

Tips and Tricks for Successfully Grilling Chicken

Whenever I teach grill classes there are a few questions that get asked time and again. Two in particular relate to chicken. “How do I manage to cook chicken so the outside isn’t charred and the inside is still raw?” The second question is, “Why does the poultry skin always stick to the grill grates?” These are great questions. I thought I would use this week’s blog to tackle the challenges (and delicious rewards!) of grilling chicken.

These are my six rules for successfully cooking chicken:

First, start with a clean, medium-hot, well-oiled grill surface. Even small bits of charred food left on the grill grate will stick to the raw poultry meat or skin, causing the flesh to tear when you try to move the piece. Have the grill preheated, brush the grate so it’s clean, clean, clean, and oil the grate thoroughly so it’s well coated and slicked with oil.

Second, never put a cold piece of chicken on the grill. Remove the poultry from the refrigerator 20 to 30 minutes prior to grilling. Remove any clumps of fat and excess skin, as they will burn on the grill and cause flare-ups. If there is residual moisture on the meat, blot it dry with paper towels before marinating or using a dry rub. Some books direct you to rinse poultry, but I don’t. Long ago, in a class taught by Craig Claiborne, a woman asked why he wasn’t washing the poultry. His response made so much sense. He said, “Madame, exactly what germs are you killing by washing a chicken under cold running water, and how do you plan to sterilize the sink that you have just contaminated with the poultry juices?” I’ve never rinsed poultry since. Nowadays, the United States Food and Drug Administration advises against rinsing poultry as well, explaining that proper cooking will kill any bacteria, and rinsing brings the possibility of splashing bacteria on countertops.

Third, with the exception of skinless chicken breasts, chicken skewers, and poultry burgers I grill chicken in a covered grill using a two-zone fire. The reason for this is control and timing. The best way to grill chicken, whether parts or a whole bird, is to sear it over a medium or medium-hot fire to create bronzed, caramelized, crisp skin, and then to finish it, covered, on the cool side of the grill, so the meat is cooked through but still moist and juicy.

Fourth, even if the poultry has been seasoned with an oil-based marinade, paste, or rub before it goes on the grill, brush or spray it on all sides with oil. This technique is critical to successful poultry grilling. Don’t be afraid to apply a good coating, especially on chicken breasts. It won’t make the chicken oily, and it will prevent it from sticking.

Fifth, use the right tools for moving and turning poultry. For breasts, thighs, wings, and even whole birds, I always use tongs, never a two-pronged fork, to move or turn the pieces, because a fork will pierce the flesh, allowing the juices to run out. If the skin is sticking to the grill grate, use a spatula to loosen it, being careful not to tear the skin.

Sixth, use an instant-read thermometer to check doneness. Poultry is done when the internal temperature reaches 165°F. When grilling a whole chicken or Cornish hen, take the temperature in the thickest part of the thigh. Once the poultry is allowed to rest for 5 to 10 minutes, the carryover heat pushes the final temperature to about 170°F. The meat is moist and tender, cooked through, not pink at the bone, with a wonderfully seared, crisped-skinned exterior.

Finally, whole birds need to rest when they come off the grill. During cooking, the heat drives the juices into the cells and into the center of the meat. If you cut a whole chicken or Cornish hen the moment you take it off the grill, the juices will spill out on the carving board and the meat will be dry and less tender. If you allow the poultry to rest for 5 to 10 minutes before cutting into it, the juices will redistribute themselves evenly throughout the flesh, leaving the poultry juicy and tender when sliced.

E-mail me and let me know if you have further grilling questions. It might be the start of September, but the grill season lingers on – rain or shine.