

Turkey-on-the-Grill

-by Stan Kaplan, WB9RQR

The turkeys turn out to be a major hit during the Friday night “pass a dish” feast at our ORC Field Day, where I typically cook and serve three birds. I am often asked what the secret is to preparing them. There is nothing magic about it. Indeed, it is fairly simple process. Here it is – everything you need to know, in some detail, to do one or several at the same time.

WHAT GRILL TO USE: Only a 22½-inch Weber charcoal kettle will do. I cannot guarantee good results if you use a gas grill or a non-Weber charcoal grill. The size and geometry of the Weber kettle yield results that are just not reproducible with any other setup. When properly fired, the kettle contains a *reducing atmosphere*. That is, the air that comes in the vents is quickly depleted of oxygen by the burning briquettes, so that virtually no free oxygen is present in the kettle during cooking. This imparts a slight rose color to the white meat just under the skin, about 5 mm deep, as well as a delicious light smoke flavor. It also controls the burning of the briquettes so they don’t get too hot. All three vents in the kettle bottom should be wide open, as well as the vent in the lid. Just open every vent fully when you set up the grill and keep them that way during the cooking process.

PREPARE THE TURKEY: Get a fresh 12 to 14 pound bird. Shuck it out of its wrap in your sink. Remove the giblets and neck, and discard them or freeze them for some other cooking project. Rinse the bird thoroughly, inside and out with *cold* water. Free the legs by removing the plastic or wire holder, and cut off the “tush” and any loose skin and fat near the rear opening to the body cavity. Next, remove any loose skin at the front of the bird, and slit the front hole leading into the body cavity to open it so that heat can freely circulate into the cavity. For those of you with a penchant for anatomy, that front hole is where the *esophagus and trachea* entered the body cavity to connect to the stomach and lungs. Now season the bird, outside and also inside on the roof, sides and bottom of the body cavity. Only three seasonings are needed. Dust heavily first with prepared “poultry seasoning”, then garlic powder (not garlic salt), and finally with plain salt. You cannot over-season the bird! When done, it should be a pungent, ugly, gritty greenish mess. Wrap tightly in heavy-duty foil if you are not going to put it on the grill immediately, and refrigerate. I criss-cross two 3-foot long pieces of foil, lay the bird in the middle, then fold up one set of ends, then the other. I then put the bird in a plastic shopping bag (upside – down) tie the bag handles, then put this into another bag (right-side-up) and tie those handles. This goes into the refrigerator for at least a day, nicely marinating the bird in the poultry seasoning – garlic powder seasonings.

Do NOT leave a bird without refrigeration for even 20 minutes! Bacteria have their own Field Day with warm poultry, and a single bacterium can become two in less than 20 minutes. Multiply that by several million and ... well, you get the idea. By the way, do not stuff the bird. Make your stuffing separately in the household oven. Stuffing a bird is a health hazard and has been recommended against by the US Department of Agriculture for a number of years.

SET UP AND START THE FIRE: Remove the top grate from the grill and build two piles of briquettes on the bottom grate, on opposite sides. Build the piles high enough so that they come up to the metal tabs that support the upper grate. Take your time and make a substantial pile. If it collapses, build it up again until stable. Leave the center of the bottom grate free of briquettes. Put a drip pan in there later, when the coals are ready, if you want to catch drippings for gravy, or just want to keep your grill’s bottom clean. Obviously, the free space on the bottom grill should be large enough to accommodate the drip pan (even if you don’t use one). Douse the briquettes with starter fluid, and light each pile independently. Cover off, of course, until the charcoal is ready (white ash over ALL briquettes). By the way, if you have two of those half-circle shaped briquette holders, feel free to use them in place of the two piles of briquettes. Start them in the

middle, next to each other, and move them with tongs to the sides of the kettle when the coals are ready.

START COOKING: When the briquettes are ready, put in your drip pan (if desired), and put on the top grate. Put the turkey on a poultry rack (a V-shaped wire grate that keeps the bird from flopping over, that is also handy for lifting the bird), or you can put the bird directly on the top grate if you wish. Insert an armored meat thermometer (Taylor makes the best) into the space between the leg and body cavity, with the point of the thermometer heading down at a 45° angle, toward the front of the bird. **DO NOT LEAVE OUT THIS STEP.** The thermometer is the only fail-safe way to tell when the bird is done. Those pop-up thingies are not to be trusted; I pull them out and throw them away before cooking. Center the bird on the grill and add the cover (top and bottom vents wide open).

WHEN TO CHECK: Regardless of the wonderful smell and your desire to check the bird, suppress your impulse to look at the thermometer until 2 hours have passed. After 2 hours, quickly lift the cover and peek at the thermometer scale. It is not done until it has reached **POULTRY** on the scale. If you can see the dark column in the glass, take heart. It only takes a short time for it to go from, lets say, beef rare to poultry. Put the cover back on quickly (so as to keep as much heat inside as is possible), and check it in another 20 minutes. Typically, during the summer months, it takes 2 to 2½ hours to do a 12 to 14 pound bird, unless it is an unusually cold day or high winds pull the heat away from the kettle. Unless you did not put enough briquettes in initially, you should not have to add any during the cooking process. When the thermometer reaches the **POULTRY** setting, remove the bird and cut the drumstick off. There should be no pink or blood red visible in the joint if the bird is done. Again, do not be concerned if the breast meat is rose colored close to the skin. That is a normal result of grilling this way. Deeper, the flesh should be completely white.

An additional tip: the battery powered remote thermometers available now are great! You put an armored metal probe into the turkey, and the metal covered wire from it comes out from under the top of the kettle and attaches to a transmitter. The receiver is inside your house, or clipped to your belt. Set it to alarm at 180° F. I use a regular Taylor meat thermometer in addition to the remote – inserted on the other side of the bird – for insurance. Then when the remote alarms, I check the regular thermometer to confirm the bird is done.

DON'T:

1. Baste. A completely unnecessary step. Trust me, it will be moist and tender without basting.
2. Tent. No foil tenting or other such step is needed, ever. Keep the bird bare.

Yes, you can apply this method to a chicken, or a Cornish game hen, or a duck, or a goose. Do everything the same, but check the thermometer sooner with smaller birds. Be sure to use an armored meat thermometer – it will never lie about the bird being done. Yes, you can use this method for a roast, too. But don't let the thermometer get up to **POULTRY** when cooking beef, unless you like shoe leather!

This method of cooking, which employs indirect heat, is failsafe. Furthermore, the flavor and juiciness of the bird just cannot be matched in an ordinary household oven. It is terrific for your Thanksgiving bird – far superior to inside cooking and it also leaves your oven free for pies, stuffing and other delicious side dishes. I have done a Thanksgiving turkey on the grill every year for at least 30. You'll love it!