blast of heat seared the bottom, so you won't lose juices unnecessarily.

After about 30-45 minutes, pull the bird out and put it on its back. Salt the breast. If needed, add more water to the roaster. Any time you hear sizzling sounds from the roaster, you need to add more water.

It'll take about 1-1½ hours for the giblets in the neck cavity to melt enough for removal (if that's where they are). CAUTION: if the giblets bag is plastic, remove it before it melts! **Melted plastic is toxic and you'll have to dump the bird. :(**

Now is the time to clip off the wingtips and tail, using your shears. Take a thin knife blade (a boning knife is best) and cut around the wing where it attaches to the breast. This will ensure you don't have a raw spot when the rest of the bird is done. Since I will make soup stock out of the carcass, I roast all the parts I remove, like the giblets, tail and wingtips, which I put in a bowl or stockpot, after browning them. If you plan on making gravy, then refrigerate these parts. I dump them into a stock pot with a bit of hot water (at least 165° F) and keep the pot over the oven exhaust, in preparation for making soup (which is a separate recipe).

It'll take about 2-2½ hours for the neck in the body cavity to melt enough to be removed. This is important! The sooner you remove it *and the block of ice inside*, the sooner your bird will be done. I use a vinyl exam glove to wrestle it out. The glove protects your hand from sharp, bony protrusions and gives a bit of friction to hold onto the slippery neck. Put the neck in the bowl or stockpot with the other parts, and the chunk of ice right on the roaster (check and see if you need more water, too). Pop the bird back in the oven.

Now it's time to chop the onion and celery. Divide the onion into 6-8 wedges and the celery into (mostly) 3-4 inch sections, with a long one or two for securing them in the bird. These relatively big pieces will leave room for hot air to get inside. Pull out the bird, stuff the cavity with the 'aromatics' and back into the oven! You can use longer pieces of celery to 'wedge' the aromatics into the cavity. Did you remember to check the water in the roaster? Sure you did!

After about 30-45 minutes, pull the bird out and flip the bird on its breast. The hot celery and onion juice will seep into the breast meat. Oh yeah! Check the water in the roaster and back into the oven.

Check the bird every half hour with a meat thermometer. Once the breast meat reaches 150°F, check it every 15 minutes.

Your target temps for white meat are 160°F, and at least 165°F for the dark meat. DO NOT OVERCOOK! If the plastic thermometer that came with the turkey pops, it's probably overcooked. They put that there to protect themselves from lawsuits, not give you the perfect turkey (some pop at about 178°F).

When you hit the right temps, pull the bird and cover it with aluminum foil, right on the roaster. Let it sit for 30 minutes. This is vital! The juices in the bird have migrated to the skin. The rest period allows the meat to 'relax' and reabsorb the juices.

Never baste a turkey, whether you use this method or not. All that does is make soggy skin.

After resting, carve it up.

Major Hint: Cut the breast meat away from the ribs and carve it *against the grain*. Instead of those long, wide slices, you get short, tender pieces that melt in your mouth.

I save all the skin for soup. In fact, as I carve, I'm dumping bones and parts into the stock pot. My soup recipe is in a separate document.