



1 HOUR  
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# Master the Holiday Meal

by Rocky Dunnam, CDM, CFPP

STRATEGIES  
TO CONQUER  
THE HOLIDAY  
MEAL'S MOST  
CHALLENGING  
ITEMS

**T**he holidays are supposed to be a time set aside for family, cheer, relaxation, and—of course—food! For most Americans, that's exactly what happens. But for nutrition and foodservice professionals, the holidays tend to get a bit stressful. The pressure mounts and it feels like all eyes are on you to deliver a delicious, memorable feast that will be talked about and maybe even publicly shared on Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, or other social media.

What if I told you that there are strategies you can implement that will make the process smoother than a fresh

jar of Skippy®—and will leave your guests in awe of the wonder and beauty from your kitchen?

Presented here are a few strategies for the most challenging items: the turkey and sides. With these ideas, we've de-stressed the most taxing part of entertaining for the holidays—so pour yourself some eggnog and relax. This is your holiday season too, after all, and you've just mastered it!

## COOKING TIME

Turkey = 30 min. = 500°F oven  
2-2.5 hrs. = 350°F



## CONQUER THE TURKEY

Frozen vs. Fresh Turkey – Most of us purchase whole turkeys during the holiday season for a couple of reasons. Whole turkey is traditional Thanksgiving nosh. The beauty of the bird is it plays well as a centerpiece to a table feast, and turkeys are inexpensive when feeding a multitude of clients, families, or even distant cousins. How much turkey do I need to feed my family? My facility? My staff?

A good rule-of-thumb is to plan for 1 lb. of raw turkey per person. This usually allows a little, but not too much, to enjoy as leftovers. (So for a family of 12, buy one 12-15 lb. turkey; for a facility with a census of 100, buy six or seven 12-15 lb. turkeys.) So do I buy frozen or fresh? I suggest frozen. Now before you start questioning my culinary aptitude, let me explain. The price of frozen turkeys typically drops about 10 percent between October and November, while fresh turkey prices remain relatively stable. Just as important for me though is the fact that the preparation technique I've developed over the past decade (in trials involving hundreds of birds) requires more time than I'm comfortable holding a fresh turkey safely.

### Here's that process:

1. Pull your frozen turkey to refrigeration seven days before Thanksgiving. This will allow your turkey to safely thaw a considerable amount.
2. On the fifth day of thawing, remove the neck and giblets (typically in a bag stuffed in the cavity of the turkey).
  - a. Create a **brine**: (recipe is intended for a 14-16 lb. turkey)
    - 1 cup Kosher Salt
    - 1 cup Brown Sugar
    - 1 gal. Vegetable Stock
    - 2 Tbsp. Black Peppercorn
    - 1 Tbsp. Allspice
    - 1 gal. Water (heavily iced)
  - b. Boil first 5 ingredients, fully dissolving the solids.
  - c. Chill.
3. On the sixth day (the day before Thanksgiving), combine the brine and iced water in a deep container, like

a 5-gallon bucket. Fully submerge your turkey with the breast-side down in the brine. \*You may want to weight it down with a plastic-wrapped brick to ensure the bird is covered with brine.

4. Brine the turkey for 12-16 hours (turning the bird over after 8 hrs.).
5. After 12-16 hours, remove the turkey from the brine and rinse well with cold water. \*At this time discard brine.

Now, you've already achieved a level of moist, decadent turkey that most only dream about when choking down a few bites of Thanksgiving dinner requiring more gravy than actual meat. Your trusted oven will do the rest for you:

- a. Preheat your oven to 500°F (yes, you read that right).
- b. Pat your turkey dry with paper towel.
- c. Stuff the cavity of your turkey with aromatics like apple, onion, leeks, cinnamon sticks, oranges, rosemary, etc.
- d. Rub the outside with oil. \*I use coconut oil, but olive oil is great too.
- e. Place on baking rack over a sheet pan on the lowest shelf of the oven.
- f. Roast at 500°F for 30 min., uncovered. \*The skin of a turkey is very resilient and creates a barrier that holds moisture inside.
- g. Lower the oven to 350°F for an additional 2-2.5 hrs. (For a 14-16 lb. turkey or approx. 8-10 min. per pound).
- h. Once the thickest part of the breast reaches an internal temperature of 165°F, remove from oven and loosely cover with foil for 15 min.
- i. Carve and enjoy!

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## MASTER THE SIDE DISHES

This season has ties to deeply-rooted traditions. A select few side dishes have stood the test of time with little variance. Unfortunately though, many will tarnish their holiday feast with small mistakes like dried-out dressing, undesirably tart cranberry sauce, gravy with little-to-no depth of flavor, or—my personal culinary nemesis—the burnt sweet potato pie.

Let's strategize:



### COOKING TIME

Giblet Gravy = 15 min. = Stove top



### Giblet Gravy:

- 1 bag Turkey Giblets and 1 Neck
- 2-4 cups Chicken Stock \*broth or bouillon may be substituted
- ½ cup All-Purpose Flour
- 4 Tbsp. Butter
- Kosher Salt & Black Pepper (fresh cracked)

### Directions

1. Place the whole giblets and neck into a sauce pot with stock and boil until giblets are firm to touch.
2. Remove giblets from stock and chop gizzards and liver.
3. Remove meat from neck bone. Discard neck bone.
4. Melt butter in separate pan and sauté chopped giblets and neck meat.
5. Once you develop some color on the giblets and neck meat, sprinkle flour directly into pan. Stir constantly.
6. Allow this roux to cook for an additional 3-4 min. until brown in color.

7. Whisk in the reserved chicken stock from earlier.
8. Adjust seasoning with kosher salt and black pepper.
9. If gravy is too thin, continue cooking until thickened.
10. If gravy is too thick, add more stock or water to thin slightly.

### Cornbread Dressing:

- ½ cup Butter
- ½ cup Celery
- ½ cup Onion
- 6 cups Cornbread (crumbled) \*prepared up to a week in advance
- 7 cups Chicken Stock \*broth or bouillon may be substituted
- 4 Eggs

### Herb Mix:

- 1 tsp. Rosemary
- 1 tsp. Thyme
- 1 tsp. Sage
- 1 tsp. Black Pepper \*fresh cracked
- 1 Tbsp. Kosher Salt

### Directions

1. Sauté celery and onion in butter until soft.
2. Hard boil 2 eggs.
3. Whisk remaining 2 eggs (raw) into chicken stock with herb mixture.
4. Mix cornbread, hard cooked eggs (chopped), sautéed onion/celery, and liquid together in a mixing bowl.



### COOKING TIME

Cornbread Dressing = 1 hr. = 350° oven



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5. Transfer to an oven-safe, greased dish.
6. Bake at 350°F for 50-60 min. or until golden brown.
7. Serve and enjoy!

### Cranberry Sauce:

- 1 bag (12 oz) Cranberries
- ¾ cup Sugar
- 1 Orange
- 1 cup Water

### Directions

1. In a medium sauce pot combine cranberries, sugar, juice AND zest of orange, and water.
2. Bring to a boil, and then reduce to simmer for 20-30 min. (stirring).
3. Remove from heat and serve at room temperature.



### COOKING TIME

Cranberry Sauce = 30 min. = Stove top



### Sweet Potato Pie:

- 1 lb. Sweet Potatoes
- ½ cup Butter (softened)
- 1 cup Sugar
- ½ cup Milk
- 2 Eggs
- ½ tsp. Nutmeg (ground)
- ½ tsp. Cinnamon (ground)
- 1 9-in. Pie Crust



### COOKING TIME

Sweet Potato Pie = 1 hr. = 350° oven



### Directions

1. Boil whole sweet potatoes for about 45 min. Rinse with cool water and remove skins.
2. Mash sweet potatoes with butter and mix until smooth.
3. Fold in remaining ingredients.
4. Pour into pie shell and smooth out surface.
5. Bake at 350°F for 1 hr. or until knife puncturing the center of the pie comes out clean.
6. Cool and serve. \*Crust will rise, but will fall back as it cools. **E**



### COOKING TIP

All of your items can go into the same oven at once. The temperature remains the same for each item...just monitor your times!



While your oven does the bulk of the work, you will spend just 30 minutes at the stove.

**Total Cook Time:** Approximately 4 hours



**Rocky Dunnam, CDM, CFPP** is Executive Chef at the Bivins Foundation, Childers Place, Bivins Memorial Nursing Home, Elizabeth Jane Bivins Culinary Center, and NINETEEN49 Catering in Amarillo, Texas.

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