

Diane's Blog
11.4.2009

Equipping Your Kitchen for Thanksgiving

Do you ever wonder why some cooks breeze through the roasting of a holiday bird, turning out a juicy gloriously bronzed turkey, while others struggle every step of the way. In many instances, it isn't about the skills of the cook; it is about the arsenal of equipment and tools they have that makes the job of roasting a bird easier and more successful. For instance, if your oven isn't accurately calibrated, you could be roasting your turkey at 450°F instead of 350°F. Or, you're guessing and wiggling the turkey leg to see if the bird is done instead of taking the internal temperature of the bird.

Here is my list of turkey tools and equipment that will ease the preparation, roasting, carving, and serving of your holiday bird – stocking a holiday kitchen from start to finish. You don't need to buy expensive equipment and tools, you just need to know what qualities to look for – and that doesn't always mean a big price tag.

Bulb Baster

This tool certainly makes basting meat and poultry easier, but a large spoon will work in a pinch. Buy either a stainless-steel or a heat-resistant plastic baster. I prefer the latter because I can see through it. Glass basters are a mistake – they inevitably break.

Carving Board

Different from a cutting board, a carving board has a “moat” that collects meat juices and a “well” that traps them. This is handy for carving all kinds of meats and poultry. My favorite type is a wooden board that is reversible, so you can use the flat side for chopping and dicing.

Carving Knife and Fork

A carving set is lovely if you are presenting a whole bird and carving it at the table. A set is not critical, but if you don't have one, it is important to have a very sharp utilitarian carving knife and carving fork. After working hard to roast your holiday turkey, you want to cut smooth, even slices. A good knife is a lifetime investment.

Fine-Mesh Sieve

Because a fine-mesh sieve can serve double-duty for cooking and baking needs, I stock my kitchen with three sizes. I use the large or medium sieve for straining stocks, soups, or sauces. I use the small one for dusting confectioners' sugar over cakes, pastries, and tarts. Medium-mesh sieves are also available and can be used for straining stocks; just be sure to buy a sturdy, well-constructed sieve.

Gravy Strainer

This useful tool looks like a measuring cup with a spout that originates near the bottom. You pour in pan juices or gravy, the fat naturally rises to the top, and the relatively fat-free liquid that settles to the bottom is easily poured out through the spout.

Kitchen Twine

Buy the proper twine to truss your bird. It should be 100 percent linen, which resists charring. Flimsy string won't do, and dental floss (I've seen it used!) chars and can tear the skin. You'll be surprised how often you will reach for twine once it is in the kitchen.

Meat Thermometer

An instant-read thermometer, built with a small-dial and thin shaft with a piercing end, is the most accurate way to judge the doneness of meats, poultry, and fish. Simply inserting it in the food for a few seconds allows it to register the internal temperature, which is an exceptionally accurate gauge of desired doneness. Note, these thermometers are not meant to be left in the food or the oven. For safety and sanitation, always wash the thermometer after each test. I prefer an analog thermometer to a digital one, as the readings on the digital models seem to jump wildly from one temperature to another.

Oven Thermometer

If you doubt the accuracy of your oven's thermostat, buy an oven thermometer before you start cooking and baking. Once you know how far off the thermostat is, you can adjust the temperature dial accordingly. Whether your oven is old or brand-new, it doesn't hurt to have an oven thermometer to double-check its accuracy.

Probe Thermometer

This thermometer is made up of a probe with a thin wire connected to a transmitter. You insert the probe into the food, put the transmitter on a counter next to the oven, and program the transmitter with the desired temperature. The newest versions have a transmitter and wireless remote, so you can walk up to 120 feet away and the pager will beep when the food is done. These thermometers are nifty, but consumer reviews have been mixed. If you like reading manuals and figuring out how to program gadgets, this is the tool for you.

Roasting Pan

These are usually about 4 inches deep and made of stainless steel or aluminum, sometimes in a nonstick finish (which makes for easy cleanup). The best ones are extra heavy and have sturdy, upright handles. Measure your oven before you buy! A medium pan, about 16 by 12 by 5 inches, is adequate for a turkey weighing up to 20 pounds. The best pans cost about \$100 and will last a lifetime, but for years I managed with a black-and-white-speckled, enamel-coated steel pan I bought at a hardware store for under \$20. I don't recommend using disposable foil pans, except for grill-roasting your bird, because they buckle easily. If you must use them, buy two for double thickness.

Roasting Rack

A V-shaped steel rack, preferably nonstick, elevates poultry and roasts for faster cooking and keeps the pan drippings away from the meat, thus promoting crispy skin. Buy one with tall, vertical handles on each end; they make the lifting much easier. Non-collapsible V-shaped racks are by far my favorite. A high-quality, medium-sized rack costs about \$20. Before you buy, make certain the rack fits inside your roasting pan!

Serving Platters

When you are serving a whole turkey, it is important to make sure you have a platter large enough to accommodate it. You don't need to spend a fortune for a china platter. Shop at outlet stores and discount shops, where you can have fun mixing and matching serving pieces.

