

Tips on buying, storing and stuffing a turkey

Sometimes it seems as though our perennial questions about Thanksgiving turkeys are nearly as old as the holiday itself. Here's a short overview of what cooks – experienced as well as novice – usually want to know about getting ready for the big meal.

BUYING

The first question is the most basic: "How big a bird do I need?"

A good rule of thumb is to allow 1 to 1½ pounds of uncooked bird per guest. So if you're feeding 12 guests, purchase a 12- to 16-pound bird. This will also provide for leftovers.

Just a small crowd? Get a smaller bird; you'll find turkeys under 9 pounds. Or buy a turkey breast, which can be purchased with or without bones.

FRESH OR FROZEN?

Whether you get a fresh or frozen turkey will depend on time and storage space. Frozen turkeys will keep in the freezer for several months, but they take time to thaw safely. Fresh turkeys are widely available but should be cooked within a few days of purchase.

STORAGE

Store a fresh turkey in its original wrapping in the refrigerator. After handling any poultry, be sure to wash all cutting boards, preparation surfaces, utensils and especially hands with hot soapy water; this will prevent potentially contaminating other foods with salmonella bacteria, which can cause illness.

If you bought a frozen turkey, remember: Never thaw a frozen turkey at room temperature, which creates ideal conditions for food poisoning bacteria to grow.

The best way to thaw the bird is in the refrigerator on a tray, allowing 24 hours for each 5 pounds; a 16-pound bird, therefore, will take a little more than three days to defrost.

If you've just bought a frozen bird, use the cold-water method – in your bathtub or kitchen sink – changing the water every 30 minutes. It's a lot of work, but you'll get the job done safely. Figure on 30 minutes per pound of turkey: A 16-pound bird will take eight hours.

STUFFING

To stuff the turkey, plan on ¾ to 1 cup of prepared stuffing per pound of bird. Prepare the stuffing separately, and do not stuff ahead of time, which risks bacterial growth. Don't pack the stuffing into the cavity too tightly. The stuffing will absorb juices from the roasting bird, so it needs room to expand. You can bake stuffing separately in a casserole dish – many cooks prefer it – but remember that it will not take as long to cook as the turkey.

See instructions on Page F7 for stuffing a brined turkey.