

ROASTING

So far you've learned how to boil, poach, steam, sauté, braise and stew. Now all that's left is roasting. Roasting is to cook something in the dry heat of an oven, where heat emanates from the floor and reflects off the wall. Roasting and baking are the same cooking techniques—one is done with meat and the other with dough.

Large pieces of meat, whole poultry and fish and root vegetables lend themselves particularly well to roasting. A word of warning--roasting time seems to speed up in direct proportion to your distance from the house. In other words, if you drive down to the store to get some milk, don't be surprised if the roast looks like the proverbial burnt offering when you get back.

Many cooks are dismayed by trying to figure out the correct time for roasting something. Is the turkey done when the leg moves freely—no, it's overdone! Mercifully there's a tool which takes the guesswork out of roasting. Get yourself an instant read meat thermometer. It's one of the secret weapons in a good cook's bag of tricks. When inserting a meat thermometer, don't let the metal touch the bone—the bone is hotter than the surrounding meat and won't give you a correct reading.

Another trick, especially with a roast of meat, is to sear it—that is to cook the outside quickly over high heat. This can be done in a hot pan, or by putting the meat into a very hot oven and then turning the temperature down after a few minutes. This helps to caramelize the juices and sugars on the meat's surface and give it a nice flavorful crust. Unless a recipe specifically tells me otherwise, I like to place my roast on a rack in a roasting pan, so that the roast doesn't touch the hot surface of the pan. This prevents the roast from either burning or getting soggy by sitting in the pan juices.

Basting, which is brushing or pouring some of the pan juices or some other liquid over the roast from time to time, helps the meat moist, prevents shrinkage, and gives the crust or skin an even, brown color. Also, turning the roast from time to time can help ensure even cooking. It's also good to let your roast "rest", covered with aluminum foil, for 15 or 20 minutes after coming out of the oven. This allows the internal juices to distribute more evenly, and with a large piece of beef, lamb, or pork, the roast will continue to cook, rising 5 to 10 degrees in temperature. Poultry won't continue to cook, but still needs to rest to redistribute the juices and let the meat loosen up a little.

There are few things better in this world than a properly roast chicken. There are many techniques, but here's one that I've always liked. Preheat your oven to 475 degrees. (I like cooking chicken in a hot oven.) Take a small chicken—about 4 pounds or even a little less. Take the packet of giblets out of the cavity and feed it to the dog. Rinse the chicken thoroughly, inside and out, pat dry with paper towels, and pull out and discard any extra gobs of fat. Sprinkle with salt and freshly ground pepper, both inside and out. I like to crush some fresh garlic in a garlic press and rub half of the garlic between the skin and the meat, loosening the meat with my fingers as I work the garlic in. Then I rub the rest of the crushed garlic on the outside of the bird over the skin. I then set a rack in a roasting pan. Chef Emeril Lagasse makes an edible rack by layering strips of peeled carrot, parsnip and celery in the bottom of the roasting pan, in a tic-tac-toe pattern. But an ordinary rack works fine. I put the chicken on the rack, cut a fresh lemon in half, and squeeze the juice of the entire lemon over the chicken, stuffing the halves into the cavity along with a few sprigs of fresh rosemary. Then I turn the chicken on its side and roast it for about 20 minutes. Then take the bird out of the oven and with tongs and a potholder, turn the chicken on its other side, trying not to pierce the skin, and roast for another 20 minutes. Then turn the chicken breast side up and roast for a final 20 minutes. Check with your instant read thermometer by sticking it into the fleshy part of the thigh—it should read about 175 degrees—if not, cook for a little longer.

If the chicken looks a little dry while it's roasting, pour a little olive oil and some white wine over it. While the chicken rests for about 10 minutes, deglaze the pan over a hot stove burner with some canned chicken broth. Then carve up the chicken and serve, spooning some of the pan juices over each portion. This is wonderful with some crusty French or Italian bread, a green salad, a few good olives on the side, and a glass of dry white wine. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.