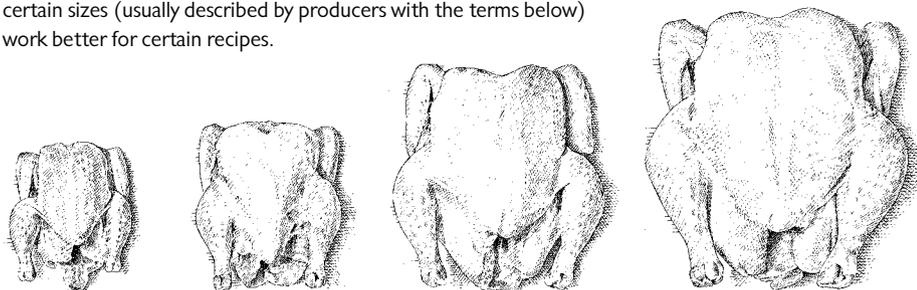


Guide to Buying & Preparing Chicken

Whole birds taste better than packaged parts and cost less, so it makes sense to cut up chicken at home. Here's all you need to know to master this basic skill and to buy a good chicken. BY SEAN LAWLER

BUYING THE RIGHT-SIZE BIRD

Producers breed chickens to "plump out" (an industry term indicating that the breast meat is thick and plump) at different ages, depending on the desired weight of the slaughtered bird. We have found that certain sizes (usually described by producers with the terms below) work better for certain recipes.



POUSSIN

CORNISH GAME HEN

BROILER/FRYER

ROASTER

Poussins are baby chickens that weigh about 1 pound. Generally available only at specialty stores or butchers, they are ideal for one person.

Cornish Game Hens are slightly older than poussins and weigh between 1 and 2 pounds. Larger game hens will serve two people, but these birds are usually mass-market brands that lack the flavor of the smaller poussins.

Broiler/fryers are the standard supermarket chicken—and our favorite. They generally weigh between 3 and 4 1/2 pounds and will serve four people. All *Cook's* recipes using whole birds are developed with chickens from this category.

Roasters generally weigh between 5 and 8 pounds. Despite their name, we do not recommend roasting birds this large, as the outer layers of meat tend to overcook before the meat near the bone reaches a safe internal temperature. When feeding a crowd, we prefer to buy two broiler/fryers.

TASTING

We tasted 3 1/2- to 4-pound chickens from nine widely available producers. Supermarket chickens range from budget birds raised on factory farms to pricier fowl with ambiguous labels—"organic," "free range," "all natural"—proclaiming the virtues of their diet and lifestyle. These terms mean different things to different producers, and, as our tasting demonstrated, they are not reliable indicators of flavor or texture. Neither is price.

Tyson, a mass-produced bird, came in third, ahead of birds costing twice as much. Perdue, the other mass-produced brand in our tasting, came in dead last. The best-tasting chicken was a kosher bird from Empire. Tasters found it to be the most juicy and well seasoned of the bunch. During the koshering process, the Empire chicken is covered with salt to draw out impurities. This leads to a juicier, more flavorful bird that never needs to be brined to pump up flavor or juiciness. If your supermarket doesn't carry kosher chickens, brining can improve the quality of just about any chicken, even last-place Perdue.

For the full results of our tasting of chicken, visit **Cook's Extra** at www.cooksillustrated.com and key in code 5043.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

EMPIRE KOSHER Broiler Chicken

➤ \$2.29/lb.

Tasters found this bird to be the most flavorful of the tasting, calling it "perfectly seasoned," with meat that was "moist" and "tender."

RECOMMENDED

BELL & EVANS Fresh Young Chicken

➤ \$2.69/lb.

Raised on an all-vegetable, antibiotic-free diet, this chicken was praised for meat that tasted "clean" and "fresh."

TYSON Fresh Young Chicken

➤ \$1.29/lb.

Some tasters liked the "firm" texture, others found it slightly "mealy." Nevertheless, Tyson outscored chickens that cost twice as much.

BRINING

Innumerable tests have shown that soaking chicken in a saltwater solution prior to cooking produces juicy, well-seasoned meat. (The exception to this rule is a kosher bird.) To brine, add salt to cold water, stir to dissolve the salt, then immerse the chicken in the brine and refrigerate for the allotted time.

Formulating the Brine

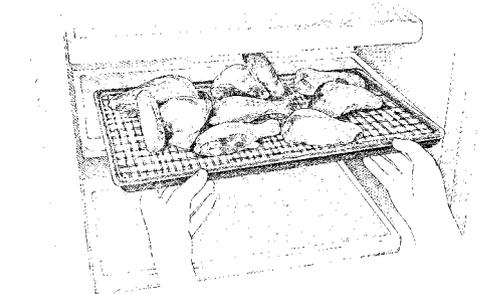
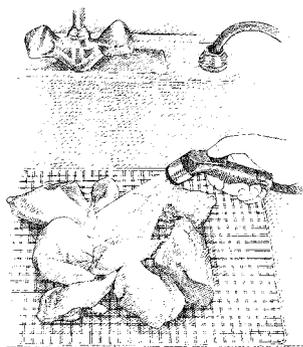
Either of the two readily available brands of kosher salt can be substituted for the table salt in the formulas below. Because kosher salt is less salty than table salt, and because one brand of kosher salt is less salty than the other, the formulas must be adjusted. Substitute 1 cup of Diamond Crystal Kosher Salt or 3/4 cup of Morton Kosher Salt for 1/2 cup of table salt.

	TABLE SALT	WATER	TIME
Whole chicken (3 1/2–4 lb.)	1/2 cup	1/2 gallon	1 hour
Chicken parts (bone-in)	1/2 cup	1/2 gallon	30 min.

Rinsing and Drying Brined Chicken

Once the chicken has been brined, it must be rinsed to wash away any excess salt that might remain on the skin. Brining does have one negative effect: The added moisture can prevent the skin from crisping when cooked. Letting brined chicken dry uncovered in the refrigerator remedies this problem. For best results, air-dry whole brined birds overnight. Brined chicken parts should be air-dried for several hours. Although this step is optional, if crisp skin is a goal, it's worth the extra time.

1. To rinse chicken, place on wire rack, set rack in empty sink, and use sink spray hose to wash off chicken. Blot chicken dry with paper towels.

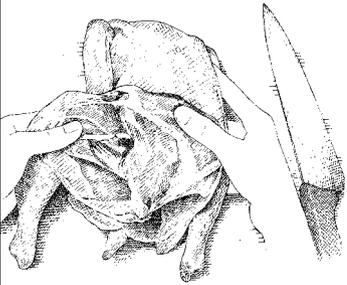


2. To air-dry chicken, set rack with towel-dried chicken on rimmed baking sheet and place in refrigerator.

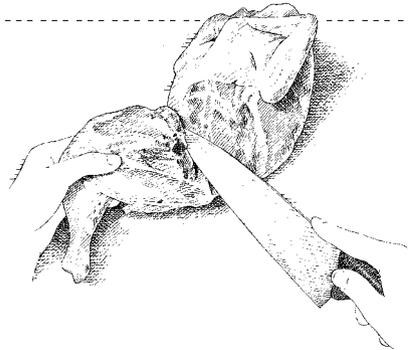
CUTTING UP A WHOLE CHICKEN

Even when a recipe calls for chicken parts, there are many advantages to purchasing a whole chicken and cutting it up yourself. Packaged chicken parts are generally mass-produced and are of a lower quality, so buying a whole chicken gives you the chance to buy a better bird. In addition, packages of chicken parts often come from different chickens of different sizes; as a result, the pieces may cook unevenly. To top it off, whole chickens generally cost less per pound and provide trimmings that are perfect for freezing to make homemade stock.

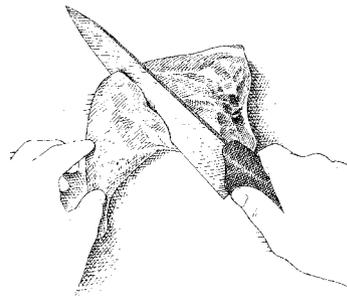
The Legs



1. Cut through skin around leg where it attaches to breast. Using both hands, bend leg back to pop leg joint out of its socket.

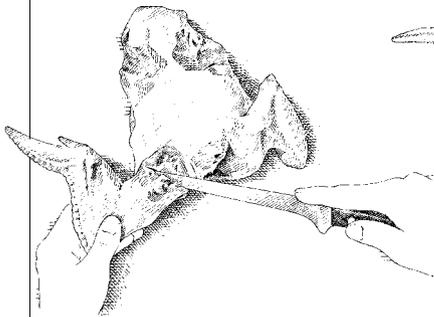


2. Cut through broken joint to separate leg. Cut very close to back, so that tender, meaty "oyster" is removed along with leg.

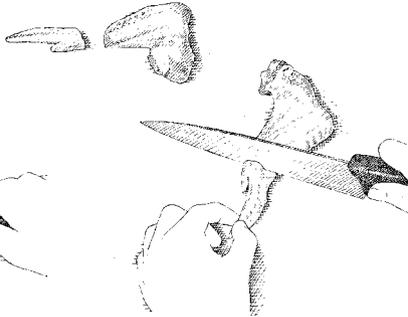


3. Note line of fat separating thigh and drumstick. Cut through joint at this line.

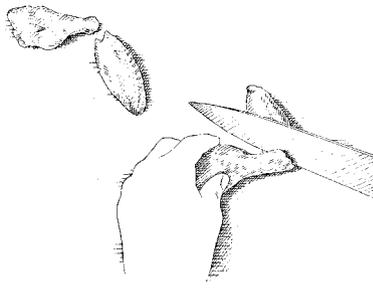
The Wings



1. Bend wing out from breast and cut through joint to separate.



2. Cut through cartilage around wing tip to remove it. Freeze tips and use to make your next batch of homemade chicken stock.

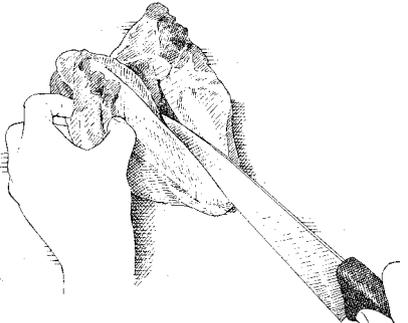


3. A triangular flap of skin connecting two halves of chicken wing can make it awkward to eat. Cut straight through center joint; two smaller pieces will cook up crispier and be easier to eat.

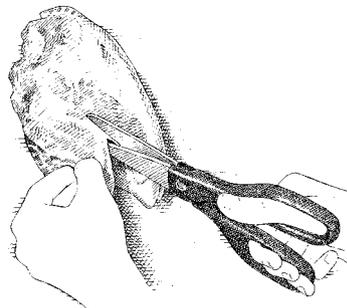
The Breast



1. To separate whole breast from backbone, cut through ribs with kitchen shears, following vertical line of fat from tapered end of breast up to socket where wing was attached.

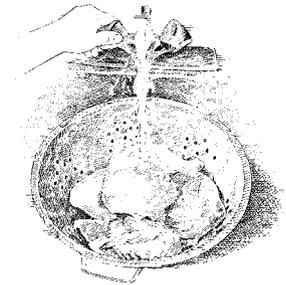


2. With whole breast skin-side down on cutting board, center knife on breastbone, then apply pressure to cut through and separate breast into halves.



3. If you purchase one whole, bone-in chicken breast, you may need to trim rib sections with kitchen shears.

TIPS FOR HANDLING CHICKEN



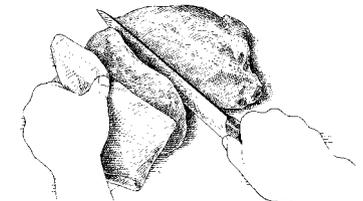
Containing Raw Chicken

Avoiding cross-contamination when washing and drying raw chicken can be a challenge. To contain the chicken, wash it in a colander, then pat dry while it's still in the colander. When done, simply transfer the chicken to your cooking vessel, then wash your hands and the colander with hot, soapy water.



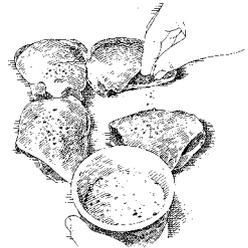
Saving Your Back

Don't stop butchering once you've removed the legs, wings, and breast—hack the back into 2-inch pieces with a cleaver and then freeze it (along with wing tips) to make homemade stock.



Getting a Grip on Raw Chicken

Raw chicken is slippery, which makes cutting it up hazardous. Get a firmer grip by using a folded wad of paper towels to hold the chicken in place.



Seasoning Raw Chicken

Touching the salt shaker or pepper mill after you've handled raw chicken can lead to cross-contamination. To avoid this, mix the necessary salt and pepper in a ramekin before handling the chicken.