

#131 - The Perfect Thanksgiving Turkey

Hi, everyone! You're listening to The Lazy Genius Podcast! I'm Kendra Adachi, and I'm here to help you be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. Y'all, we're about to spend an entire episode talking about Thanksgiving turkey. Or just turkey if you periodically cook a ten pound bird when it's not Thanksgiving. I shared a recipe years ago on my absolute favorite turkey recipe, and I still stand by it. I could just link to it and say goodbye, but I want to talk through it a little because sometimes we need a voice telling us we're doing okay, especially when we're dealing with a giant dead bird and hungry, mildly judgmental family members.

Real quick before we get into turkey talk, I wanted to give you a heads up that I'm putting together a gift guide for the holidays. It only has stuff that I actually use in my house, so because of the makeup of my family and what our interests are, it's not going to cover every age and category. But I'd personally rather give you tested items than guess. In case you're ahead of the game in gift-buying but also feel a little stuck on what to get people, look for that gift guide on thelazygeniuscollective.com before the end of November. I'm shooting for before Thanksgiving, but I make no promises. Still, I wanted you to know it was coming in case you'd like a little Lazy Genius gift help.

Okay, let's talk about your turkey.

If you live in the US, you likely celebrate Thanksgiving, but I know there are a lot of listeners from the UK and Australia and other countries that don't celebrate Thanksgiving or Christmas or any of the traditionally turkey-driven holidays. Obviously, this episode is about cooking a big celebration turkey, and you can use any occasion to make it. However, because it's November and we're two weeks away from eating turkey for Thanksgiving, I'm going to likely use that holiday as my frame of reference as we talk. Cool.

The first question to ask when serving turkey is how big of a bird do you need? You'll see charts and turkey math suggestions on the Internet of anywhere from one to one and a half pounds per person. Remember, those suggestions count the bones and everything that comes wrapped up in plastic from the store. I remember once trying to subtract how much the bones might weigh to get the turkey math right, so I'm telling you in case you got stuck on that like I have, the turkey math poundage is based on the entire bird. I think you want at least a pound per person and 1.5 if you'd like some leftovers. Maybe you land somewhere in the one and a quarter pound per person range. If you have kids who don't eat as much, count them as a pound and adults as one and a quarter. The recipe I'm going to share with you is based on a ten pound turkey which is likely a great size for about eight people.

What if you're feeding more than eight? What if you're feeding sixteen people? You could cook a 20 pound turkey which is the right turkey math, and it would work fine. I will say that smaller turkeys tend to not overcook as much just because they have a higher ratio of bone and skin to the meat underneath. They stay juicier in general. If you want to cook two smaller turkeys, work that out with your oven and the other foods that need to be cooked. Basically, when it comes to feeding the people, 1.25 pounds per person is a great place to land, and once you know the number of pounds you need, you can decide if you can make that happen with one turkey or if you'll cook two. Your call, and either call is great.

Next up, you get to decide the source of your turkey. Do you get a Butterball, a free-range turkey, an organic turkey? You get to choose based on what matters to you. The quick difference in free-range and organic. Free range turkeys are allowed to roam free. The ways they're housed and taken care of are more humane than turkeys that are literally cooped up all the time in a coop. Organic turkeys aren't necessarily free range by the way. Sometimes they are, but the certification for organic is different and usually means the turkeys were fed organic food, not injected with any sort of antibiotics or hormones, that kind of thing. It's regulated. But for instance if you have a local farmer who sells turkeys, that turkey could technically be an organic turkey in how it was fed and raised and could likely be free-range as well, but the farmer might not have gone through the certification process to be able to claim that name. It's not necessarily complicated, but there are things to consider. Now, if the treatment of the turkey is important to you, be prepared to pay significantly more for your turkey. A storebought Butterball turkey could be anywhere from a dollar to three dollars a pound, so a ten pound turkey would cost 10-30 dollars. An organic turkey probably costs closer to five to eight dollars a pound which makes a ten pound turkey cost 50-80 dollars. 10-30 versus 50-80. So it's significant, and that's just enough turkey to feed eight people. For some of you, that's absolutely worth it. A lot of folks think that organic free-range turkeys taste better, and I agree that there's a great depth of flavor in the meat. Storebought turkeys are generally fattier because their muscles weren't used as often which is sad to think about but also might not be as much of a priority or something you can fit into your budget. I think store bought turkeys tend to naturally be a bit juicier just because they have more fat to help that along. The point is you can't go wrong. Choose what matters to you, and pick the right turkey for that.

So you've chosen the size of the bird and what kind you'll get. Now let's talk about when to buy it. Most people buy a frozen turkey. Don't assume that turkey will thaw in the fridge overnight like a pack of chicken breasts would. Because it will not. Remember that episode of New Girl where she cooks a turkey for the guys and buys a frozen bird on that day? They end up putting it in the dryer to get it to thaw? Not the best look. Here's your defrosting math. Eight hours in the fridge for every pound of turkey. One pound takes eight hours. Now that's not a science-y thing, but if you have a ten pound turkey, it'll likely take around 80 hours or three days to fully thaw in the fridge. A twenty pound turkey? Double that. You're looking at six days for sure. And you definitely want to thaw the turkey in the fridge and not on the counter because it's just too big of a bird. The outside will be exposed to a warmer temperature and could easily breed bacteria while the inside is still solid as ice. Or it's actual ice. Thaw the turkey in the fridge for about eight

hours per pound of bird. And for my perfect Thanksgiving turkey recipe, you'll need a thawed bird the day before you want to eat your turkey. So if you need to eat a ten pound bird on a Thursday, it'll need to be thawed on Wednesday and will need to be put in the fridge to thaw on Sunday. Just back it up. Now if you buy a fresh turkey, this conversation doesn't matter, but most turkeys are sold frozen so there you go.

Here's my tip on thawing your bird. Leave the turkey in the wrapping during the thawing. Line a sheet pan big enough to hold your turkey with foil to catch any potential leaks and then put the turkey on the pan with the breast side up which is how it looks when it's pretty on a platter and ready to be carved. So turkey in the wrapping on a lined sheet pan. Keep that in the fridge, and you'll not have a messy bird catastrophe on your hands.

Okay, next up. You have the right sized thawed bird, and now we get to the good stuff. It's time to make the turkey taste amazing with very little effort. Truly. We hear a lot about brining and all kinds of things to keep the turkey moist and tasty, but finding a tub big enough to fit in a giant turkey submerged in salt water feels intimidating, at least to me. However, the concept of brining is important. The whole goal is not the water but the salt and seasonings in the water. You're trying to get salt into the flesh of that turkey as much as possible. The salt does make the turkey taste good, but it also breaks down the muscle tissue and tenderizes it. The same is true of chicken. If you can salt your chicken a day ahead, even it's just for stir-fry or something? Do it. The difference is something else.

So we are going to get salt into the meat of the bird a solid 12-24 hours before it's cooked. How are we going to do that? Not with water. With butter. Yes, ma'am. By the way, in case you missed it, this recipe is on my site, and I'll put a link in the show notes. No need to write down amounts or anything, but listen as we talk about how easy this process is so you're not intimidated once it's time to make your turkey.

We need flavor and moisture, and the two ways we're going to get that are from a highly seasoned butter on the outside of the turkey and some moisture-rich foods on the inside.

First, the butter. The basic idea is we're going to take the softest most room temperature butter imaginable and season it with salt, pepper, and herbs. Then we're going to rub that seasoned butter all over the turkey. Actually it's not going to go on the top of the turkey but under the skin. That's where the magic happens. Any leftover butter can be smeared on top of the skin, but the focus is under the skin. The seasonings in that butter, along with the butter, start to penetrate the meat without having to go through the skin first. The salt breaks down the meat and makes it more tender. The salt and herbs make the meat taste great. The butter adds flavor, moisture, and will be a big part of getting a golden brown turkey at the end of it all. It's a winning situation and requires no giant plastic containers of water.

The second way we're going to add flavor and moisture is to season the cavity or inside of the turkey so that salt is coming at the meat from both sides and we're going to fill the cavity with

apples and onions. Both are a little sweet which is a nice balance to the earthy herbs, and they're full of water which means they'll break down and keep the inside of the bird from drying out. You don't eat the apples and onions; just throw them away when the turkey is done. Now I know that a lot of you are diametrically opposed to not putting actual stuffing inside your turkey, and while I'm definitely not opposed to that, a breaded stuffing inside your bird is likely why your bird tends to be dry or why you have to get the big bucket of salty water to counteract the drying. Also some people get weird about the contamination factor and how the stuffing dries up before the turkey is cooked and all kinds of things. When I host, I like a bird on its own and stuffing or dressing in a casserole dish. And y'all, don't sleep on Pepperidge Farm. I love that stuff, maybe more than your intricate cornbread situations. I grew up on it, my mother-in-law still uses it, and I'm not sure I'll ever prefer another stuffing to that one. But moving on, this episode isn't about stuffing.

So we're adding flavor and moisture by covering the meat of the turkey under the skin with a heavily seasoned butter and then putting more salt along with apples and onions in the cavity to keep it moist from the inside. Once those things are done, all that's left to do is cook it.

On the site, you'll get actual measurements of butter and herbs, and I also have it divided up by what day to do these tasks. Because of that, we'll just shoot through these last couple of steps, and you can read it in more detail on the site.

So the day before you're going to cook the turkey, pull out your butter first thing so that it gets nice and soft. Later in the day, some time between lunch and when you go to bed, you'll stir all the seasonings into the butter. On the site, I mention half rosemary and half thyme. You can also use any combination of fennel, sage, or even oregano if you wanted. I love the traditional earthy flavor of rosemary and thyme, but whatever you choose, I'd recommend choosing at least two herbs to add some complexity.

Also regarding the herbs, I typically use dried just because they're easier to find and you need less of them to get all the flavor. And since we're adding a lot of stuff to this butter, adding fresh herbs does chunk it up a bit. That said, this bird will in no way be harmed by using more butter than is called for. Truly, so if you just love the flavor of fresh rosemary (as you should) and really want to use it, double the measurement called for in the written recipe if you're using fresh. So if you'd use a teaspoon of dried rosemary, use at least two teaspoons of fresh. And if you do use fresh, chop it really really fine. It'll work great.

Then you'll coat the meat under the skin with the seasoned butter and then put it back in the fridge overnight. The hours and hours of that salt being able to penetrate the meat is what's important. It's like a brine without the water.

There's some info on the site about how long to cook the turkey and when to know it's done and all that, but really you're looking at about four hours. I like to do the first three hours covered in foil to keep the moisture in and to keep the skin from browning too quickly. Then I take the foil

off the last hour and let it fly. And after you butter the turkey the day before, cover it in foil while it hangs out, and then the next day when it's time to cook it, literally stick the pan in the oven. There's nothing to do the day of cooking except to put it in the oven. That's how a Thanksgiving should roll.

Now, in case you think this is too simple, that this turkey can't possible be as good as I claim, I will direct your attention to the dozen comments on the post and I wish I had the even more dozens of emails I've gotten over the years of people who have made this turkey. In fact, I posted this recipe on my very first food blog which is now removed from the Internet almost a decade ago. That's how long I've depended on this recipe as the best turkey out there. Listen to this comment from Erika:

Dude. I made my first turkey this year and followed your recipe to a "T." It was amazingly simple and tasty. My brother in law is a phenomenal cook and he said it was perfect. I almost cried. My husband has requested I make this exact recipe every year we host, and I have no plans to do otherwise. Thank you for making me look so good!

Thank you for those words, Erika, and you guys for real, this recipe will not let you down. It just won't. I hope this breakdown has been helpful, and I hope you try to make it this Thanksgiving or for any holiday you so choose.

Also thank you for letting me spend an entire podcast episode on how to make a turkey. That's true love right there. Thanks so much for listening, and until next time be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. I'm Kendra, and I'll see you next week.