OVEN ROASTING: CHICKEN

Chef Thomas Keller / Chapter Nine

MASTERCLASS

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"Roasted chicken reminds me of places I've been in the past. [It] is one of those preparations that crosses all geographic boundaries and all social boundaries and even economic boundaries. Everybody loves roasted chicken."

CHAPTER REVIEW

Chef Keller is often asked what he would want as his last meal. His menu varies depending on his mood, but one dish is always on it: roast chicken. It's a personal favorite, and a signature item at his restaurant Bouchon. Chef Keller loves the contrasting flavors and textures from different parts of the chicken, from the pope's nose at the tail to the wings and thighs and on to the "oysters" between the back and the leg. He's not alone. Roast chicken was also one of Julia Child's favorite dishes. When she visited The French Laundry, Chef Keller says, the staff always sent out a roast chicken for her.

Chef Keller's roast chicken is a one-pot dish, but it involves multiple steps: brining, air-drying, trussing, and roasting. Brining is not required—but it will impart better flavor. Nor do you have to truss the bird, but doing so will help the chicken brown more beautifully and evenly. Prior to roasting, Chef Keller removes the wishbone, as it makes for easier carving.

The root vegetables make a bed for the chicken, and the rendered fat and juices from the chicken flavor the vegetables. If you have a big cast-iron skillet, use that. This is a delicious family dinner. But don't hesitate to make it for yourself. You'll have leftovers!

PREP & COOK TIMELINE

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PROTEIN

Mise en place

Serves 2 as an entrée or 4 family style

FOR THE BRINE:

Ingredients

5 lemons, halved
6 bay leaves
½ bunch (4 ounces) flat-leaf parsley
½ bunch (1 ounce) thyme
¼ cup clover honey
1 head garlic, halved through the equator
⅛ cup black peppercorns
1 cup (10 ounces) kosher salt
1 gallon water
Canola oil
Kosher salt

Equipment

Stockpot
Container

METHOD

MAKE THE BRINE:

Mix all of the brine ingredients and bring to a boil. Once boiling, remove from heat and let cool, then pour into a container large enough to hold both the brine and the chicken and cool in the refrigerator until chilled.

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FOR THE ROASTED CHICKEN:

Ingredients

1 whole chicken, 2½ to 3 pounds
3 rutabagas
2 turnips
2 parsnips
2 large leeks
4 carrots, trimmed and cut in half
1 small onion
8 small red-skinned potatoes
Clarified butter
*Ingredient note: To learn how to make clarified butter, see Chapter 19: Hollandaise in Chef Keller's first MasterClass. (or ⅓ cup canola oil)
1 lemon

Equipment

Parchment-lined cutting board
Paring knife
Abrasive green scrub pad
Kitchen twine
Kitchen shears
Roasting Pan
Meat thermometer
Chef's knife

PREPARE THE CHICKEN:

Remove the neck and innards if they are still in the cavity of the chicken. Using a paring knife, cut out the wishbone from the chicken—this will make it easier to carve the chicken. Submerge the chicken in the cold brine for 8 to 12 hours.

When done brining, remove the chicken and truss to ensure even cooking. Discard the brine.

To truss: See illustation on following page. Note that the illustrated method is different from the method Chef Keller demonstrates in the video lesson. The illustrated method is how his culinary team trusses chickens in his restaurants.

Leave the brined, trussed chicken uncovered in the refrigerator for two days. Doing so removes moisture from the skin and allows it to crisp beautifully during roasting.

Remove the chicken from the refrigerator and let stand at room temperature for 1 ½ to 2 hours, or until it comes to room temperature.

PREPARE THE VEGETABLES:

Cut off both ends of the rutabagas. Stand the rutabagas on end and cut away ⅛-inch of the tough skin, working from top to bottom. Cut into ¾-inch wedges. Repeat with the turnips, cutting the wedges to match the size of the rutabagas. Cut off the dark green leaves from the top of the leeks. Trim off and discard any darkened outer layers. Trim the root ends, cutting around them on a 45-degree angle. Halve the leeks lengthwise and rinse the leeks well under warm water. Scrub the parsnips and carrots, trim, and halve lengthwise. (See Chapter 7: Big-Pot Blanching: Asparagus in Chef Keller's first MasterClass for a detailed demonstration of various methods for removing the fine outer layer of skin.) Cut the parsnips into wedges similar in size to the other vegetables to ensure even cooking. Cut the onion into wedges and leave the potatoes whole.

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Combine all the vegetables in the roasting pan and season with salt. Drizzle clarified butter or canola oil over the vegetables and mix with your hands to coat.

ROAST:

Preheat the oven to 475°F. Brush the chicken with clarified butter and season all sides with salt. Make a nest in the center of the vegetables and nestle the chicken in it. Roast for 20 to 25 minutes. Reduce the heat to 400°F and roast for an additional 30 to 45 minutes, or until the temperature registers 160°F in the meatiest portions of the bird—the thighs, and under the breast where the thigh meets the breast—and the juices run clear where the leg joint meets the thigh. If necessary, return the bird to the oven for more roasting; check it every 5 minutes. Transfer the chicken to a carving board and let rest for 20 to 30 minutes.

Just before serving, set the pan of vegetables over medium heat and reheat the vegetables, turning them to coat with the pan juices. Finish with a squeeze of lemon. Carve the chicken into serving pieces, arrange over the vegetables, finish with grey sea salt, and serve.

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TRUSSING A CHICKEN: STEP BY STEP

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LEARN MORE

Chef Keller's method for brining and roasting chicken can be applied to other poultry and game birds, such as pigeons, guinea fowl, pheasants, and capons. You could brine your Thanksgiving turkey (more time) or a quail (less time). The key is to preserve the ratio of salt to water in the brine; otherwise you'll end up with a result that is either too salty or bland.