

# Chicken to crow about

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From its crispy, golden-hued skin to its tender, moist meat, roast chicken remains a timeless, comforting dish that is as eagerly embraced by home cooks as it is by sophisticated chefs.

Julia Child and Jacques Pepin celebrated the well-roasted chicken as the hallmark of a fine cook in their book "Julia and Jacques Cooking at Home."

Restaurateur Judy Rodgers of San Francisco's landmark Zuni Cafe is widely known for her earthy wood-fire-oven roasted chicken.

And closer to home, Saffron's Su-Mei Yu long ago achieved acclaim for the restaurant's popular rotisserie chicken.

Part of roast chicken's appeal is its simplicity. It's easy to prepare in a pinch, whether for a weeknight meal or a special-occasion dinner. Why, then, are there endless versions of this time-tested preparation online, in cookbooks and in food magazines, each purporting to yield the best roast chicken ever?

The editors of *Cook's Illustrated* went to the trouble of roasting 40 chickens (so that we wouldn't have to) to uncover a foolproof method that they included in last year's book "The Best Chicken Recipes."

I confess I collect roast chicken recipes like some people collect old coins, determined as I am to achieve culinary perfection.

Truss or don't truss? Baste or don't baste? Brine ahead or don't bother? Flip the bird during roasting or leave it alone? These are the nettlesome questions that bedevil anyone interested in turning out that perfectly roasted bird.

"What is interesting about roast chicken is, it seems really simple: unwrap bird, put in oven, bake. And the ingredients list is just salt, pepper, chicken," said Jack Bishop, editorial



At Urban Solace in North Park, chef Matt Gordon brines chickens in a salt solution with lemons, garlic and fresh herbs before roasting.

**U-T Multimedia:** For video on roasting a chicken, plus more recipes, visit [uniontrib.com/more/chicken](http://uniontrib.com/more/chicken)

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director for America's Test Kitchen, home of *Cook's Illustrated*. "Yet it's one of those things that's hard to get right, because you have two kinds of meat, the hollow cavity and things cooking at different rates.

"It's not like a pork loin or beef tenderloin, where if one end is cooked, the other will be as well."

Still, after roasting dozens of chickens, the experts at America's Test Kitchen concluded that preparing a roasted chicken does not have to be a complicated endeavor. In fact, they

found there are two traditional steps that can be eliminated entirely: trussing the chicken, which can inhibit the cooking of the thigh meat, and basting.

Experts vary on the utility of turning the chicken while it's roasting to promote even browning, and there's little consensus on what kind of cooking vessel is best. Some insist on using a V-rack placed in a roasting pan, while others say an ovenproof skillet or glass baking dish is sufficient.

One essential step, many agree, is brining the chicken to ensure a flavorful, tender bird.

One of my biggest frustrations with roast chicken is that no matter how

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Brining allows the flavors of seasonings to permeate the meat of roast chicken. *Nelvin C. Cepeda / Union-Tribune*

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### It's a simple dish with many ways to accomplish it

much I season it, embellish it with fresh herbs and nudge butter under the skin, the end product is tender but not that flavorful. Failure to brine, I'm told, is the reason.

"We brine our chickens, and that really is the secret, even if you buy a lesser-quality bird," said Matt Gordon, executive chef at Urban Solace in North Park. "We use salt water, lemons, garlic, sugar, fresh herbs and peppercorns in our brine.

"The salt draws the natural liquid out of the chicken and tenderizes the meat. The muscle relaxes. That allows the flavors you put in the brine to work itself back into the chicken."

Rodgers of Zuni Cafe is a fan of using a dry brine, rubbing the bird in advance with  $\frac{3}{4}$  teaspoon sea salt per pound of chicken. She also advocates using smaller birds, no more than 3½ pounds, because they tolerate high heat better, and with more skin per ounce, the meat is guaranteed to be more succulent, said Rodgers.

Salting the chicken at least a day in advance will help season it evenly while also tenderizing it, she said.

"If you do stuff herbs under the skin, you have a double win. The salt will grab hold of the aromatic herbs and carry them inland," explained Rodgers, who no longer bothers turning the chicken over while it is roasting, as she recommends in her cookbook.

"Our chicken is nicely seasoned and nicely browned and picks up nice flavors from our brick oven," she said. "You're not seduced in by things like

honey anise or maple yogurt glaze. It's just the chicken."

Coating the chicken with oil or butter before roasting is unnecessary, she added, as there already is sufficient fat in the skin.

Tell that to Julia Child, who always generously massaged her chickens with butter before putting them in the oven.

"Why? Because I think the chicken likes it — and more important, I like to give it," Child wrote in "Julia and Jacques Cooking at Home." "I learned the butter massage when I started cooking for the first time in France and would never give it up."

I have used Child's roast-chicken technique many a time, generously buttering the outside and stuffing the cavity with fresh herbs and sliced lemons. While I adore the intensely flavored deglazing sauce that comes from melding the juices and brown bits from the cooked chicken with minced shallot, vermouth and chicken stock, the chicken itself is rather bland.

That was not the result when I followed Rodgers' instructions to pre-salt the chicken. Just as she predicted, the meat was full of flavor, having absorbed the seasoning over a 24-hour period, and the skin was nicely crisped.

Saffron's Su-Mei Yu doesn't brine her chickens but does apply a marinade that includes chopped ginger and lemon juice, which she says help tenderize the chicken as it cooks.

"I try not to overpower the chicken. I use garlic, shallots and soy sauce and mix that with lemon, and it helps brown the skin," said Yu.

"Roast chicken is one of these universal foods that everyone recognizes. There's something about the smell, the way it turns golden that enhances your appetite, and you just want to eat it."

## Brine and Glaze for Roast Chicken

Makes enough for 3 chickens

1 cup kosher salt	<b>CIDER MOLASSES GLAZE</b>
$\frac{1}{4}$ cup granulated sugar	3 cups apple cider
$\frac{1}{4}$ cup brown sugar	$\frac{1}{4}$ cup cider vinegar
6 fresh thyme sprigs or other herbs	$\frac{1}{2}$ cups dark molasses
$\frac{1}{4}$ cup garlic cloves	1 tablespoon cold butter
1 tablespoon peppercorns	1 teaspoon chopped fresh herbs
1 lemon, halved	
4 cups boiling water	
1 gallon cold water	
Olive oil	
Salt and pepper, to taste	

**To brine chickens:** Place kosher salt, granulated sugar, brown sugar, herbs, garlic cloves, peppercorns and lemon halves in a very large pot. Add the boiling water and stir. Let rest for 20 minutes for all the flavors to steep. Stir and then add the cold water. Use this to brine up to three chickens. (Remove any giblets before brining). Let chicken(s) sit in brine, refrigerated, 12 to 24 hours.

**To roast chickens:** Remove chicken(s) from brine and drain all liquid out of cavity. Pat outside of chickens with paper towel. Fold the wing tips behind the back of the chicken (so it looks like it's relaxing in a hammock on a hot summer day). Truss the legs with twine. Place chicken in a roasting pan, rub the skin liberally with olive oil and sprinkle with salt and pepper.

Preheat oven to 425 degrees. Roast bird for 20 minutes, or until the skin looks mostly golden brown. Reduce oven heat to 250 degrees and continue to cook for 20 minutes or longer. During the last few minutes of roasting the chicken, brush on the Cider Molasses Glaze. The chicken is done when a meat thermometer inserted in the inner thigh near the breast but not touching bone registers 160 degrees. (Home ovens vary, so use a meat thermometer to judge doneness.) Let chicken rest for at least 20 minutes prior to carving.

**For Cider Molasses Glaze:** In a saucepan, boil cider and vinegar until reduced to 1 cup. Remove from heat. Add molasses and let cool. The glaze should be lightly syrupy.

Place any remaining glaze (or glaze that drips off after chickens are finished) in a saute pan. Bring to a simmer and stir in the cold butter and fresh herbs. Pour sauce over carved chicken just before serving.

(Adapted from chef Matt Gordon of Urban Solace Restaurant, North Park)

Roasting a succulent bird can be as easy as salt and pepper



Roast chicken is a simple dish, yet there are endless versions, each purporting to produce the best result. *Nelvin C. Cepeda / Union-Tribune photos*