

# Stovetop Roast Chicken

One skillet and a trick from Chinese cookery were all we needed to produce the speediest crisp and juicy roast chicken that never saw the inside of an oven.

➤ BY J. KENJI ALT ◀

Roasting chicken in the oven is the usual route to crisp skin and moist meat, but sometimes you want your oven for something else. Plus the fond created from the drippings is typically greasy (or burned) and firmly bonded to the bottom of the roasting pan—so if one of your goals is making a pan sauce, it's more trouble than it's worth. Cooking chicken pieces in a skillet easily yields a pan sauce, but the skin on the chicken is often flabby and the meat unevenly cooked. Was there a way to combine the best aspects of each method? My goals were high: crisp, golden skin; evenly cooked, juicy meat; and a flavorful sauce—all produced in a single large skillet that would never go into the oven.

## Steaming Up the Process

To suit everyone's taste, I wanted my recipe to work with any combination of white and dark meat, so I did my initial testing on a standard set of mixed chicken parts: four breast halves, two drumsticks, and two thighs. First I cooked the chicken pieces in the simplest way I could think of. I fit the eight pieces snugly into a 12-inch skillet, where I browned the skin for 5 minutes over medium-high heat (any higher and the skin tended to burn in patches). I flipped the pieces over, browned the second side, then turned the heat down to low (trying to cook the chicken through at a higher temperature ended up burning it). Then I waited. And waited. And waited. Forty-nine minutes later, the eight chicken pieces had reached their optimal temperature (160 degrees for breast meat and 170 degrees for legs and thighs), but the bottom layer of chicken that had been in contact with the pan was dry and leathery.

Next I tried starting the chicken pieces skin-side up, then flipping and finishing them skin-side down with a cover on the skillet. The idea was that the skin would act as an insulating buffer, protecting the meat from overcooking and becoming leathery. The long, slow rendering process produced some of the crispest skin I'd ever had, and the cover speeded things up a bit, but it still took over 40 minutes. Plus the meat wasn't as juicy as I'd hoped.

What if I introduced a little liquid into the mix? Water transfers heat much more efficiently than dry



These crisp-skinned chicken pieces are served with a quick pan sauce.

air (as an example, putting your hand in 200-degree water can cause burns, while you can safely reach into a 200-degree oven). So if I created a moist, steamy environment for the chicken, I should be able to cook it much more quickly. For my next test, I browned the chicken on both sides, added some broth to the pan, put on the lid, and let the chicken cook undisturbed over low heat.

This technique worked—almost. Cooking the chicken at a very gentle simmer (instead of a blazing 450-degree oven, as in oven roasting) meant that the meat came out tender and juicy every time, as long as I didn't overcook it. Unfortunately, the limp, steamed skin wasn't in the same league as the perfectly cooked, moist meat underneath.

## Achieving Crisp Skin

Traditionally, chicken parts are seared before being cooked through. What if I tried reversing that convention? I started the chicken off in the simmering broth,

waited until it cooked through, poured off the liquid, and then returned the pieces skin-side down to the hot pan to brown the skin. I was sure I had solved the problem by the smell of browning skin and the decisive sizzle of the meat. But upon removing the pieces from the pan, I discovered that the skin had shrunk to almost half its size, leaving the chicken looking like someone trying to fit into a jacket four sizes too small. Clearly I had to sear the chicken and its skin before steaming (to learn why, see "Keeping Skin from Shrinking," page 7), but how could I keep the skin crisp until the very end? I was toying with the idea of removing the skin after searing and serving it separately (a technique I've used in restaurants in the past) when an idea struck me.

Growing up, my favorite meal was my mom's Chinese potstickers. First she seared the dumplings, which set the size and shape of the bottoms and produced a golden brown crust (the same process that happens with chicken skin). Then she added water to the pan, covered it with a lid, and gently cooked them through. Finally, she re-seared the dumplings after steaming, creating a bottom crust that was even crisper than after the initial sear.

Since I had the same goal in mind for my chicken, why not use the same method?

After searing and steaming the pieces, I poured off all the liquid from the pan (reserving it for my pan sauce) and returned the chicken skin-side down. The second searing produced just the deep, russet-hued crisp skin I had hoped for. I softened a little chopped shallot in the hot skillet, added some flour and the reserved liquid, then whisked in lemon juice, parsley, chives, and butter off heat to create a flavorful pan sauce.

With a simple 30-minute technique, I had managed to produce juicy meat with skin that's thinner and crisper than that of any oven-roasted chicken (not to mention a great pan sauce!).

**COOK'S LIVE** Original Test Kitchen Videos  
[www.cooksillustrated.com](http://www.cooksillustrated.com)

## HOW TO MAKE

• Stovetop Roast Chicken with Lemon-Herb Sauce

## VIDEO TIP

• How to cut up a chicken



## TECHNIQUE | KEYS TO CRISP SKIN AND JUICY MEAT



**1. SEAR** the raw chicken pieces to jump-start the cooking process and crisp the skin.



**2. STEAM** the chicken in broth to cook it quickly and evenly and to render fat from the skin.



**3. RE-CRISP** the chicken pieces in the cleaned skillet to create super thin, ultracrisp skin.

### STOVETOP ROAST CHICKEN WITH LEMON-HERB SAUCE

SERVES 4

A whole 4-pound chicken, cut into 8 pieces, can be used instead of the chicken parts. Use a splatter screen when browning the chicken. For our free recipe for Stovetop Roast Chicken with Sake Glaze, go to [www.cooksillustrated.com/december](http://www.cooksillustrated.com/december).

#### Chicken

- 3½ pounds bone-in, skin-on chicken parts (breasts, thighs, and drumsticks, or a mix, with breasts cut in half), trimmed of excess fat (see note)
- Table salt and ground black pepper
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1–1¼ cups low-sodium chicken broth

#### Lemon-Herb Sauce

- 1 teaspoon vegetable oil
- 1 medium shallot, minced (about 3 tablespoons)
- 1 teaspoon unbleached all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon juice from 1 lemon
- 1½ tablespoons minced fresh parsley leaves
- 1½ tablespoons minced fresh chives
- 1 tablespoon cold unsalted butter
- Table salt and ground black pepper

1. **FOR THE CHICKEN:** Pat chicken dry and season with salt and pepper. Heat 2 teaspoons oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add chicken pieces skin-side down and cook without moving until golden brown, 5 to 8 minutes.

2. Using tongs, flip chicken pieces skin-side up. Reduce heat to medium-low, add ¾ cup broth to skillet, cover, and cook until instant-read thermometer inserted into thickest part of chicken registers 155 degrees for breasts and 170 degrees for legs and thighs, 10 to 16 minutes (smaller pieces may cook faster than larger pieces). Transfer chicken to plate, skin-side up.

3. Pour off liquid from skillet into 2-cup measuring cup and reserve. Using tongs, wipe skillet with paper towels. Add remaining teaspoon oil to skillet and heat over medium-high heat until oil is

shimmering. Return chicken pieces skin-side down and cook undisturbed until skin is deep golden brown and crisp and it reaches 160 degrees for breasts and 175 degrees for legs and thighs, 4 to 7 minutes. Transfer to serving platter and tent loosely with foil. Using spoon, skim fat from reserved cooking liquid and add enough broth to measure ¾ cup.

4. **FOR THE SAUCE:** Heat oil in now-empty skillet over low heat. Add shallot and cook, stirring frequently, until softened, about 1 minute. Add flour and cook, stirring constantly, 30 seconds. Increase heat to medium-high, add reserved cooking liquid, and bring to simmer, scraping skillet bottom with wooden spoon to loosen browned bits. Simmer rapidly until reduced to ½ cup, 2 to 3 minutes. Stir in any accumulated juices from resting chicken; return to simmer and cook 30 seconds. Off heat, whisk in lemon juice, parsley, chives, and butter; season with salt and pepper. Pour sauce around chicken and serve immediately.

### STOVETOP ROAST CHICKEN WITH SPICY THAI SAUCE

- 3 tablespoons juice from 2 limes
- ¼ cup light brown sugar
- 2 garlic cloves, minced or pressed through garlic press (about 2 teaspoons)
- 1 tablespoon fish sauce
- 1 teaspoon Thai red curry paste
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro leaves

Follow recipe for Stovetop Roast Chicken with Lemon-Herb Sauce through step 3. Add 2 tablespoons lime juice, sugar, garlic, fish sauce, and curry paste to now-empty skillet. Cook over medium-high heat, scraping skillet bottom with wooden spoon to loosen browned bits, until spoon leaves wide trail when dragged through sauce, about 2 minutes. Add reserved cooking liquid; return to simmer and cook until reduced to ½ cup, 2 to 3 minutes. Stir in any accumulated juices from resting chicken; return to simmer and cook 30 seconds. Off heat, stir in cilantro and remaining tablespoon lime juice. Pour sauce around chicken and serve immediately.

### STOVETOP ROAST CHICKEN WITH GRAPEFRUIT-TARRAGON SAUCE

- 1 teaspoon vegetable oil
- 1 medium shallot, minced (about 3 tablespoons)
- 1 grapefruit, rind and pith removed and segments cut into ½-inch pieces, juice reserved (about ½ cup)
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh tarragon leaves
- 1 tablespoon cold unsalted butter
- Table salt and ground black pepper

Follow recipe for Stovetop Roast Chicken with Lemon-Herb Sauce through step 3. Heat oil in now-empty skillet over low heat. Add shallot and cook, stirring frequently, until softened, about 1 minute. Increase heat to medium-high, add reserved cooking liquid and reserved grapefruit juice; bring to simmer, scraping skillet bottom with wooden spoon to loosen browned bits. Simmer rapidly until reduced to ¼ cup, 4 to 6 minutes. Add grapefruit segments, honey, and any accumulated juices from resting chicken and return to simmer. Off heat, stir in tarragon and butter; season with salt and pepper. Pour sauce around chicken and serve immediately.

#### SCIENCE:

#### Keeping Skin from Shrinking

**PROBLEM:** While creating our recipe for Stovetop Roast Chicken, we tried a variety of approaches to achieve both moist meat and perfectly crisp skin. One method, steaming the raw chicken in broth and then searing it in a hot pan, skin-side down, crisped the skin but shrunk it to half its size.

**EXPLANATION:** Chicken skin is composed of protein, fat, and water. When steamed (which occurs at a relatively low temperature of about 212 degrees), the fat slowly renders out, water evaporates, and the proteins tighten, causing the skin to shrink dramatically.

**SOLUTION:** We seared the chicken first, then steamed it. Searing at a very high temperature (close to 500 degrees) causes the proteins inside the skin to rapidly crosslink, setting the skin into a firm shape before it has time to shrink. Even subsequent steaming will not lead to major shrinkage. —J.K.A.



STEAMED, THEN  
SEARED



SEARED, THEN  
STEAMED