

Just Plain Old Roast Chicken

This is one of those recipes that aren't really recipes, but could be classified under *Things Mother Taught Me*. When it comes to roasting chicken, all kinds of questions pop up. Low and slow? Hot and fast? A combination? Truss? Baste? Covered or uncovered or both? With or without a thermometer? Who cares? Just do what Mother did.

(Serves about 6)

1 whole chicken (4–5 pounds) a free-range, drug-free, clean-living bird

extra-virgin olive oil

salt and freshly ground pepper

Optional: onion, celery, lemon, garlic

Preheat oven to 450 degrees. You'll reduce it to 400 later, but we start it off hot. Find a pot with a lid that will fit your chicken – I use a 3-quart enameled cast iron pot or a 5-quart Dutch oven.

1. Check the cavity of the chicken. If there is a neck, toss it back into the cavity. If there is a bag of giblets, rip it open. There are usually a couple of funny little things that I believe are the heart and gizzard – I throw them in with the neck. If the liver looks inviting it gets sautéed briskly in butter, salted and peppered, and eaten while it's hot. Mm-mm. (See note)
2. Rub a teaspoon of olive oil around inside the pot before putting the chicken in. Stuff chicken with the optional items – a squeezed lemon, (save the juice for something else), a quartered onion (no need to peel it, but strip off any loose papery skin), some leafy celery tops, and some garlic cloves, not necessarily peeled but lightly smashed. Coat visible surfaces of chicken with olive oil. (Although Mother says nothing browns chicken skin more nicely than butter, trying to spread butter over a cold chicken is something I would only do once.) Dust generously with freshly ground pepper and salt.

Reduce oven to 400 degrees.

3. Cover pot, place in oven, and cook for about 1½ hours. Check for doneness by wiggling a drumstick; if it moves with any reluctance, or tends to bounce firmly back to its original position, cook the chicken another ½ hour or so. If the drumstick moves easily in the joint, the chicken is cooked. (If the drumstick comes away in your hand – well, it's overcooked, and therefore more meltingly delicious, according to Mother.)
4. Give the cooked chicken 15 minutes to brood before serving.

Note:

► Buying a whole raw chicken is not where I focus on saving money. I want a fresh bird with springy flesh and taut skin, and it has to be born and bred here in the Northwest. When buying any meat or fish, I shop where I know the people behind the counter, and can count on their guarantee.

► Mother didn't like chicken skin so she didn't care if it was crispy or not. I love the skin so I leave the lid off the pot for the final half hour of cooking.

► Chicken livers that are broken up and shapeless are banished to the cavity, and are not honored with a hot bath in sizzling butter. They should have their rosy, smoothly-curved liver shape relatively intact. I generally trim them into evenly-sized morsels and sauté them until they have barely lost their pink centers. (If you like chicken liver and can get them fresh, see *Chopped Liver* on page 169.)

Leftover chicken ideas

Save skin and bones for *Chicken Stock – Simple* on previous page. If you are looking for uses for your leftover cooked chicken, some ideas would be *Chicken Pot Pie* (next page), *Chicken Salad* (page 170), *Southwest Chicken Salad* (page 232), *Chicken Soup, Mexican-style* (page 233), *Tom Kab Gai* (page 234), and a substitute for the lamb in *Lamb Curry* (page 246).