

The TURKEY

BY Sam Sifton

THE WHOLE PURPOSE OF THANKSGIVING IS TURKEY. That is not so much argument as truth. Turkey is why you are here.

You can make the best roasted butternut squash in the history of Thanksgiving. You can do the same with Sherry-kissed oyster bisque or cornbread dressing with sausage or buttery mashed potatoes. But here is a fact: Mashed potatoes are a side dish. Take the turkey away from them—or from Aunt Esther's creamed onions or your sister's "famous" macaroni and cheese—and what you are left with is...a potluck supper.

Which is fine on any other day of the year. (Who doesn't love a Minnesota hot-dish dinner?) And it is in no way an indictment of the side dishes themselves—even that casserole with marshmallows on top. Side dishes are crucial to the success of any Thanksgiving meal. But they will never be the star. Turkey is.

The bird should never be an afterthought. It should arrive on the table as a magnificent, golden triumph, a symbol of good fortune and excess and happiness. Prepared correctly, it should be moist and sweet beneath crisp and burnished skin, the perfect vehicle for rich, silky gravy. Your guests should eat a lot of it, until they are full. They should compliment you on its excellence. They should swoon.

I'm here to help with that. I am here to give testimony: Making a great turkey is remarkably easy, as you will see.

What Kind of Turkey Should I Buy?

You have approximately one zillion choices these days, from the frozen turkey in your supermarket to the heritage breeds sold by lottery at your farmers' market. You have free-range and organic, fresh and frozen, kosher and halal. My father once ordered a bird from a farmer friend and it came in feathered, feet attached.

Each has its merits. But to my mind, your best bet is a fresh, free-range, organic bird of whatever breed. "**Fresh**," in turkey

speak, means unfrozen—it has been chilled after processing to the point where the flesh has almost gone stiff in the cold. "**Free-range**" means that even if it didn't spend its life in a field reading Tennyson, at least it didn't live in a box. And "**organic**" means it ate only organic feed and was not treated with antibiotics. These labels are not a guarantee of taste, but odds are the bird will taste better than the frozen old toms they hand out at the local used-car lot.

FOR THE TRADITIONALIST

See photo, opposite page.

This is a good option for cold-weather Thanksgivings eaten under threatening skies, since the combination of herbs and citrus provides a house-filling aroma that speaks to sunniness. Garnish with some remaining sprigs of sage and thyme, but be careful with the rosemary, as a little goes a long way.

HERB-ROASTED TURKEY

- 1 12–14-lb. turkey, giblets and neck removed, at room temperature for 1 hour
- 3 Tbsp. kosher salt
- 1½ Tbsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 6 Tbsp. (¾ stick) unsalted butter, room temperature
- 1 Tbsp. finely grated lemon zest
- 1 Tbsp. minced fresh rosemary
- 1 Tbsp. minced fresh sage leaves
- 1 Tbsp. minced fresh thyme leaves
- 1 medium onion, quartered
- 1 orange, quartered
- 1 lemon, quartered

Preheat oven to 450°. Set a rack inside a large roasting pan. Pat turkey dry with paper towels. Rub bird inside and out with salt and pepper. Place turkey on the rack in the pan. Using a fork, mix butter, lemon zest, rosemary, sage, and thyme in a small bowl. Rub herb butter over top of turkey and inside cavity.

Place onion, orange, and lemon inside turkey cavity. Tuck tips of wings under bird (this prevents them from burning during the long roasting time). Pour 4 cups water into pan. Roast turkey, uncovered, for 30 minutes. Reduce oven temperature to 325°. Baste turkey with pan juices; add more water if needed to maintain at least ¼" liquid in the bottom of roasting pan. Continue roasting turkey, basting every 30 minutes and tenting with foil if skin is turning too dark, until an instant-read thermometer inserted into thickest part of the thigh without touching bone registers 165° (juices should run clear when thermometer is removed), about 2½ hours total.

Transfer turkey to a platter. Tent with foil and let rest for 1 hour before carving. 8–10 SERVINGS

Sam Sifton of the New York Times is the paper's former restaurant critic. His new book, *Thanksgiving—How to Cook It Well* (see page 81), is out now.