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Roasting Those "Other" Holiday Meats

No doubt about it, holiday time is turkey time. Of the 267 million turkeys produced in 2000, 67 million (or 25 percent) were served at Thanksgiving and Christmas. Yet numerous other meats are also traditional at holiday gatherings. Some families choose a rib roast; others, a ham; and some will have the butcher arrange a crown roast of lamb.

If a hunter's in the clan, that family may serve wild game such as duck, venison or pheasant. Small families may opt for a bird smaller than a turkey -- such as capon, duck, goose or Cornish hen -- or a small cut of meat like a pork tenderloin or veal roast. Whatever the choice, have a meat thermometer on hand to determine when the meat has reached a safe temperature as well as the preferred doneness. For special holiday meals, the cook wants everything perfect -- and perfectly safe.

The Safety of Special Holiday Meats

When choosing your holiday meat, be assured that all beef, lamb, pork, veal and poultry sold at your supermarket have been inspected for wholesomeness by the USDA or state inspection systems. Once your purchase is at home, refrigerate it immediately and cook or freeze fresh poultry within 1 or 2 days; fresh meats, 3 to 5 days.

There are two types of hams: fully cooked and those that need cooking. Fully cooked hams may be eaten cold or reheated to 140 °F. When storing these hams, observe use-by dates on hams sealed at the plant; use store-wrapped cooked ham portions within 3 to 5 days. "Cook-before-eating" hams must be cooked to 160 ° F to destroy harmful bacteria that may be present. Use within 7 days.

Wild game bagged by hunters obviously has not been federally or state inspected so care must be taken to handle it safely. Parasites such as *Trichinella* and *Toxoplasma* may be present. Improper handling can cause bacterial contamination as well as off-flavors.

Dress game in the field right after shooting. Dressed meat must be chilled as soon as possible. Keep the game cold -- below 40° F, until it can be cooked or frozen. For more information about wild game, call state or county extension offices.

About Roasting

Because holidays are special times, people tend to spend more money for a specialty meat. These fancy meats and poultry may cost more because they are exceptionally tender or special.

Roasting is the recommended method for cooking tender meats. To roast, meat is placed on a rack in a shallow, uncovered pan and is cooked by the indirect dry heat of an oven. To keep the meat tender and minimize shrinkage due to the evaporation of moisture, a moderately slow oven temperature of 325 °F should be used.

"But," says Bessie Berry, manager of the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline, "the USDA does not recommend cooking meat and poultry at oven temperatures lower than 325 °F because these foods could remain in the 'Danger Zone' (temperatures of 40 ° to 140 °F) too long. Bacteria which may be present on these foods multiply rapidly at these temperatures."

Boned and rolled meats require more cooking time per pound than bone-in cuts because it takes longer for the heat to penetrate through the solid meat.

Background Information about Holiday Meats

BEEF: Beef is leaner these days so roasting cuts from the rib, tenderloin, and eye round to medium rare (145 °F) keeps these roasts tender and juicy. Whereas ground beef should be cooked to 160 °F to be safe, beef roasts are whole muscle meat and any bacteria would most likely be on the surface. For that reason, a beef roast needn't reach 160 °F to be safe.

LAMB: Technically, "Spring lamb" is meat from lambs slaughtered from March to the first week in October. The term comes from olden times when lambs born in harsh winter weather would have little chance to survive until the next year. Today with more protected animal husbandry conditions, enjoying "lamb" -- meat from sheep about one year old, needn't be confined to a particular season of the year.

Some people may view lamb as a fatty meat. However, leg and loin lamb meat has a similar fat content to lean beef and pork loin when trimmed of visible fat. The "fell" is a paper-like covering on lamb and is usually removed from steaks and chops at the retail market. Leave it on leg roasts to help retain shape.

PORK: Because hogs are about 50 percent leaner than they were 25 years ago, today's pork cooks faster and can dry out when overcooked. Years ago when pork had more fat than it does today, the meat could be overcooked and still be fairly tender and flavorful.

Cook fresh pork to 160 °F (medium) or to 170 °F (well done). Fresh pork cooked to medium doneness as measured with a meat thermometer may still be pale pink inside but will be safe. Heating to 160 °F kills foodborne bacteria -- such as Salmonella -- as well as parasites that cause trichinosis and toxoplasmosis.

WILD GAME: To remove the "gamey" flavor, you can soak wild meat or poultry in a solution of either 1 tablespoon salt or 1 cup vinegar per quart of cold water. Use enough solution to cover the game completely and soak it overnight in the refrigerator. Discard the soaking solution before cooking.

Wild game is leaner than its domestically raised counterpart. But trim any visible fat -- that's where a gamey flavor can reside. Then roast tender cuts of venison and game birds (if skinned) covered with oil-soaked cheesecloth or strips of bacon to prevent the meat from drying out. Set them on a rack in a shallow pan and roast at 325 °F.

DUCK and GOOSE: Most domestic ducks are the breed called White Pekin. The term "Long Island" duck is a trade name. Domestic ducklings have a great deal of fat. While it helps them float when swimming, fat is undesirable in a cooked duck. Therefore, it's recommended to prick or score the skin of a whole duck before cooking so much of the fat will render out.

Although domestic geese are larger than ducks, they are cooked in the same manner. Oven cooking bags are helpful for cooking these birds because they hold the fat for easy disposal and keep the oven spatter-free.

CAPONS and CORNISH HENS: These specialty birds are chickens. Cornish hens are small broiler-fryers weighing 1 to 2 pounds. Capons are male chickens which are surgically unsexed; weighing about 4 to 7 pounds, they have generous quantities of tender, light meat. Roast them as you would any chicken.

HOLIDAY MEAT ROASTING CHART

For approximate cooking times to use in meal planning, see the following chart compiled from various resources. Use a meat thermometer to determine that meats reach a safe temperature.

RED MEAT, TYPE	OVEN °F	TIMING	INTERNAL TEMP °F
BEEF, FRESH			
Beef, rib roast, bone-in; 4 to 8 pounds	325	23 to 30 min/lb	145 med. rare
		27 to 38 min/lb	160 medium
Beef, rib roast, boneless; 4 pounds	325	39 to 43 min/lb	145
Beef, eye round roast; 2 to 3 pounds	325	20 to 22 min/lb	145
Beef, tenderloin roast, whole; 4 to 6 lbs	425	45 to 60 minutes total	145
Beef, tenderloin roast, half; 2 to 3 lbs		35 to 45 minutes total	
LAMB			
Lamb, leg, bone-in; 5 to 9 pounds	325	20-30 min/lb	160 medium or 170 well done
Lamb, leg, boneless; 4 to 7 pounds		30-35 min/lb	
Lamb, crown roast; 5 pounds	325	30-35 min/lb	170
PORK, FRESH			
Pork, loin roast, bone-in; 3 to 5 pounds	325	20-25 min/lb	160
Pork, loin roast boneless; 2 to 4 pounds	325	23-33 min/lb	160
Pork, crown roast; 6 to 10 lbs	325	20-25 min/lb	160-170
Pork, tenderloin; 1/2 to 1 1/2 lbs.	425	20-30 minutes total	160
PORK, CURED			
Ham, cook-before-eating, bone-in; Whole, 14 to 16 pounds	325	18-20 min/lb	160
Ham, cook-before-eating, bone-in; Half, 7 to 8 pounds		22-25 min/lb	160

RED MEAT, TYPE	OVEN °F	TIMING	INTERNAL TEMP °F
Ham, fully cooked, bone-in; Whole, 14 to 16 pound	325	15-18 min/lb	140
Ham, fully cooked, bone-in; Half, 7 to 8 pounds		18-25 min/lb	140
Ham, fully cooked, boneless; 3 to 4 lbs	325	27-33 min/lb	140
Ham, country, dried	(see label directions)		
VEAL			
Veal, boneless roast, rump or shoulder; 2 to 3 pounds	325	31-35 min/lb	160 medium;
		34-40 min/lb	170 well done
Veal, bone-in roast, loin, 3 to 4 pounds	325	34-36 min/lb	160 medium;
		38-40 min/lb	170 well done
VENISON			
Venison, round, rump, loin, or rib roast, 3 to 4 pounds	325	20-25 min/lb	160

For approximate cooking times to use in meal planning, see the following chart compiled from various resources. Use a meat thermometer to determine that poultry reaches a safe temperature.

NOTE: Times are for unstuffed poultry. Add 15 to 30 minutes for stuffed birds.

TYPE OF POULTRY	OVEN °F	TIMING	INTERNAL TEMP °F
CAPON, whole; 4 to 8 pounds	375	20 to 30 min/lb	180
CORNISH HENS, whole; 18 to 24 oz.	350	50 to 60 minutes total	180
DUCK, domestic, whole	375	20 min/lb	180
DUCK, wild, whole	350	18 to 20 min/lb	180
GOOSE, domestic or wild, whole	325	20 to 25 min/lb	180
PHEASANT, young, whole, 2 pounds	350	30 min/lb	160
QUAIL, whole	425	20 minutes total	160

For additional food safety information about meat, poultry, or egg products, call the toll-free USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854); for the hearing-impaired (TTY) 1-800-256-7072. The Hotline is staffed by food safety experts weekdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Eastern time. Food safety recordings can be heard 24 hours a day using a touch-tone phone.

The media may contact the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at (301) 504-6258.

Information is also available from the FSIS Web site: <http://www.fsis.usda.gov>

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For Further Information Contact:

FSIS Food Safety Education Staff

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E-mail: mph hotline.fsis@usda.gov