

Chez Panisse Brine Brings Out the Best

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Leave it to Alice Waters and her crew at Chez Panisse to come up with a recipe that's so simple and so brilliant that it brings out the best in chicken, pork or turkey.

They've created a brine with sugar, salt and a few seasonings that infuse loads of flavor into the meats. In fact, she has used this brine on her Thanksgiving turkey and reports that it was marvelous. To test how well the brine worked, I cooked two chickens side by side. One had been soaked in the brine for 24 hours; the other had not been brined at all. Both were filled with Italian parsley, preserved lemons and onions and roasted in a 400-degree oven. The difference was remarkable. While the regular chicken had a deeper richer skin color, the brined chicken was plump and juicy, though a little anemic looking. More important was the amazing flavor and texture. It was also the moistest chicken I can remember eating.

The next day I warmed the leftovers. The regular chicken was even drier and had that typical day-old taste, but the brined chicken still tasted moist and fresh.

Because of the brining the chicken stays moist enough to leave it in the oven a little longer if necessary to achieve a crisp, bronzed skin. We also tried a pork roast, brined for three days. It came out fabulous, too, and is particularly good leftover for sandwiches the next day. Since Waters opened Chez Panisse more than 25 years ago, she has been at the forefront of improving our food supply -- first gathering farmers to grow the best organic produce, and now spotlighting other causes: a school gardening program and sustainable agriculture. But the food at Chez Panisse, or upstairs in the Cafe, isn't about politics; it's about finding the best ingredients, cooking them simply and presenting them with care. Never one to take things for granted, Waters refurbished the craftsman-style interior in 1998, adding smoky copper mirrors and new lights to give the already pretty space a new lease on life.

Chez Panisse, 1517 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley; (510) 548-5525. Dinner Monday-Saturday.

SECRET OF SUCCESS

--The brine. The brine infuses flavor into pork, chicken and turkey and makes the meat tender and succulent.

CHEZ PANISSE'S BRINE FOR MEATS

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 1/2 gallons cold water
- 2 cups kosher salt
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 bay leaves, torn into pieces
- 1 bunch fresh thyme, or 4 tablespoons dried
- 1 whole head of garlic, cloves separated and peeled
- 5 whole allspice berries, crushed
- 4 juniper berries, smashed

INSTRUCTIONS: Place the water in a large pot that can easily hold the liquid and the meat you intend to brine.

Add all ingredients and stir for a minute or two until the sugar and salt dissolve.

Leave poultry in the brine for 24 hours; pork for 3 days. If the meat/ poultry floats to the top, use a plate or other weight to keep it completely submerged in the brine.

Note: The recipe may be halved or doubled; the important thing is to have enough brine to completely cover the meat or poultry.

To roast a brined chicken: Drain well. Pat dry and stuff with onions, lemons and herbs. Rub the skin with oil to help browning and sprinkle with pepper (salt isn't needed because of the brine). Roast in a 400 degrees oven until done; generally about 1 hour and 15 minutes for a 3 1/2- to 4-pound bird.

To roast a boneless brined pork roast: Place the meat in a roasting pan and roast at 400 degrees for 12 to 15 minutes per pound, until the center is just pink, or until the internal temperature reaches 150 degrees to 160 degrees.

Michael Bauer is The Chronicle's food editor.

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