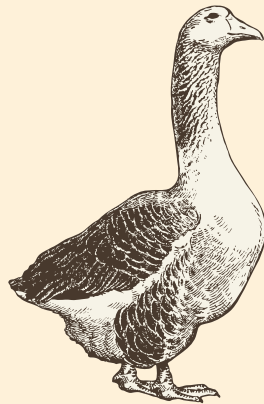


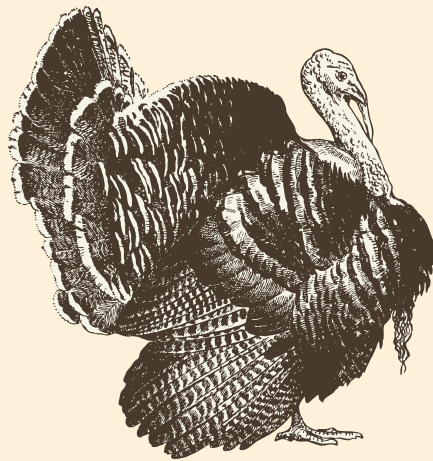
ONE MAN



THREE BIRDS



AND A PECULIAR CULINARY AMBITION



# The Turducken Diary

BY ERIC FRANCIS



PHOTO BY RUSTY HUBBARD / ILLUSTRATION BY RACHEL KOOPS

## Prologue

Ah, the turducken. How it has haunted me all these many years!

The roots of this “stuffed roast” stretch back at least to ancient Rome. During the Middle Ages, castle cooks would stuff pretty much any bird (heck, any animal) into a larger one — for example, starting with a finch and working their way up to a swan — to serve when their royal employers had someone they wanted to impress.

Today that practice seems to survive only in the turducken: a chicken inside a duck inside a turkey. It became a fad food in the mid-1980s after it was revived in Louisiana — some say by Chef Paul Prudhomme; some say by specialty butcher shops — and enjoyed a brief spike of fame nationwide. Nowadays, the Cajuns again seem the only people who still turn them out, especially for the mail-order business.

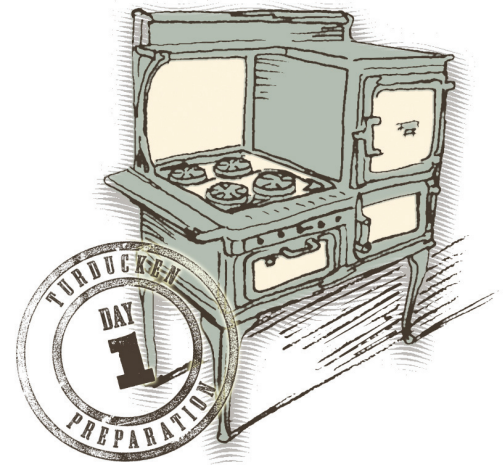
I’d first heard of this culinary marvel some twenty years ago during one of NPR’s holiday recipe roundups, and I was transfixed as the hosts described this fantastic feast-in-one-dish. Never mind that they didn’t explain in detail how it was done; I told myself, there and then, that I had to make one of these!

And kept telling myself that, year after year, as the holidays came ‘round.

This year is different, though. I am tired of putting it off. I want to know how those layers of bird and stuffing tempt the palate. I have the ambition, I have the culinary skills, and, most importantly, I have someone offering to pay me to write about it.

No longer will all those hours of watching the Food Network have been in vain!

However, given the nature of publishing-industry deadlines, I also have only seventeen days to make this happen. So I’d best get started.



## Day 1

My first hurdle is to be found in the kitchen. Actually, it is the kitchen.

I rent a house with a smallish kitchen. And maybe six square feet of counter space. And a stove that’s ... that’s ...

It’s a thing of beauty, I’ll give you that. A true antique with white enamel, cast iron, porcelain knobs, a lovely little coat of arms on the oven door.

But the only word for the oven behind that door is “tiny.” A little work with a tape measure tells me it’s just twenty inches deep, fourteen wide, and less than twelve tall. Plus, one of the hinges is missing from the door, so it’s held shut by a long coil spring running from the handle and over the back. It’s a two-handed job just opening and shutting it; how am I going to get a bird in or out?

At this point I’m about ready to pack the project in, but there’s a paycheck riding on this, so I persevere.

I grab my trusty roasting pan, the one that’s seen me through so many Thanksgiving dinners: oval, a high-domed lid, tall sides, your basic black with white speckles. And I know how it cooks.

Far as I’m concerned, if I can’t use this pan, I can’t cook a turducken.

I unhook the spring and lower the cantankerous oven door. This could be the game right here. I slide the roasting pan in. ...

It fits! In fact, it more than fits — there’s room to spare! Disaster (or at least inconvenience) averted!

Next step: Recipe research.



## Day 2

How the heck do you totally debone a bird?

## Day 3

I'm in the kitchen of the Starving Artist Café, where Chef Jason Morell has agreed to tutor me on the art of deboning poultry without reducing it (or my fingers) to various parts. I provide the chickens; he provides the nice sharp knives and stylish black aprons.

It's a given that Chef Jason will make this look easy. The nifty part is that he makes it seem easy, too. I may do some inelegant hacking or take three slices where he takes one, but after about fifteen minutes, we're both standing over completely boneless chickens. And mine looks startlingly similar to his.

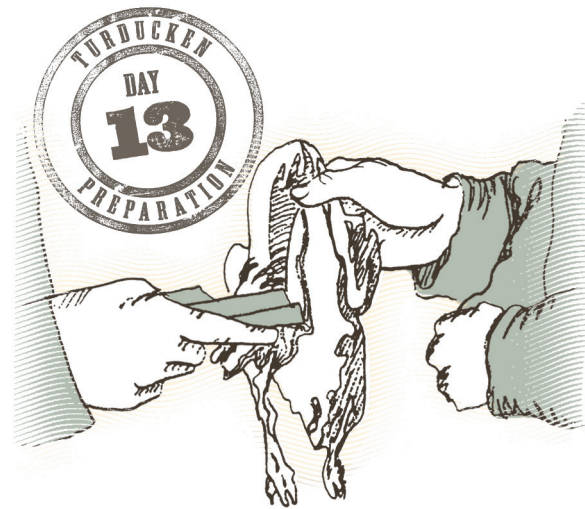
I am more than a little stunned at this outcome.

The chef gives me a hearty Job Well Done, and I give him the chickens. As I walk out onto Main Street, I am convinced that I could tackle my trio of poultry participants tomorrow morning and be done with the turducken by quitting time.

## Days 4 through 9

Procrastinated.

Okay, not entirely. I drove to Brinkley, Batesville, Melbourne, and Marshall; fixed a leaky water line; acquired a nice sharp knife and stylish black apron; bought a chicken; had dinner with my mom and stepdad. Clearly, I got stuff done.



## Day 14

Tarnation.

Remember that lovely antique stove? I crank up the oven and chuck in a thermometer. Result? It's running 100 degrees too hot and won't go below 325.

That's bad, because my turducken is supposed to cook for eight hours at 225. And this oven can't manage that.

Only one option: Bail on this kitchen. I call my oldest surviving friend, Monty, who lives just around the block. I happen to know her kitchen contains a perfectly serviceable, avocado green, 1950s-era electric range. The call goes something like this.

Me: Monty! Can I borrow your oven to cook a turducken?

Monty: A what?

Me: A turkey stuffed with a duck stuffed with a chicken.

Monty: A what!?!?

Me: Thanks! I knew I could count on you!

The rest of my day is devoted to the stuffing. Breadcrumbs stuffing, wild rice stuffing, cornbread stuffing. By the time I'm done, I'm stuffed out. Plus, I accidentally make enough for about three turduckens.

That's all right. Overkill is good.

## Day 15

Deboning day. Here's where I remember just how much I forgot of what Chef Jason taught me.

With my nice sharp knife in hand, I tackle the chicken. I slice, I pull, I scrape, I curse — and by the time I'm done, my chicken is a mess.

That stuff just didn't include practicing my bird-deboning skills. But that's the only thing I forgot to do, I swear.

That, and I have no idea where to buy a duck.

## Day 10

Placed desperation call to Jody Hardin, my go-to guy for farm animals. He directs me to Cody Hopkins of Falling Sky Farm up in Marshall.

Marshall? Wasn't I just there?

Anyway, Cody reassures me that he can be my duck dealer. He tells me where and when to meet him on Monday. The turducken is back on track!

## Days 11 and 12

Procrastinated. For real, this time.

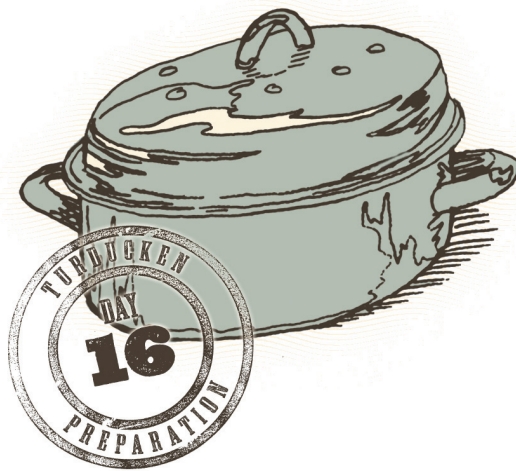
## Day 13

I go to see a man about a duck.

On the way, I remember I'm also going to need a turkey; after all, it is one-third of a turducken by syllable count.

Placed desperation call to Whole Foods. I'm in luck! They've got a nineteen-pound gobbler that is neither frozen nor chopped up. Seems I won't be making just a ducken, after all.

I meet Cody at the farmers market by Pulaski Academy. He hands over a sizable free-range duck. As requested, it is already plucked and gutted; however, nobody bothered to remove its feet. Authentically organic, but kinda creepy.



This is no time to panic, I tell myself in a panic as I race to Argenta Market and get two more chickens. During the second try, I scavenge my memory for the chef's wisdom: Start with a slice down the back, move slowly, follow the bones, don't cut through the skin, or, for that matter, your hand.

Chicken No. 2 turns out all right, so I move on to the duck. It goes swimmingly (even after I remove its creepy feet). The turkey, however, is another matter entirely. There's just so much of it! You can manhandle a duck or chicken, but by the time I've got the turkey boned out, I feel as if it had fought me the whole way. Darned uppity poultry!

Laid out before me, the three poultry carcasses are, to be quite frank, unappetizing — all that raw meat, all at once. Still, in the name of culinary science and meeting a deadline, I forge ahead.

I take the turkey and spread the cornbread stuffing over it. Put the duck on top of that and cover it with wild rice stuffing. Then the chicken, with a handful of breadcrumb stuffing on top. Hey, that was easy.

But it's not a turducken yet. Not until I wrap it all up.

It's quite the experience, bundling up nearly thirty pounds of meat and stuffing into one big, preferably turkey-shaped, package. Raw poultry is limp and slippery, and a guy's only got two hands. Still, the stuffing is just sticky enough to help bind all the parts, and with a long skewer and some kitchen twine, I manage to get it closed.

Once in the roasting pan, it looks more than halfway like a turkey. I declare a moral victory.

The proto-turducken then goes into the fridge to await its all-day date with Monty's oven.

## Day 16

Up with the sun, and the turducken is in the oven shortly after 7 a.m. I drop in every hour or so to check the internal temperature and bail out the drippings so it doesn't fry in its own oil.

When it does emerge, at about 3 o'clock, it is golden brown and sure smells good. But the true test of turducken success is on the inside. After transferring it to a platter, I grab the longest knife I've got and slice a thick slab off the front.

It's all turkey.

So I take another thick slice, and another. I don't even hit the cornbread stuffing until I'm three slices in; the duck doesn't make its appearance until the fourth.

The turkey's breasts were so substantial they pushed the rest of the contents backwards as I closed it up. I only get the legendary meat-stuffing-meat layers when I cut the turducken in half across its middle.

That done, it looks pretty darn impressive: pale turkey, yellow cornbread, darker duck, black-and-brown wild-rice stuffing, white chicken, and breadcrumb stuffing the color of khaki.

But as with pudding, the proof of the turducken is in the eating.

I put a slice on a plate, take a fork, gather a bit of each layer ... and bite.

Tastes like turkey.

Really. That's the overwhelming flavor, despite the myriad layers. The essence of the big bird has infused everything, from the cornbread stuffing to the other fowl. The

wild-rice dressing only just manages to make its presence known as a pleasant aftertaste. Even by themselves, the duck and chicken taste a bit turkey-ish.

And that's kind of an anticlimax.

To complicate matters, the whole thing is dry. No surprise, given that I took four cups of drippings out during cooking. Gravy would have helped, but I wanted the unadulterated turducken experience in that first bite.

In the end, the turducken is a bit of a letdown. All those ingredients, all that labor, all those hours in the oven, and I wind up with something neither better nor distinctly different from the turkeys I've roasted for Thanksgivings of yore.

I set down my fork and knife. I push the plate away. Time to do some dishes.

## Day 17

So, what to do now that I've done a turducken?

The practical answer is: Get rid of the thing. After all, there's close to thirty pounds of stuffed poultry sitting in the fridge. But that's okay — I'll mash some potatoes and make gravy from the drippings, then call some friends.

But what about the philosophical "what next"? What do you do when you've slain the culinary beast that's been haunting your dreams for nigh on twenty years? What, pray tell, do you do to follow a turducken?

Well, I've always liked the idea of smoking a whole hog. ...

