

Diane's Blog
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Selecting a Turkey – What Size and Type to Buy

I've had quite a number of turkey-focused questions from readers that I have answered individually, and I thought it would be helpful to share that information here.

Size Matters

The size of the turkey you buy does matter, for several reasons. The most obvious, of course, is that you want to have enough for everyone. For turkeys weighing less than 12 pounds figure on 1 pound of turkey per person. This allows for a reasonable amount of leftovers. Turkeys weighing more than 12 pounds have more meat per pound, so figure on 3/4 to 1 pound per person, which leaves room for plenty of seconds and leftovers.

Size matters most when it comes to handling the bird. I have enough work to do on Thanksgiving Day without engaging in a wrestling match with a large turkey, so I avoid buying weighing over 18 pounds. (Even capable men will admit – or maybe they won't – that maneuvering a hefty turkey is a lot of work.) If you have 25 people coming for dinner, my suggestion is to roast 2 smaller birds.

Another factor, which many people don't think about until it's too late, is that some ovens can't even accommodate a 25-pound bird. Measure and plan. Finally, a big turkey is only impressive if the bird and the cook make it to the dinner table in one piece. I nearly dropped a 22-pound turkey one year, inching it out of an oven barely large enough to accommodate it. So my advice comes from experience!

The Choices

At one time, fresh or frozen was the only choice you had to make when it came to buying a commercially raised whole turkey. Now there are lots of choices, and quality and taste differences figure into them. Here are my thoughts on what is available in the marketplace.

Standard Turkeys

These mass-produced, conventionally raised birds are sold either fresh or frozen during the holiday season. This is a perfectly acceptable turkey, easy to obtain without a lot of forethought from any large supermarket and reasonably priced.

Self-Basting Turkeys

These turkeys, sold fresh or frozen, have been "enhanced" with fat of some sort, in addition to natural and artificial flavorings. The selling point of this product is that the bird doesn't need to be basted, thus saving the cook time and energy. Good idea in theory, bad idea in practice – primarily because that enhancer is flavored vegetable oil, which is not a likely source for any improvement, in my opinion. This is my least favorite turkey on the market. Do not brine a self-basting turkey; these birds have already been injected with a salt solution.

Free-Range Turkeys

These are the turkeys that get to run around the barnyard, so to speak. They aren't necessarily ranging outdoors, but they are raised in spacious, open environments. Most of these birds are

more expensive than other turkeys, especially if they are also organic, which free-range turkeys often are. If you order from a knowledgeable butcher or have a specialty-foods store you trust, ask the staff who farms the turkeys they sell and if the birds are both free range and organic, or “natural” and free range, which means they are not fed organic feed but are raised without hormones or antibiotics. These can be delicious, moist, and flavorful birds, and I believe they are usually worth the higher price.

Kosher Turkeys

Although usually sold frozen, kosher birds are often available fresh in large supermarkets at Thanksgiving. They have been inspected, slaughtered, and cleaned under strict rabbinical supervision, which makes for an expensive bird. If you will be serving observant Jewish guests, this is the turkey to buy; otherwise, opt for a nonkosher, free-range bird. Do not brine kosher turkeys, as they have already been salted in the koshering process.

Heritage Turkeys

Prized for their rich flavor and beautiful plumage, Bourbon Red, American Bronze, Slate, and Narragansett are four breeds of turkey that date all the way back to the Pilgrims. These breeds reproduce naturally (unlike the broad-breasted breed of turkey that requires artificial insemination to reproduce) and tend to be raised by small specialty producers who allow the turkeys to range freely in large, field-fenced pastures. The turkeys forage for indigenous grasses and insects and are given organic whole grains on a free-choice basis. The flavor of the meat is richer and gamier than the broad-breasted breed of turkeys. For those especially fond of dark meat, these turkeys are succulent. A roast heritage turkey has graced my Thanksgiving table for the last several years. I do recommend brining these birds. Heritage turkeys can often be purchased at farmers’ markets and specialty butcher shops, or online at www.heritagefoodsusa.com.

“Wild” Turkeys

The only way you are going to get a true wild turkey is to shoot one yourself or cultivate a friend who hunts. Most turkeys labeled “wild” by specialty producers are actually farm raised. These turkeys are expensive, the meat tends to be tough, and the flavor doesn’t justify the price. Smile if a friend calls with one freshly killed and cleaned; roast the breast meat and stew the dark meat.

Fresh or Frozen?

Whether the bird is fresh or frozen, it takes planning when it comes to buying a turkey. Buying a fresh turkey, especially a free-range one, requires a call to the butcher shop or grocery store at least 1 and often 2 or more weeks ahead. Obviously, stores like to know how much to order from the turkey producers, though I’m sure they pad their orders for the last minute, yikes-I-forgot-to-order-a-turkey shoppers. However, you can’t assume there will be a high-quality turkey waiting for you, so mark your calendar.

The bottom line is: A fresh turkey is a better product overall. First off, the convenience of not having to thaw a turkey for 4 to 5 days in the refrigerator is considerable; turkeys take up a lot of fridge space – usually an entire shelf – and that can be a burden on the cook, the household, and the machine itself. Second, the less time you spend juggling shelf space and monitoring the defrosting turkey, the better. Finally, fresh turkeys are moister, because the freezing process inevitably dries the meat out somewhat.

If, for whatever reason—price, convenience, timing, a supermarket freebie—you select a frozen turkey, you still need to plan ahead. The turkey may be at home with you, but it needs to be thawed carefully and slowly in the refrigerator for several days. If you're short on time, a turkey can be thawed in a sink or very large bowl filled with cold water, but that still takes a whole day.