

How to Cut a Whole Chicken Into Pieces – Mother Earth News

Meredith Leigh — Read time: 9 minutes

How to Cut a Whole Chicken Into Pieces

Slice prices and corporate reliance by learning how to consume the entire bird.



by Getty Images/AlexRaths

Learn how to cut up a whole chicken into pieces — including how to prepare a spatchcock chicken — which will allow you to slice prices and corporate reliance.

When I raised chickens on pasture, I wanted to sell the entire bird. After all, I had to feed, process, and package the whole bird. If car manufacturers were only able to sell the front bumper and engine of a newly built, fully functioning vehicle, they'd have a hard time paying the bills. This is a common problem for the average livestock farmer selling direct to consumers: Consumers don't demand the whole product, but the whole product must be sold to make ends meet. I had to sell boneless skinless chicken breasts for \$20 per pound to make money, and people still lined up to pay it. We're all so used to quick-searing

boneless skinless chicken breasts that we're leaving [chicken feet](#) and backs and wings in the farm freezers.

I'm not selling chicken anymore, but I am traveling around talking about farming and trying to figure out a better way. In my mind, leaving a farmers market with \$20 worth of meat that only provides one meal isn't the solution, even if it does keep farmers in business. The answer to this half-chicken conundrum is to figure out how to use the entire bird. When you [cook the whole chicken](#), the farmer pays less in processing and packaging costs, incurs fewer labor costs, and stores less inventory. And you'll get a better price per pound, plus more meals for your purchase.

If you don't want to pressure-cook, smoke, or roast the whole bird, you can always pick up your butcher knife and turn that chicken into any cut you need. Here, I'll cover several ways to cut up an entire chicken at home, making the meat easier to use and giving you more bang for your cluck.

Sharpen, Sterilize, Slice

First, you'll need a cutting board and a knife. Poultry carries the highest bacterial load of any meat we eat, so look into buying a heavy plastic cutting board that you can reserve for raw poultry. Avoid using wooden cutting boards, because the wood will soak up the juices and harbor bacteria. And of course, don't cut raw vegetables on your poultry board. Wash it thoroughly after each use.

As for a knife, seek out a 5- or 6-inch flexible boning knife, typically \$20 to \$40 online or at a kitchen store. The flexible blade will come in handy as you work around bones and joints. Make sure the knife is good and sharp.

With your poultry board and knife ready, it's time to focus on the bird. Place the chicken in the sink and remove its packaging. If there are giblets and other offal included, remove them from the bag or body cavity, rinse them with cold water, and place them in a large pot to make stock. Making stock from chicken parts is an important way of using the full bird. Almost completely fill the pot with cold water and place it on the stove over high heat. As you cut up the bird, add any throwaway chicken parts to the stockpot, depending on your plans for the carcass. Toss in onion scraps and celery trimmings for flavor, and simmer for a couple of hours until the stock is brown and flavorful.

Returning to the chicken, rinse the bird, inside and out, with cold water. Take a moment to inspect the bird and remove any pinfeathers you see, particularly around the wings and the tail. Gently shake the chicken to drain any excess water, and transfer it to the clean cutting board. Next, disinfect the sink, faucet, handles, and anything else the chicken has touched.

Now, you're ready to pick up the knife.

More Than One Way to Cut Up a Chicken Into Pieces

Here are several standard ways to break down a bird. Aside from chickens, these techniques are also effective on ducks, geese, and guineas; despite some variations in skeletal structure, the anatomy is very similar.

First, find the oysters. These are little morsels of dark meat that you don't want to miss. If you ace the butchery, you'll pull them off with the thigh meat. To access the oysters, lay the bird breast-down on your board and even up its legs. Make an imaginary line, perpendicular to the spine, across the back of the bird, right at the top of the knees. Using the knife, cut into the back along this line, all the way to the bone. Now, lift up the skin and spy the two pads of muscle (oysters), one on either side of the spine. Scoop the oysters from their little home on the pelvis with your fingers or by making careful cuts with the knife, and cut down either side of the spine to release them. Leave them hanging off the back of the chicken; you'll come back to them later.



Access the oysters just above the knees of the bird.



Release the oysters by making a cut on both sides of the spine.

Now, turn the bird over and pick it up by one of its wings. Gravity will show you where the joint is between the shoulder and the breast. Remove the wing at this joint. In my classes, I've found that the joint is deeper and closer to the neck than many people expect. While holding the bird by its wing, take your knife and cut around the ball of the humerus (located at the intersection of the shoulder and the wing) to remove the wing. Repeat this process on the other wing. If you want, you can remove the wing tips by cutting straight through the last joint at the tip of the wing; toss these into the stockpot.



Use the weight of the bird to help remove its wings.

To remove the legs, lay the bird on its back and use your knife to cut into the skin stretched from the breast to the thigh. By opening up the skin, you'll be able to see the muscles and joints more clearly. Don't remove the skin, just neatly open it with the knife and push it aside. Now, pick up the chicken, and while holding the leg by the thigh, pop the femur (thigh) bone out of its socket in the pelvis by bending the leg back and down, toward the table. Use your knife to cut through the place where the femur popped out of the pelvis. When making this cut, be sure to turn the chicken around and adjust your cut so the oyster you freed earlier is removed with the leg.



Cut into the skin to reveal the leg joint.



Cut through the femur-pelvis joint to remove the leg at the thigh.

At this point in the breakdown, you'll have four pieces: two wings and two legs (drumsticks and thighs).

5-Piece Cut

The standard five-piece cut will produce two wings, two legs, and a one-piece breast. You'll toss the remaining portion of the chicken carcass into the stockpot.

To achieve a five-piece cut, remove the entire breast — both sides — by pulling each side off the bone, intact. Removing the breast intact will allow you to stuff the entire breast and roll it for a delicious and show-stopping supper.

Start at the side of the chicken — right where you feel the meaty breast transitioning to the less-meaty back of the carcass — with your knife. Make exploratory cuts to help you lift the meat up and over the keel bone in the center, and then continue with the cuts on the other side until you remove the entire breast intact.

6-Piece Cut

A six-piece breakdown will yield two breasts, two wings, and two legs. As with the five-piece cut, you'll add the rest of the carcass to the stockpot.

Remove the breasts in two pieces. Use your knife to cut vertically down the center of the bird from the neck to the tip of the breast, following the highest point on the breast where the keel bone sits. Use your hands to peel back each breast, and then use your knife to carefully lift the breast from the keel bone. Use exploratory cuts close to the bone as you lift the muscle out with your hand.



Find the keel bone and trace around it with your knife.



Use your hands to pull the breast meat back from the bone.

8-Piece Cut

To achieve an eight-piece cut, you'll follow all the steps above, plus splitting the thighs from the drumsticks.

Pick up a leg and bend it at the knee to find the joint. If your bird has a lot of fat on it, you'll see a seam of fat right where the knee joint is located. This is your cut spot. If you nail that joint, you should be able to knife right through it and cleanly separate the thigh from the drumstick.



Find the joint at the knee and cut to separate thigh from drumstick.

The only other trick you might like to learn is deboning. For any of the cuts you've produced, simply cut through the meat to find the bone, and then trace around it with your knife, staying as close to the bone as possible. Place the bone in the stockpot.



Cut down through the meat where you can access the bone.

Remember, practice is everything. You might feel unsure during the first couple of times you break down a whole chicken, because you're unfamiliar with the bird's anatomy and the structure of the bones and muscles. But you'll develop confidence if you keep trying, and eventually will successfully cook everything

from stuffed duck breast to galantine. By learning to break down a chicken, you'll become more self-sufficient, and you'll limit processing and inventory headaches for the farmer.

Spatchcock Chicken: A Truly Spineless Bird

When you want to cook a chicken whole, consider “spatchcocking.” This technique removes the spine from the bird so it can lie flat and roast more evenly. To spatchcock a chicken, place the bird breast-down on the cutting board. Turn the bird so the tail faces you, and pick up the neck. Keep your knife at about a 45-degree angle relative to the spine, and begin cutting down either side of the backbone. If your knife is parallel to the spine, you'll find this harder. The easier alternative to making this cut with a knife is to get yourself some good bone-crunching poultry shears. With these, you can cut straight down either side of the spine (with this approach you'll cut through the pelvis). When finished with this cut or shear, you should have a backbone with a tail on the end. Put this in the stockpot.



Image by Getty Images/andreveen

With the chicken's spine removed, you can cook a large, delicious meal with peace of mind.

Next, place the bird breast up in a regular casserole dish, spreading it out as much as you can. If you want the chicken to rest completely flat in the dish, push down on the breast until the keel bone cracks. Rub the chicken with a [compound butter](#) (mixed with garlic and lemon), yogurt, or buttermilk. For seasoning, add salt, pepper, and herbs. Roast the chicken at 450 degrees

Fahrenheit for about 15 minutes, and then turn the heat down to 375 degrees until the internal temperature of the breast is 155 degrees. Remove it from the oven, and let it rest for about 10 to 15 minutes before you dig in.

Meredith Leigh has worked as a farmer, butcher, chef, and writer in the pursuit of good food. She's the author of [The Ethical Meat Handbook](#) and [Pure Charcuterie](#). Learn more about her at [MereLeighFood](#).



MOTHER EARTH NEWS STORE

You've turned off quick searches.

Undo