

## Timing a Turkey Dinner

### Update:

I originally wrote this about 15 years ago. Since then, there has been a mighty brouhaha about stuffing a turkey. Health authorities advise there may be bacterial contamination if the stuffing does not reach the temperature high enough to thoroughly cook it. If you really like your stuffing in the turkey, try this technique: Prepare the stuffing as usual and right before placing it into the turkey, microwave it for 5-6 minutes until it is hot. Stuff the turkey, place it all in the oven and cook the turkey as you normally do.

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For most Americans, the traditional Thanksgiving feast is just that — “traditional”. Every year, the same way — the same stuffing, the same potatoes, those little marshmallows on top of the sweet potato casserole, the same desserts, the same family expecting the identical meal they’ve had once a year all their lives. Ironically, of all American holidays, Thanksgiving is the only one centering around and celebrating food, yet the menu seldom varies. I wouldn’t presume to offer a recipe for stuffing or a turkey the week before the big event. However, the one thing that seems to be on every cook’s mind this time of year, no matter how big or small the feast, is how to get the whole kit and kaboodle to the table hot at the same time.

It’s a universal concern. Whether you’re a first time feast-giver or you’ve done it every year since you were twelve, there’s definitely a lot of organizing required. That’s all it takes — planning. And if you haven’t started yet, you better get to it, for there are many little time-consuming jobs easily done in advance so you don’t waste valuable oven space and patience the day of the celebration.

Assuming the following basic menu, I offer a master plan to get in on the table with aplomb and efficiency.

Cold shrimp over mixed greens with lemon vinaigrette.

Roast turkey.

Herbed bread stuffing.

Garlic mashed potatoes.

Whipped sweet potato casserole.

Really good gravy.

Brussel sprouts and artichokes.

Cranberry sauce with walnuts and orange.

Apple pie and praline pumpkin pie.

Bread and/or rolls.

### Today — Right Now.

1. Decide on your menu and put it in writing.

2. Make a shopping list. It is very important to mentally walk yourself through preparing the whole menu and visualize, and then write down, every item you will need for every dish you prepare. If you are an everyday cook, this will be easier and result in a shorter list than if you are a once-a-year cook whom I advise to check everything carefully. Many a holiday chef has gone to the brink of mania because there turned out to be no salt in the house. Also, check cooking pans and pots and service plates and utensils. Borrow what you need or buy disposables.

3. Write out a timetable, day by day and then, for feast day, hour by hour. Consider the amount of oven space and refrigeration (use the back porch if necessary), the number of guests, your cooking abilities and time, any help you can actually rely on, and, most importantly, the time of the meal. Work backwards from that time.

The above may seem like overkill, but it most assuredly is not. The 15-20 minutes it takes you to put it all on paper are the most important ones you'll spend this week. Putting it all on paper also goes a long way to emptying your head of worry. If you haven't tried this trick in past years, try it this year. I guarantee a happier holiday.

#### The weekend before Thanksgiving.

1. Shop. Get everything you need in-house, including the turkey if it's frozen. If you're using a fresh bird, order it and pick it up on Tuesday. Do not even think of going anywhere near a market on Wednesday.
2. Make cranberry sauce.
3. Make pie dough, roll it out, line pie tins, wrap and freeze.

#### Monday.

1. Prepare bread cubes for stuffing.
2. Make lemon vinaigrette, cover and refrigerate.
3. Take turkey out of the freezer and put into refrigerator.

#### Tuesday.

1. Prepare whipped sweet potato casserole.
2. Or take the day off and make the sweet potatoes tomorrow.
3. If you're going to cook a fresh turkey, pick it up at the market.

#### Wednesday.

1. Peel and cut the potatoes, cover with cold water and refrigerate.
2. Prepare stuffing. If you're not going to cook it in the turkey, put it into the pan you'll use to cook it, cover and refrigerate. Always put stuffing into the turkey right before it goes into the oven.
3. Pull the unbaked pie shells from the freezer and, while they are defrosting, prepare the fillings. Bake the pies at the end of the day.
4. Prepare the turkey. If it's frozen, be sure it is thoroughly defrosted. If it's not and there are ice remnants in its cavity, soak the bird in cold water, changing it every once in a while, until it's really defrosted. Fresh or frozen, remove the package of innards from the cavity, rinse the whole bird, pat it dry, then season with salt and pepper and place in baking pan. Cover and refrigerate.
5. Using the neck and other giblets, along with celery and onion, prepare stock for the gravy. Strain, bring to room temperature and then refrigerate. Make a roux from butter and flour for use in the gravy.
6. Prepare the vegetables, place in their baking dish, cover and refrigerate.
7. Boil and peel the shrimp. Pick over and wash the mixed greens. Then rinse and refrigerate.

#### Thursday.

1. Assuming a 16-20 pound turkey, cooking time will be between 5 and 6 hours if the stuffing is baked inside it. The same bird, unstuffed, will take only 3 or 4 hours to bake. The choice is yours. Set the time of your dinner and about 7 hours before that time, put the stuffed turkey into a preheated 350 degree oven. Timing a turkey's doneness is tricky. The breast white meat cooks much more quickly than any of the dark meat parts. Test by inserting a meat thermometer into the thickest part of the thigh. It should register at least 185 degrees.
2. While it is baking, take the sweet potatoes, white potatoes and vegetables out of the refrigerator and allow them to come to room temperature.
3. About an hour and a half before serving, cook the white potatoes and mash them. Put in a serving bowl.
4. Your turkey should be done about an hour before serving. Remove it from the oven and raise the temperature to 375 degrees. Remove the turkey from its baking pan to the serving platter.
5. Remove the stuffing from the cavities of the turkey and put into a serving bowl.
6. Place the sweet potatoes, brussel sprouts and stuffing (if being baked out of the bird) into the oven.
7. Make the gravy using the giblet stock to deglaze the baking pan and the roux to thicken it.
8. Quickly assemble the salads.

9. As soon as the sweet potatoes, vegetables and separate stuffing (if any) are heated, you are ready to serve.

10. Check to assure that the white potatoes and stuffing baked removed from the turkey are still warm. If not, heat them quickly in the microwave or on the stove top.

Now, you're ready to eat! And you can sit and enjoy yourself, because the rule is that the cook doesn't do the dishes!