

The Best Way to Cook a Goose

For a rich, flavorful roast goose with crispy browned skin, first dunk the bird in boiling water, then refrigerate for at least twenty-four hours before roasting.

BY STEPHEN SCHMIDT

Those who have never cooked a goose are in for a treat. The meat is surprisingly firm, almost chewy to the bite, yet it is also moist and not at all tough or stringy. Both the breast and legs are dark, in the manner of duck, but unlike duck, goose has no gamy or tallowy undertones. Actually, the first impression of many people is that goose tastes a lot like roast beef, and perhaps it is this rich, beefy quality that makes the bird so satisfying and festive.

Goose, however, does have a problem. Although the meat itself is not fatty, a thick layer of fat lies just below the skin. As a consequence, the skin, which looks so tempting, often turns out to be too soft and greasy to eat. I have been roasting goose for years, but I never succeeded in solving the fat problem until I began work on this article. Happily I have found a method that not only roasts but also renders.

Fat Reducing Strategies

My strategy over the years has been to periodically baste goose with chicken stock or wine as it roasts. This helps to dissolve the fat, and it also promotes a handsome brown color. In researching this article, however, I chose not to test this method, because I know from experience that the results are imperfect. A considerable amount of subcutaneous fat always remains, and worse, the basting seriously softens the skin. Last Christmas I tried a variation on this technique. During the last hour of roasting, I turned the oven heat up to 450 degrees and stopped basting. I was hoping to get crispy skin, but what I actually got was a smoky kitchen. And to no purpose—the skin was still chewy and fatty.

Among all the goose-cooking methods I had read about, I was most intrigued by the steam-roasting and closed-cover techniques recommended by various authorities. Since the best way to render fat is to simmer it in water, steaming sounded like a promising procedure.

So in my first test I set the goose on a rack over an inch of water and steamed it on top of the stove in a covered roaster for about an hour. Then I poured the water out of the pan and put the goose into a 325-degree oven, covered. After one hour I checked on the goose, and seeing that the skin was very flabby and not in the least bit brown, I removed the cover of the pan and turned the heat up to 350 degrees. Alas, an hour later the skin was still soft and only a little browner. Even though the goose tested done at this point, I let it stay in the oven for another thirty minutes, but the skin did not improve.

Despite its shortcomings, this method melted out a good deal of the subcutaneous fat, so I decided to modify it and try again. This time I poured only a few cups of water into the pan, and I put the goose directly into the oven rather than starting it on top of the stove. My plan was to roast the goose covered for about one and one half hours, and then uncover the pan, raise the oven heat, and roast for about one and one half hours longer. During the first phase, I reasoned, the goose would steam and the fat would melt; and during the second phase the dry heat of the oven would evaporate the juices in the pan and crisp the skin. Or so I hoped.

What actually happened was that I got a goose much like the first, with unsatisfactorily soft, pale skin. And tasting the goose, I realized that there was yet another problem; steaming had perhaps made the meat a tad juicier, but it had also made the texture a little rubbery and imparted a boiled, stewish flavor. The goose no longer tasted the way I thought goose should. So steaming and I parted company.

Since liquid basting and steaming had both proved unsuccessful, I thought it was time to try a simple dry roast. Some of the geese that I had bought came with instructions to roast at 500 degrees for thirty minutes and then to turn the oven down to 300 degrees and roast several hours longer. The directions said to cover the pan during the second phase of roasting, but having had poor results with covered cooking, I decided to ignore that recommendation and roast uncovered throughout. I stuffed the goose, dried and pricked the skin, and popped it into the scorching oven. As I should have guessed, within fifteen minutes the goose had begun to drip, and the kitchen had filled with smoke. I quickly turned the oven thermostat down to 325 degrees (my usual temperature for goose) and let the bird roast until it tested



Classic accompaniments to roast goose include mashed potatoes, braised red cabbage, and Brussels sprouts. When stuffed, a ten-pound goose serves eight to ten; for more people, you will need to cook two geese.

done, about three hours. Then I increased the oven temperature to 400 degrees, transferred the goose to a large jelly-roll pan, and returned it to the oven for about fifteen minutes to brown and crisp the skin. The results surprised me. This method, the simplest of all, yielded a beautifully brown, crisp-skinned bird, with moist meat and surprisingly little unmelted fat.

Dry, open roasting looked like the way to proceed, but I wondered if the technique could be further improved. Some time ago I had read about a method for roasting duck that was adapted from the classic technique for Peking duck. The duck was immersed in boiling water for one minute and then allowed to dry, uncovered, in the refrigerator for twenty-four hours. The boiling and drying were supposed to tighten the skin, so that during roasting, the fat would be squeezed out. I tried the method with duck and found it highly effective, so I was emboldened to roast a goose using the same procedure. I loved the results. The skin was papery-crisp and defatted to the point where it could be eaten with pleasure—and without guilt.

As it happened, I wanted to do a bit more work on my stuffing, and I also needed to refine my rec-

THE SHAPE OF THE GOOSE

Although dressed geese can weigh as much as fourteen pounds, weights over twelve pounds are rare in American markets. In any case, it has been my experience that heavier geese gain much more in fat and bone than they do in meat. Furthermore, the breast meat of large geese tends to be coarse.

Geese vary considerably in shape, some being long and slim, with thighs that protrude above the breast bone, and others being wide and squat, with thighs tucked along the body. I was expecting the long ones to have less breast meat, but this proved not to be the case. Nor did shape seem to appreciably affect cooking times. According to the man at my market, there is no rhyme or reason to the differences in shape. Geese simply vary.

Recommendations with respect to timing and doneness. So I had to roast another goose. I boiled the bird and put it in the refrigerator, planning to roast it the next day, but something came up that prevented me from cooking it until the day after. The delay proved to be a lucky happenstance. Dried for a full two days, the goose was even crisper and less greasy than the one dried for twenty-four hours. It was perfect.

Confirming the Nature of Goose

My tests tended to confirm various observations that I have made over the years about the nature of goose meat and its reactions to cooking. As I have long noted, the breast and leg meat of a goose are not as dissimilar as the breast and leg meat of a chicken, turkey, partridge, or even a duck. Thus, while most birds require special roasting procedures—such as trussing, barding, or basting—to keep the breast at a lower temperature than the legs and prevent it from drying out, goose can simply be put in the oven and left alone except for turning it over at the halfway mark to ensure even cooking.

These tests also demonstrated to me that the doneness of goose cannot be judged solely by the internal temperature of the meat. The length of the cooking time is also an important factor. Goose generally reaches an internal temperature of 170 degrees in the thigh cavity (the usual indicator of "well done") after less than two hours of roasting. Yet the meat turns out to be tough, especially around the thighs, if the bird is removed from the oven at this point. At least forty-five minutes of additional roasting are required. The most reliable indicator of doneness, is the feel of the drumsticks. When the skin has puffed and the meat inside feels soft and almost shredded when pressed—like well-done stew meat—the rest of the bird should be just right.

Another good way to test for doneness is to make a small slit in the skin at the base of the thigh, where it joins the body. If the juices are pinkish rather than clear, the bird needs more

cooking. If, on the other hand, there are no juices, the goose has been cooked enough and may even be verging on overdone. Don't panic though. One of the nicest things about goose is that it is tolerant of a little overcooking and does not readily dry out and turn stringy. This is because the particular proteins in goose tend to turn soft and gelatinous during cooking, so goose remains moist and tender even when thoroughly cooked.

ROAST GOOSE WITH PRUNE AND APPLE STUFFING AND RED WINE GIBLET GRAVY

Serves 8-10

Turning the goose in the boiling water may not be necessary if you have a stock pot large enough for the goose to be fully submerged. To make sure there is plenty of meat to go around, I make up the plates in the kitchen rather than passing platters at the table. Mound a big spoonful of stuffing on the plate and bank three to four slices of meat against it. Moisten both stuffing and meat with gravy, and lay a strip or two of skin over the top.

Roast Goose

- 1 roasting goose (10 to 12 pounds gross weight), neck, giblets, wing tips, and excess fat removed, rinsed, patted dry, and reserved; wishbone removed and skin pricked all over (see illustrations 1 through 4, page 8)
- Salt and ground black pepper

Brown Goose Stock

- 3 tablespoons reserved goose fat, patted dry and chopped
- Reserved goose neck and wing tips, cut into 1-inch pieces; heart and gizzard left whole, all parts patted dry
- 1 medium onion, peeled and chopped
- 1 medium carrot, peeled and chopped
- 1 medium celery stalk, chopped
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- 2 cups full-bodied red wine
- ½ cup chicken stock or low-salt canned broth
- 6 large parsley stems
- 1 large bay leaf
- 1 teaspoon black peppercorns
- ½ teaspoon dried thyme

Prune and Apple Stuffing

- 6 ounces (about 1 cup) pitted prunes, cut into ½-inch pieces
- ½ cup sweet sherry (cream or amontillado)
- 8 ounces homemade-style white bread, cut into ½-inch cubes (about 4 cups lightly packed)
- ½ cup reserved goose fat, patted dry and chopped
- 3 medium onions, chopped fine (about 3 cups)
- 3 medium celery stalks, chopped fine (about 1½ cups)
- 3 medium-large (1½ pounds) Granny Smith apples, peeled and cut into

- ½-inch chunks (about 3 cups)
- 6 ounces Black Forest ham, minced (about 1 cup)
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh sage or 1½ teaspoons rubbed dried sage
- Salt and ground black pepper
- ¼ teaspoon ground cloves
- ¼ teaspoon grated nutmeg or ground mace

Red Wine Giblet Gravy

- 1 recipe Brown Goose Stock
- ½ cup sweet sherry (cream or amontillado)
- ½ cup chicken stock or low-salt canned broth, if needed
- 2½ tablespoons melted goose fat from the roasting pan
- 2½ tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1 goose liver, cut into small dice
- Salt and ground black pepper

1. For the goose, fill a large stock pot two-thirds of the way with water and bring to a rolling boil. Following illustration 5 on page 8, submerge goose in boiling water. Drain goose and dry thoroughly, inside and out, with paper towels. Set goose, breast side up, on rack in roasting pan and refrigerate, uncovered, for 24 to 48 hours.

2. For the stock, heat fat over medium heat in a large saucepan until it melts, leaving small browned bits. Increase heat to medium-high; heat fat until it just begins to smoke. Add goose pieces and giblets to fat; sauté, stirring frequently, until meat turns deep mahogany color, about 10 minutes. Add onions, carrots, and celery; sauté, stirring frequently, until vegetables brown around edges, about 10 minutes longer. Stir in sugar; continue to cook, stirring continuously, until it caramelizes and begins to smoke. Pour in wine, scraping pan bottom with a wooden spoon to dissolve browned bits. Add chicken stock, parsley, bay leaf, peppercorns, and thyme. Bring to simmer, then adjust heat so that liquid barely bubbles; simmer, partially covered, until stock is dark and rich, about 2 hours, adding a little water if solids become exposed. (Can be cooled to room temperature and refrigerated in the saucepan up to 3 days—do not strain at this point.)

3. For the stuffing, soak prunes in sherry in a small bowl, at least 2 hours, preferably overnight.

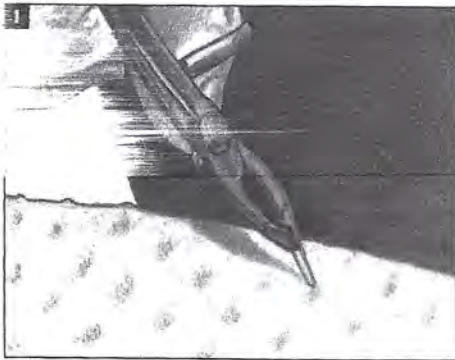
4. Heat oven to 400 degrees. Spread bread cubes over large baking sheet; bake, stirring occasionally, until cubes are lightly toasted, but still soft inside, about 10 minutes.

5. Heat fat in 12-inch skillet over medium heat

FROZEN OR FRESH

I used both fresh and frozen geese in testing and found no difference in the final result. This is fortunate, as most geese come to the market frozen, even at holiday time. To thaw, simply leave the goose in the refrigerator for twenty-four hours or more.

HOW TO PREPARE AND STUFF A GOOSE



1. Use tweezers or small pliers to remove any remaining quills from the goose.

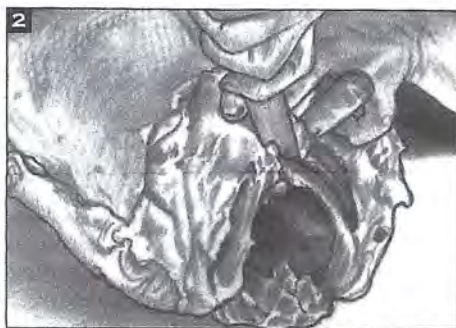


3. Pull down on the wishbone, freeing it from the carcass; add the bone to the stock pot.

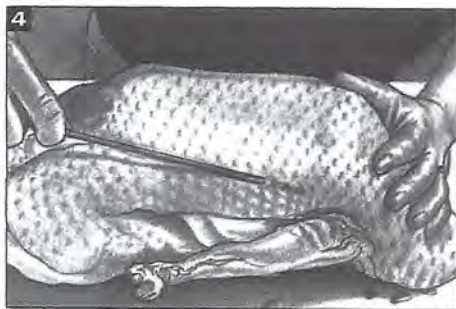


5. Using rubber gloves to protect your hands from possible splashes of boiling water, lower the goose, neck end down, into the water, submerging as much of the goose as possible until "goose bumps" appear, about 1 minute. Repeat this process, submerging the goose tail end down.

7. Pack the remaining stuffing in the body cavity, pressing it in firmly with your hands or a large spoon; sew the body vent shut.



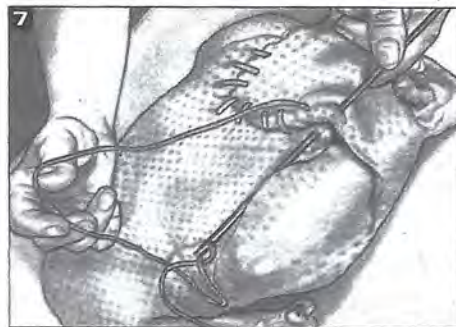
2. Pull back the skin at the neck end and locate the wishbone. Scrape along the outside of the wishbone with a paring knife until the bone is exposed; then cut the bone free of the flesh.



4. With a trussing needle, prick the goose skin all over, especially around the breast and thighs, holding the needle nearly parallel to the bird to avoid pricking the meat.



6. Pack a small handful of stuffing into the neck cavity; sew the opening shut with a trussing needle and heavy white twine.



until it melts, leaving small browned bits. Leaving 2 tablespoons fat in skillet, remove and set aside remaining fat. Increase heat to medium-high. Add onions and celery; sauté until vegetables soften, 5 to 7 minutes. Scrape vegetables into a large mixing bowl. Return skillet to burner; heat 2 tablespoons reserved fat. Add apples, sauté until golden and soft but not mushy, 5 to 7 minutes. Add apples to onions and celery. Stir in ham, sage, $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon each salt and pepper or to taste, cloves, and nutmeg or mace, along with prunes, unabsorbed sherry, and bread cubes. (This can be covered and refrigerated a day ahead. Turn mixture into a 13-by-9-inch or comparably-sized microwave-safe pan and reheat in 325 degree oven or microwave until stuffing is warmed through before packing it into goose.)

6. Adjust oven rack to low-center position and heat to 325 degrees. Following illustrations 6 and 7, stuff and truss goose. Season goose skin liberally with salt and pepper.

7. Place goose, breast down, on heavy-duty wire rack set over a deep roasting pan; roast for 1½ hours. Remove goose from oven and bail out most of fat from roasting pan, being careful not to disturb browned bits at bottom. Turn goose breast up, and return to oven to roast until flesh of drumsticks feels soft and broken up (like well-done stew meat) and skin has puffed up around breast bone and tops of thighs, from ¼ to 1½ hours longer. Increase oven temperature to 400 degrees; transfer goose, still on its rack, to large jelly-roll pan. Return to oven to further brown and fully crisp skin, about 15 minutes longer. Let stand, uncovered, about ½ hour before carving.

8. Meanwhile, for the gravy, bring reserved goose stock to simmer. Spoon most of fat out of roasting pan, leaving behind all brown roasting particles. Set pan over two burners on low heat. Add sherry; scrape with wooden spoon until all of brown glaze in pan is dissolved. Pour mixture into goose stock; simmer to blend flavors, about 5 minutes. Strain mixture into 4-cup glass measure, pressing down on solids with back of a spoon; let liquid stand until fat rises to top. Skim fat, and if necessary add enough chicken broth to make up to 2 cups. Rinse out goose stock pot and return strained stock to it. Take gizzard and heart from strainer, cut in tiny dice, and add to goose stock. Return stock to boil.

9. Heat goose fat and flour over medium-low heat in heavy-bottomed medium saucepan, stirring constantly with wooden spoon until roux just begins to color, about 5 minutes; remove from heat. Beating constantly with whisk, pour boiling stock, all at once, into brown roux. Return saucepan to low heat; simmer 3 minutes. Add liver; simmer 1 minute longer. Taste, and adjust seasoning, adding salt and lots of fresh black pepper.

10. Remove trussing, and spoon stuffing into serving bowl. Carve goose following illustrations on pages 16 and 17. Serve stuffing and carved goose immediately; pass gravy separately. ■

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