

Cooking Heritage Chicken

Heritage chickens have very little in common with commercial meat chickens and require different cooking methods. Cooking too quickly at a high temperature is going to result in tough, chewy meat. To understand the difference, it's important to know that modern meat chickens were developed with one focus - an astounding growth rate. This allows them to be ready for slaughter at a very young age.

Commercial broilers are butchered before they are **6 weeks old**, but traditional breeds (dual-purpose chickens) grow slowly and will not reach an adequate roasting size until they are **6 - 8 months of age**. It's very similar to the differences between veal and grass-finished beef. Heritage chickens live a full, active life. They use their wings and legs to develop muscle while free-ranging. The authentic, distinctive flavor of heritage fowl is attributed both to their diet and to the length of time the birds are grown. The firmer texture of the meat is developed through the natural activities of healthy, energetic chickens. The carcass will also look different than regular supermarket chickens. They are not as round, have longer legs and usually less white breast meat.

Using a 'low and slow' cooking method allows connective tissues to break down, helps the meat retain moisture and brings complex flavours out of hiding.

Roasting: A slow-roasted heritage chicken is a worthy centerpiece for a special occasion. To reach its fullest potential, it is recommended to thaw the bird completely before cooking. This is a traditional meal that cannot be hurried along, so be sure to plan ahead. Roast the chicken slowly at a lower temperature (no more than 300 degrees) preferably using a Dutch oven with heavy lid. (Enamel or cast-iron cookware is excellent!) Keeping it covered is important to retain moisture to keep the meat tender and juicy.

Allow a large roasting chicken to cook for around 3.5 hours until leg joints are loose. Avoid piercing the skin while cooking to keep the moisture in the meat, and do baste it from time to time. If the skin does not brown nicely while covered, the lid can be left off for the last 20 -30 minutes.

The more intense flavour of heritage chicken means there is nothing better for braising, stewing or for delicious soups. Most regular chicken recipes can be adapted for heritage chicken by incorporating moist heat and extending the cooking time.

Heritage chickens should be prepared for the table in the same manner as they are raised - with care and patience. But when prepared and cooked properly the result is a special and memorable dining experience.