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Roasting Virtuosity

E.M. Burton explains how to properly roast a chicken for the hungry cave people in your life.

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All images: E.M. Burton

One of the things I like best about membership in the CrossFit community is that nutritional issues are top of mind for most of us. Still, we can all use a refresher on some of the basics.

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The essentials of what can be called a “CrossFit diet” can be found in [CFJ Issue 21: Zone Meal Plans](#), elegantly explained and justified by Nicole Carroll in [Getting off the Crack](#) and [Nutrition: The Teeter-Totter](#). Start with those for the how and why.

When it comes to implementation, a few basic food-prep skills can save you time and money and perhaps reward you in unexpected ways. It might help to think of meal preparation as skill work.

Regardless of the diet you follow, and unless you’re a vegan or vegetarian, chances are pretty good that knowing how to roast chicken will be good for you. This is not so much a recipe as a method; in terms of skills, you owe it to yourself to have this one down, even if you don’t use it often.



You can always add garlic and fresh herbs, but sea salt and black pepper are really all you need to season your chicken.

Why learn how to roast a chicken? Perhaps you need to feed a family and wonder how you’re all going to make changes from the standard American diet (appropriately shortened to SAD). Maybe you cook all the time for other people and would like to shake up your routine. Perhaps you’ve never set foot in a kitchen, let alone opened a hot oven. It doesn’t matter what your training goals are; no matter who you are, you need to know how to roast a chicken. Just knowing this one kitchen skill can improve the quality of your meals and stretch both your budget and time like few others.

That’s it for the practicalities, and maybe the “why” will cease to matter once you taste it.

Like a squat, there’s a thing done badly and then there’s something that approaches the divine. The act of cooking chicken well, however, will surprise you. It can be a very sensual experience in itself, which can transport you. It always makes the romantic in me think, “This is what it must have been like to roast a chicken for a caveman,” but the realist in me always adds, “but with much better teeth.”

Teeth or no, over time those cave people managed to figure it out. Not having refrigeration for preservation, they discovered that cooked meat would last much longer than raw meat. They also must have figured out how to use high temperatures to sear in the juices, how long to cook it for best results and so on.

I have to warn you that this is going to be very hot, noisy and smelly, and you’ve got to work fast. This process will likely be very attractive to those fans of *Iron Chef*. If that’s not your thing, then supervise someone else. But if it is, put the music on loud, and it will feel like a party. It can seem very impressive, but it’s remarkably easy: once you have the ingredients, you already have everything you need to make it turn out perfectly. It’s just time and execution that will distinguish your performance.

Read through the instructions first. Like doing a WOD, wrap your head around everything that needs to be done so you’re not learning it the first time through when things are underway. Gather everything you need on the counter before you start.



Pan, salt, thermometer, baster: the essential tools for a perfect roast chicken.

Prep

Ingredients

Roasting chicken, roughly 4-5 lb.

Medium to coarse sea salt

Black pepper

Tools

Oven

Oven-safe roasting pan

Baster

Oven thermometer

A note on ingredients: The rule of thumb is to always procure the best that you can afford. As with everything, the more you spend, the better quality and taste you'll get.

In my experience, the better the bird, the less fat you'll find in the pan after roasting. Also, I think Maldon salt is the best brand I've ever found—it's a treat in our house—but any salt will do. Black pepper tastes best here when freshly and finely ground.

Directions

Start to clean and prep the chicken by removing its trusses, if it came with any (untie it). Rinse it, pat it dry, and set it in a large bowl to rest, allowing the cavity to breathe. Cover the entire thing inside and out with sea salt—liberally and all over. Grind the black pepper over the areas covered in skin; you don't need to pepper the cavity. Cover with a plastic wrap or similar cover just to keep it clean. Let the chicken sit to room temperature. For most roasters between 3 and 5 lb., that will be about one hour.

When you're ready, heat the oven to 475 F.

1. Once the oven is warmed, put the pan in and let it sit there for a few minutes to heat up. Working as quickly as you safely and carefully can, pull the pan out and drizzle it with a couple of tablespoons of non-virgin olive oil (sometimes you don't want a virgin olive oil; the flashpoint is lower). Set the chicken in the pan, breasts up. It will sizzle like crazy. Return the pan with the chicken to the oven. Set your timer for 15 minutes and ready your baster for the next step.
2. At 15 minutes, and working very quickly, take the chicken out of the oven. Notice how dry and taut the skin looks; it's holding in all the moisture. Baste it. Three or four quick squirts are all you need to cover the entire bird, and be sure to include the legs. Return it to the oven. Set the timer for 15 minutes.
3. When the timer goes off at the 30-minute mark, remove the chicken, baste it again and return it to the oven. Set the timer for 15 minutes.
4. At the next 15-minute mark—45 minutes at this point—baste again. Set the timer for 10 minutes.
5. When the timer goes off—now at 55 minutes on the overall clock—remove the bird, baste it again and return it to the oven. Set the timer for 5 minutes.
6. When the timer goes off, remove the chicken from the oven, stick the thermometer into the thickest part of the breast and wait for the reading. It should read at least 170 F. If it does, you're done.
7. Let it rest 10 minutes.

If the chicken's temperature is lower than 170 F, return it to the oven and repeat Step 5 until it reads 170 F. This likely won't be necessary; I've never had a 5-lb. chicken require more cooking time, but you need to be sure. You may live 5,000 feet above sea level, in which case your oven temperatures and its variations will differ.

I defy you to keep from devouring the roasted chicken standing up. "Heaven on Earth"—I think this is how our caveman forebears must have felt once they'd figured this out. But seek out company with this one. As the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus is known to have said on the well-lived life, "We should look for someone to eat and drink with before looking for something to eat and drink."



How to Baste

Hold baster and squeeze bulb. Insert tip into hot drippings in bottom of pan. Hold baster over bird and release bulb. Repeat three or four times.

If you don't have a baster, you can use a large metal spoon.



About the Author

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