

Roast Chicken with Honey-Thyme Vinaigrette

Make everyday chicken something special

BY SARAH STEGNER



To make the skin as crispy as possible, and to add herbal flavor to the chicken, the author brushes it generously with thyme oil before and during roasting.

In my cooking at the Chicago Ritz-Carlton, I like to use vinaigrette sauces with more than just salads. Fish, poultry, and meat are all delicious when accented with this tangy, acidic sauce. This style of saucing makes sense for home cooking, too, because a vinaigrette delivers loads of flavor without requiring time-consuming stocks and lots of other ingredients.

I think a perfect partner for a warm vinaigrette is roast chicken. The chicken in this recipe is brushed with thyme oil and roasted on a bed of vegetables. After it's cooked, all you have to do is blend the juices and seasonings that have accumulated in the pan with vinegar, oil, and other flavorings. The result is a vinaigrette sauce that has complex flavors but is easy to prepare. The chicken can be served with a mix of salad greens, wilted just slightly by tossing with some of the sauce. Boiled new potatoes would be a nice accompaniment to round out the meal.

There are three main components to this dish: the chicken, roasted on a bed of celery and onion, which makes for more flavor and keeps the chicken from sitting directly on the roasting pan and sticking; the thyme oil, which is olive oil blended with lots of fresh thyme, giving it a potent herbal flavor; and finally the shallot vinegar, made by infusing red-wine vinegar with lots of sliced shallots.

I love the flavors in this recipe because the strong herbal fragrance of the fresh thyme is great with chicken, and the red-wine vinegar is balanced by lavender honey. You could use the same technique with other herb-and-vinegar combinations, too, maybe pear and red-wine vinegar with fresh tarragon.

INFUSING THE VINEGAR

To get the best flavor, the vinegar should be prepared 24 hours in advance, if possible. If you're in a

hurry, try adding the shallots to the roasting pan when you add the vinegar to deglaze (see below). The flavor won't be quite the same, but it's an acceptable shortcut.

To prepare the vinegar, combine sliced shallots and vinegar in a bowl, cover, and refrigerate for at least a day and up to a week. The vinegar becomes more pungent the longer it marinates, so when you think it has enough shallot flavor, strain it and refrigerate it until it's time to use it.

FRESH THYME FOR COLOR AND FRAGRANCE

Thyme oil is used for basting the chicken as it roasts, as well as for whisking into the sauce. Only fresh thyme will do, giving the oil a strong perfume and a bright green color. Use the oil within three days because the color and flavor will fade after that.

Blend the oil and thyme. Strip the thyme leaves from the stems. (You're aiming for about a third of a cup loosely packed leaves, but having a little less is all right.) Combine the thyme and olive oil in a blender and process them until the thyme is completely incorporated into the oil. Cover and store the thyme oil in the refrigerator, and then strain before using.

ROASTING TIPS FOR MOIST CHICKEN AND CRISPY SKIN

My goal when roasting a chicken is to end up with crispy golden skin and moist flavorful meat that's perfectly done—both the delicate white meat and the denser dark meat. I like to start my chicken at a really high heat to crisp the skin and seal in some of the juices, and then finish cooking it in a moderate oven. Brushing with thyme oil during cooking adds more flavor and makes the skin crisp and brown.



ROAST CHICKEN WITH HONEY-THYME VINAIGRETTE

Serves four.

6 small shallots, sliced
 ½ cup red-wine vinegar
 1 large bunch fresh thyme
 ½ cup olive oil
 3-pound chicken
 3 tablespoons coarse salt
 Freshly ground black pepper
 4 medium ribs celery, chopped
 1 medium onion, chopped
 1 tablespoon lavender honey or other floral honey

Mixed salad greens (such as romaine, Bibb, frisée, red oak leaf), washed and torn in pieces (optional)



Serve the roast chicken on a bed of slightly wilted mixed salad greens, tossed with some honey-thyme vinaigrette. The vinaigrette sauce delivers loads of flavor without requiring time-consuming stocks.

When we roast poultry in the restaurant, we often cook it until the breast meat is done, carve off that portion, then return the bird to the oven, and continue cooking until the dark meat is done. You may not want to try this method at home because carving the hot chicken takes an experienced hand. Instead, just cover the breast meat halfway through cooking with a couple of large, hardy lettuce leaves, such as romaine. This protects the meat, but doesn't stick to and tear the skin the way a "tent" of aluminum foil might.

To roast the chicken, first remove any giblets from the chicken and pull off all excess fat. Rub the skin and the cavity with coarse salt, let the chicken sit for about an hour, and then wipe off all the excess salt. (This salting process is optional, but I think it gives the chicken a better flavor and texture.)

Heat the oven to 500°F. Brush the chicken generously with some of the thyme oil and season with freshly ground black pepper.

Put the celery and onion in a flameproof roasting pan, season with salt and pepper, and then put the chicken on top of the vegetables. Roast the chicken at 500° for 15 minutes, then reduce the heat to 350° and continue cooking until the juices from the cavity run clear when the chicken is lifted, another 45 to

50 minutes. If the breast meat is cooking too quickly, cover it with one or two of your lettuce leaves.

When the chicken is cooked, remove it from the roasting pan and keep it in a warm place. Put the roasting pan directly on a burner and turn the heat to medium high. (Don't forget that the pan has been in the oven and will be very hot.) Add the vinegar to the vegetables and chicken juices in the pan (add the shallots, too, if you haven't infused them with the vinegar) and boil until the liquid reduced by about half, scraping to dissolve any drippings from the bottom of the pan.

Strain the liquid into a small, deep-sided bowl and press on the vegetables with a spoon to extract their juices. Now whisk in the honey. Taste the sauce. The oil from basting and the accumulated chicken juices serve as the "oil" part of the vinaigrette, but if the sauce is too sharp, whisk in a little more thyme oil to mellow it. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

To protect the delicate breast meat, the author covers it halfway through the roasting time with some lettuce leaves from her salad greens.

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