

BONING A CHICKEN

By Dennis W. Viau

Filleting a chicken is not for the squeamish. I know people who prefer to believe boneless chicken breasts grow in cellophane and Styrofoam packages to be labeled and shipped when ready to cook. If you fainted in biology lab when the scalpel pierced the frog you might want to look away. On the other hand, learning to bone a chicken is a culinary skill that all cooks should master. I own dozens of cookbooks, including textbooks about running a commercial kitchen. None of them demonstrate boning a whole chicken. So I correct that oversight here.



To wash a chicken or not to wash a chicken? Some people warn you not to wash a chicken before you cook it because the juices will contaminate your kitchen (and make anyone who ventures near deathly ill). Others agree it is perfectly safe to wash a chicken if you use some common sense and wash up with soap and water when finished. You can mix a little bleach in a bottle of water and spray the surfaces to disinfect your kitchen. I wash my chickens and I keep a spray bottle of bleach water under the sink.

You'll need a very sharp knife, preferable a boning knife. Don't attempt this project with a dull knife. Dull knives are more dangerous than sharp ones for the simple reason that a dull knife requires more pressure as you force the blade through the meat. If you should slip you could cut yourself badly. A very sharp knife glides through the meat almost effortlessly and is therefore very easy to control. I rarely cut myself. I use a diamond hone to keep my kitchen knives super sharp. You will also be safer if you keep dry the hand that controls the knife. Let your other hand get all wet and slimy, but keep your knife hand clean and dry so that the knife won't slip in your grip.

Why fillet a chicken when you can buy chicken parts in a store? There are many reasons:

1. Whole chickens in the warehouse store are currently only 99¢ per pound. Boneless chicken parts cost upwards of \$2.99 a pound, or more.
2. You have leftover skin, bones, and wings (called *trim* in a commercial kitchen) for making chicken stock. Nothing beats homemade chicken stock. (I show you how to make your own stock in another recipe.) And consider this stock *free* because you make it with the parts you would normally discard.
3. Just for the practice and skill of it. You'll feel a lot more competent and accomplished in your kitchen if you develop the skill of boning a chicken.
4. There are plenty of recipes, such as stir-fry, that require cubed or cut up chicken. You might as well learn how and save yourself some money.

At Thanksgiving I bought a fresh (not frozen) turkey at the warehouse store for 89¢ per pound. I boned the thing, roasted all the fillets in the oven, made stock from the all the leftovers, and divided the cooked turkey meat into three-ounce servings, which were sealed in plastic pouches and stored in the freezer. I got 42 servings off that bird, not counting the soups I made with the stock. That's *economy*.

Ingredients:

A whole chicken, 4 to 5 pounds. (I buy mine at the warehouse store where they come two to a package.)



STEP-BY-STEP

1



I have one cutting board I call my “chicken board.” I use it only for chicken. Make sure your knife is perfectly sharp, and buy a good one. A high quality knife will hold an edge longer than a cheap one. Have two or three bowls nearby to hold the pieces as you remove them. Put the neck in the same bowl you will use for the bones and other trim, as these will go into your stock pot. Supposedly the liver will add bitterness to your stock, so separate it into another bowl. The gizzards and heart can go in either bowl.

2



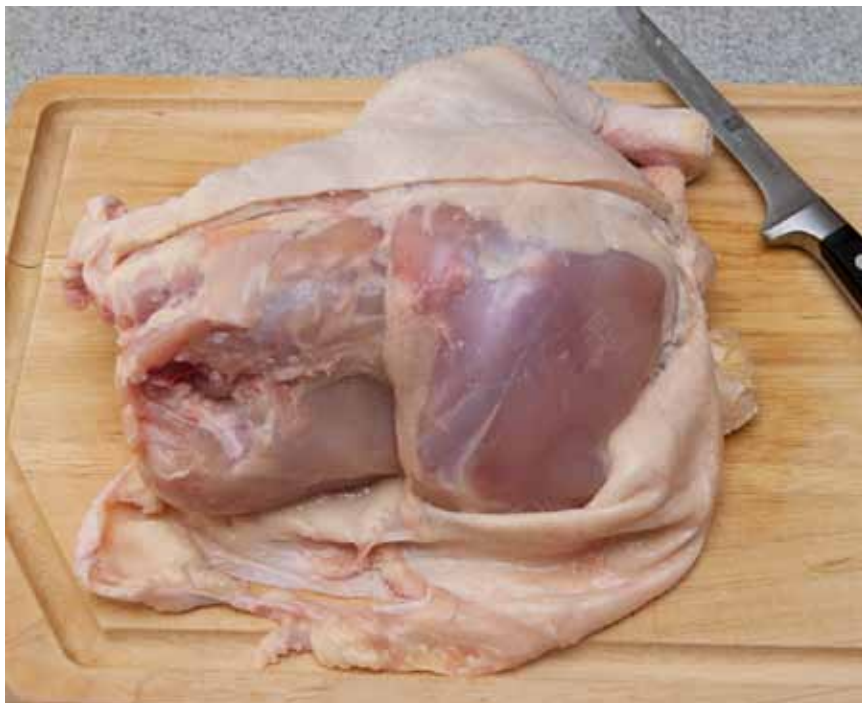
Remove the wings by cutting through the joint below the breast meat. The joint is rather deep under the breast. You can locate it rather easily by moving the wing back and forth. Try to remove it without cutting a lot of the breast meat with it. I separate the wing into three pieces. The tip goes in with the trim that will be used for stock. The joint for the wing tip is so thin you can easily cut through it with a knife. Flex the other wing sections (sometimes called the *drumette* and *wingette*) back and forth to locate the joint and cut down through it. It is easier to cut through the joint than to cut through the bones. Butchers just give it a quick *whack* with a sharp cleaver. I prefer a little more *finesse*.

3



Cut the skin down the center of the breast, from the neck to the opening above the tail. The skin holds tightly in only a few places—along the center of the breast, down the center of the back, along the opening where the internal pieces were removed (okay, the *guts*), along the back of the thighs, and at the ends of the drumsticks. Around the rest of the chicken you can easily slip your fingers under the skin as you separate it from the meat.

4



Turn the chicken over onto its breast and slit the skin along the back, from neck to tail. Then start separating the skin from the body. It adheres closely here and is therefore more work to remove. After you separate the skin here, the rest will be fairly simple to remove. Work the skin off the body, progressing toward the legs. When you get to the thighs you'll need to cut the skin free along the back of the thighs. Then you can simply pull the skin free, all the way down to the ends of the drumsticks.

5



Here is our chicken with all the skin removed. Put the skin in the bowl you'll use for chicken stock pieces. It will add flavor to the stock.

6



The next step is to remove the legs where the thigh joins the body. I'm rather fussy about the thighs because this is my favorite meat in all the chicken. So I get as much of it as I can. On either side of the joint the meat attaches to the pelvic bone. I start by separating this meat first, working the tip of the knife under the meat to separate it from the bone. You can see the tip of the knife under a bit of thigh meat in the picture above. You don't need to be this fussy.

7



After separating the thigh meat from the pelvic bone you can just bend the leg backward and the joint will pop free. It is then an easy task to just cut through the white cartilage to separate the bone from the body.

8



Separate the drumstick from the thigh by cutting through the joint. I've done this so many times I can feel the joint with my finger tips and cut through it without needing to expose the joint. In the picture above I cut through some of the meat to expose the joint. You can see the gap between the two bones. It is easy to cut through this gap, because the cartilage is soft.

9



Here is the drumstick separated from the thigh with one clean cut.

10



The easiest way to remove the bone is to cut along the inner thigh. Above is the thigh with the outer part placed upward, so that you can recognize it. This is a nice piece of meat and it looks too good to cut through. So turn the thigh over and cut through the other side.

11

Cut down through the meat to the bone and then cut the meat away from the bone by cutting along both sides of it. Keep working your way around the bone until it is separated from the meat.

12

Here is the thigh meat separated from the bone. If I remember correctly, boneless thighs are \$2.19 per pound in the warehouse store. I paid 99¢ per pound for this chicken, and I have bones for making stock.

13

The drumsticks are the most difficult to fillet. Start by pushing the knife under the meat, close to the bone, and push all the way through. Twist the knife so that the back of the blade faces the bone and the sharp edge faces upward. Cut upward to sever the tendons. You'll need to repeat this step two or three times to separate the meat all the way around the bone.

14

Starting anywhere, cut down to the bone along the drumstick and then cut the meat away from the bone, as you did for the thigh. The joint area is the most difficult because of its shape, but with a little patience you can cut all the way around it.

15

Here is the drumstick meat separated from the bone. I don't remember ever seeing boneless drumsticks in any store. If they're available, they're probably expensive because this is the most difficult piece of chicken to fillet.

16

The breast meat, by comparison, is the easiest to remove. Cut down along the center of the breast, to one side of the breast bone, and cut down all the way to the rib cage. At the neck end it is easy to cut the meat away from the wishbone. If you prefer, you can remove the wishbone first by cutting it out. This would make removing the breast meat even easier. I leave the wishbone in place and simply work around it.

17

Working the knife close to the rib cage, separate the breast meat, starting from the center of the breast and working around toward the back of the chicken. This meat separates easily. The breast meat is more delicate in texture than the dark meat; therefore, handle it more carefully so as not to tear it.

18

And here's our boneless chicken breast, ready for cooking. You know how expensive these things are in the store.

19



With both breast meat sections removed, it is easier to see the breast bone you need to cut around as you remove the meat. Here it is, photographed from above.

20



Here's the breast bone photographed from the side. You can see that long thing that looks like a fin extending from one end of the chicken to the other along the top. It is called a *keel*.

We're done. The chicken is boned.

21



Here is the bowl of trim that would be discarded. These can be put in a stock pot or pressure cooker with a *mirepoix*—chopped carrot, chopped celery stalk, half a coarsely chopped large onion (or one whole if small, chopped)—ten peppercorns, and a bay leaf. Add enough water to cover and simmer for about an hour. When coo. strain to remove the solids. (In a pressure cooker the cooking time is reduced to about 20 to 30 minutes.) You might wish to simmer the stock further to concentrate its flavor.

22



I return the trim to the original bags (rinsed) and place them in a ziplock bag. These go into the freezer until I'm ready to make stock.

23

And, finally, here are our boneless chicken fillets, ready for any recipe that calls for chicken pieces. If you don't have an immediate need for them, wrap them in plastic wrap and place in a ziplock bag. They will keep in the refrigerator for two to three days. For longer storage, freeze them. By wrapping them individually they will be easy to separate when you need them. If you put the unwrapped chicken pieces in a bag and freeze them you'll have one large solid mass of chicken that will need to defrost in the refrigerator for two days before you can separate the pieces.

Conclusion

Boning a chicken is a fundamental skill that should be mastered by anyone who wants to be an accomplished cook. With practice it will soon become a valuable skill. The first time I boned a chicken it took a long time. I've filleted so many chickens that it goes relatively quickly now. I typically fillet two to four chickens at a time. Sometimes I store the individually wrapped pieces in the freezer. Sometimes I cook everything and portion them into individually sealed packs of three ounces each for heat-and-serve convenience later (my Lazy Man Meals).

I almost always have chicken stock in my freezer, which is excellent for soups or other recipes that call for stock. Nothing beats homemade chicken stock.