

# Keeping it wild:

## Outdoor food and forays

### TALKING TURKEY, FROM FIELD TO FORK

John Motoviloff

#### Field dressing and cleaning

While bagging a wild turkey can be challenging, cleaning one is a fairly simple matter. Field dressing — removing the entrails and allowing the bird to cool — is the first step in the process, with slightly different procedures followed for birds that will be plucked versus those that will be skinned.

Young turkeys — those with spurs of an inch or shorter — are good candidates for plucking; the skin and accompanying layer of fat help keep the bird juicy during roasting. Older birds are best skinned and cooked using a marinade or other moist method.

For birds to be plucked, remove all feathers from the area between the breastbone and tail feathers. Make a shallow cut along (not per-

pendicular to) the base of the breastbone. For birds to be skinned, the incision can be made without plucking.

At this point, use your knife or fingers to remove the entrails (liver, heart, crop, lungs, windpipe and intestines) from the chest cavity. Livers and hearts are choice morsels if not shot-damaged. Stew them with wine and shallots; puree and add butter or olive oil, salt and pepper, and, voilà — you have pâté.

Discard the other entrails. Clean the cavity well with paper towels, blotting up any blood or juices. The turkey should be set in a cool, shaded place or in the refrigerator.

#### Skinning vs. plucking

Plucking is not a complicated task, but it is time-consuming. Pull out all feathers up to and beyond the first wing



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joint and neck. Use strong tweezers or needle-nose pliers for stubborn feathers. Go slowly and take care not to tear the skin. If the skin tears easily, try freezing the bird for an hour and then plucking it. This helps firm up the skin.

Using a sharp knife or game shears, remove the wings and head. Make a final pass and pull out any remaining feathers. Remove blood or other material from the chest cavity. For birds being cooked immediately, rinse until water forced through the cavity runs clear.

For birds that are being frozen, enclose them in an extra large zip-top bag. Press out as much air as possible and seal. You can further protect the turkey by wrapping the bag in butcher paper. Vacuum sealers accomplish the same thing, locking in air and keeping out freezer burn. Always label game with the species and date of kill.

Skinning a turkey takes less time. After the initial incision is made, the hunter can simply stand on the wings and pull the skin, feathers and all, from the bird. Skinning, which is like removing a sock, is best done while the turkey is still warm. Cut through wings with game shears.

Alternatively, you can peel back the skin and carve out the big fillets on either side of the breastbone. Work slowly and deliberately so you don't waste meat. To remove the drumsticks and thighs, peel back the skin covering these areas. Fillet out the thighs on either side. Cut the drumsticks from the body with game shears.

The parts can be wrapped and frozen. Remember that gamebirds which are transported — either from the field, home or camp — must have a full feathered wing, an entire leg or the head attached to the carcass.

#### Three ways to cook your bird

Americans eat a lot of turkey — some 700 million pounds a year, with 46 million of the big birds cooked on Thanksgiving day alone, according to the National Turkey Federation. However, what we know about domestic turkeys doesn't always translate to their wild cousin, *Meleagris*.

Cagey as opposed to gullible, active instead of sedentary, eating nuts, grasses, insects and forbs instead of premixed feed, the lifestyles of the two birds are quite different. As a result, their flavor profiles and textures are also a study in opposites. While the wild turkey has lean meat full of bright flavor, its domestic cousin is fatter and milder.

So, how does the average cook make the most of this stately gamebird? Fortunately, like most game cooking, the job isn't rocket science. But it does require a shift in thinking from the throw-it-in-the-oven-and-watch-the-Packers approach that one uses for domestic birds.

#### Going Dutch

How a turkey is cooked depends, in large part, on how it's cleaned. While most domestic turkeys come to American kitchens plucked, the vast majority of wild turkeys come to the cook skinned. Since this already lean meat is now missing protective fat and skin, moist cooking is called for. Think marinating, basting and braising.

Cut the turkey into six pieces (two breasts, two drumsticks, two thighs) and dredge them in seasoned flour. A Dutch oven or similar cooking vessel is handy for this job. It saves on dishes and captures the taste left behind from browning. Heat your cooking grease of choice — butter, oil or bacon drippings — and brown the pieces. Remove them to a dish. Now, get ready for mushrooms.

Why mushrooms? Mushrooms are great with game. Spring turkey hunters, especially in southern and western parts of Wisconsin, may well stumble across a patch of morels. Throw in a handful of ramps if you're lucky enough to find them. Both morels and ramps can also be purchased at food co-ops or natural food stores if you don't find them.

Deglaze the Dutch oven with a cup of chicken broth. Replace the browned turkey pieces, cover and bake at 200 degrees until tender, about four hours. The liquid produced in the Dutch oven is a powerhouse of flavor. Thicken it with a few tablespoons of flour or cornstarch and serve it over egg noodles or



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Take your spring turkey harvest to new levels of culinary delight with these tips and recipes.

mashed potatoes. Asparagus, wild or store-bought, and wild rice are the perfect sides.

### Soup's on!

Another approach to cooking wild turkey is to use the breasts and legs separately. Marinate the breast as you would chicken and reserve the legs for a soup. Any sharp marinade used for chicken works well for wild turkey. Soak it for a few hours, as turkey breast is lean and prone to drying out.

Fowl paired with lemon and herbs is delicious for good reason. Citric acid is a tenderizer and green herbs such as rosemary or thyme complement the mild taste.

White wine, olive oil, sea salt, garlic and fresh-ground black pepper all add to this sharpness. Drain from marinade and sear or grill the turkey breast over a hot flame. Doneness will vary with the thickness of the breast fillets, which can be sliced in smaller pieces to promote even cooking.

Drumsticks and thighs of wild turkey are as — or more — flavorful than the breast, though tougher. A long, slow simmer in broth or water along with noodles or wild rice, is a no-fail approach. Carrots, onions, mushrooms and celery are good add-ins. Add salt, pepper and a pinch of poultry seasoning. When the meat is tender, strip it from the bone and replace it in the soup. Correct the seasoning and serve.

### Whole foods

The largest gamebird in North America, a plucked wild turkey, roasted whole, is an eye-catching treat. Keep in mind, though, that plucking a wild turkey is a task of an hour or more. Check the bird's age by the length of its spurs; spurs of an inch or less indicate a young bird and good candidate. Soak the plucked bird for an hour or two in cold, salted water (about a cup of salt for each gallon of water) before roasting.

Bard the breast of your prized bird with bacon strips. Keep the heat low — 200 to 250 degrees. Baste frequently with pan juices and make sure the roaster stays moist with a cup or two of broth, white wine or orange juice. To get the most out of your bird, use the carcass to make a rich and delicious soup.



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## DRIFTLESS WILD TURKEY

This dish is a fine example of seasonal eating — turkey, morel mushrooms and ramps are all springtime treats. If you find some wild asparagus growing in a fence row, so much the better. The Driftless area contains many small-scale producers such as millers, dairies, breweries and wineries, making it possible to construct this dish from ingredients produced in this region. Interestingly, Wisconsin's highly successful wild turkey reintroduction project started in Grant, Crawford and Vernon counties in the Driftless area.

- 1 wild turkey skinned and cut into 6 pieces — 2 breast fillets, 2 drumsticks, 2 thighs
- 1 cup all-purpose flour seasoned with salt, pepper and thyme for dredging
- ¼ cup sunflower oil
- 1 quart broth made with 1 pound wild turkey trimmings (bones, odd pieces, skin) simmered for 30 minutes in 6 cups water (1 quart chicken broth may be substituted)
- 3 tablespoons all-purpose flour for thickening
- ½ cup sour cream
- ½ pound or more of morel mushrooms,\* chopped, soaked in salt water and dried
- 4 ramps, washed and chopped (equivalent in onions, garlic or shallots may be substituted)
- 1 pound spaetzle or egg noodles, cooked according to package directions

1. Heat a Dutch oven on the stovetop. Preheat oven to 200 degrees.
2. Dredge turkey pieces in seasoned flour; shake off excess.
3. In Dutch oven, fry turkey pieces so outside is crisp; remove to platter in oven.
4. Sauté mushrooms and ramps in Dutch oven. Deglaze with turkey/chicken stock; bring to a boil. Add salt and pepper as needed. Replace turkey pieces.
5. Bake and check in 4 hours; turkey should be tender. If not, cook for an additional hour, adding more liquid if necessary.
6. Remove 1 cup of liquid from Dutch oven, thicken with flour and sour cream, add this to the Dutch oven. Turkey pieces can be removed with a slotted spoon during thickening, and then replaced.
7. Heat thickened mixture on stovetop until sauce thickens. Do not boil.
8. Serve over spaetzle or noodles, with steamed asparagus on the side.

\*All mushrooms thought to be morels should be cut in half lengthwise. Inspect mushrooms to make sure they are hollow inside. If mushrooms are not hollow, discard them.

## LEMON-THYME TURKEY BREAST

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|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Breast fillets from one wild turkey | 4 shallots, peeled and diced |
| ½ teaspoon dried thyme              | 1 cup dry white wine         |
| 1 teaspoon sea salt                 | ½ cup olive oil              |
| Fresh ground black pepper to taste  | 4 tablespoons butter         |
| Juice of one lemon                  |                              |

1. Place turkey breasts in a large glass or other nonreactive container. Season with thyme, salt and pepper.
2. Combine the next four ingredients in a measuring cup, whisk together; pour over the fillets. Marinate, covered, for 4 hours in the refrigerator.
3. Remove fillets from marinade; drain, reserving marinade.
4. Heat a large skillet and melt butter. Sear breasts so they are brown on the outside and still juicy on the inside, about 10 minutes per side.
5. Remove fillets to platter in warm oven. Add marinade to skillet and heat, boiling for 5 minutes or longer.
6. Serve sauce over turkey breast with wild rice and fresh steamed asparagus on the side.



MICHAEL GORDON

Keeping wild turkey moist is crucial to cooking success.