

# String Roasting

## EQUIPMENT

- Ceiling or mantle hook
- Two 8-inch (20-cm) skewers
- String
- Dutch oven
- Shovel

## PRIMARY VENUE

- Hearth

## ALTERNATE VENUE

- Campfire



**I**N COOKING, as in other aspects of life, the most elegant solution is often the simplest. When it comes to hearthside roasting, the elegant solution is to roast from a loop of cotton string hanging from a hook, a practice that lasted well into the nineteenth century. Today, it is only in France that the system the French call *à la ficelle*—on a string—remains more than a historical curiosity. Leg of lamb turned on a string, *gigot à la ficelle*, is a Provençal specialty, a preparation about which restaurants boast. It is also the system used by many French hunters at their country houses to roast haunch of boar and the small birds they so enjoy eating.

What is amazing about this roasting method is that, in many cases, once the loop of string is weighted down by the meat, it begins turning of its own accord. Watching the meat turn is mesmerizing. The string unwinds and then winds again, seemingly on its own power. After many minutes, it slows down, stops, hangs motionless, and then, somehow, begins turning again in the opposite direction. When, finally, the meat does stop turning, the slightest touch sets it back in motion. While I could say, “On each wind from a five-foot loop a chicken will turn for ten minutes,” the fact is that from the perception of the cook, the chicken seems to never stop turning. The barest touch keeps the system in play, and since you have to attend to roasting meat anyway—to baste it, to check the fire—you never have the sense of doing anything to keep it going. The meat seems to turn magically, silently, without help. Of all the methods of roasting before the open hearth—on a clockwork spit, on an electric spit, on a spit turned by hand, meat resting on a stand—this way is the most lyrical. When backlit by the fire in a darkened room, the bronze glow bathing the rotating meat, whatever you are roasting appears to float in front of the fire as a golden apparition.



*The Fire: A mature fire with moderate to high flames combined with a substantial bed of embers to radiate a significant amount of heat onto the hearth.*

**See page 267 for instructions on setting up the string-roasting system**, including placement of the hook, making the string handle, and making the string loop.

**After preparing the roasts, poultry, or lamb** according to one of the suggested recipes, truss them with string so they are as compact and as symmetrical as possible. String roasting requires even more attention to symmetry than other roasting methods, so truss as tightly and compactly as you can. If the looped string is not already on its hook, place it on its hook at this time.

**To position the skewers:** Set the bird or roast on a counter so it stands upright. Push a short skewer through the top and bottom thirds of the meat. On a bird, this generally means one skewer passes through the thighs and the other through the wings. The skewers should be parallel to each other, pass through the meat's center of gravity, and extend 1 to 2 inches (2.5 to 5 cm) on either side.

**To test for balance:** Take 1 string handle of the right length (see page 267) and attach it to the top skewer so you can lift the meat like a purse. When you lift the meat by this handle, it should hang vertically. If it tilts toward you or away from you, reposition the skewer and test again. If it hangs correctly, test the second skewer.

**Pour 1 cup (250 ml) water into a drip pan** and place the pan on the hearth under where the meat will spin. If you instead plan to make Vegetables in Drippings (page 140), set up a tripod and pan as described in that recipe.

**With the string still attached**, carry the meat in a bowl to the hearth. With an assistant holding the bowl, slip the string handle off one end of the skewer and pass it through the bottom of the loop that is hanging from the hook. Slip the string back over the skewer and slowly lower the bowl until the meat is hanging from the looped string. The meat should hang 6 to 8 inches (15 to 20 cm) above the hearth. If necessary, adjust the height by using a looped string of a different length. Once positioned, press the loops that hold the skewers flush against the meat and give the meat a spin to start it turning.

**How hot should the fire be?** The air at the edge of the hearth, where the meat is turning, is equivalent to the air of the oven. The hotter this air, the faster the roasting. I prefer roasting very hot. When I roast, I cannot hold my hand near the meat for

**RECIPES USING THIS METHOD INCLUDE:**

*Roasted Chicken*, 70

*Roasted Duck*, 73

*Roasted Leg of Lamb*, 108

*Roasts, Plain and Elaborate*, 110

Chinese method, dough and other foods are directly exposed to steam, usually by placing them in bamboo baskets that sit over boiling water.

## STRING ROASTING

### Recipes using this method

String-Roasted Turkey, 65

Roasted Chicken, 70

Roasted Duck, 72

Roasted Leg of Lamb, 108

Roasts, Plain and Elaborate, 110

**This is a flexible method for roasting on the hearth.** It is applicable to large meat roasts and to large birds, such as turkeys. When string roasting, the birds and meat hang from a string that is tied to a hook usually placed either in the ceiling or under the mantle. The string—either a loop of string or, for very small birds, a single strand—turns the meat with only an occasional push from the cook. For the recipes in this book, string roasting is accomplished as follows: the meat is pierced with a skewer through its short direction, a string handle is attached to one end of the skewer, passed through the bottom of the loop that hangs from the hook, and then attached to the other end of the skewer. With the meat in place, it turns in front of the fire hanging from the loop, first turning in one direction, then in the other. The string-roasting method is fully explained on page 62. What follows is technical information on how to position the hook and prepare the two required sets of strings, the one being the loop that hangs from the hook, and the other, the handle that attaches the meat to the loop.

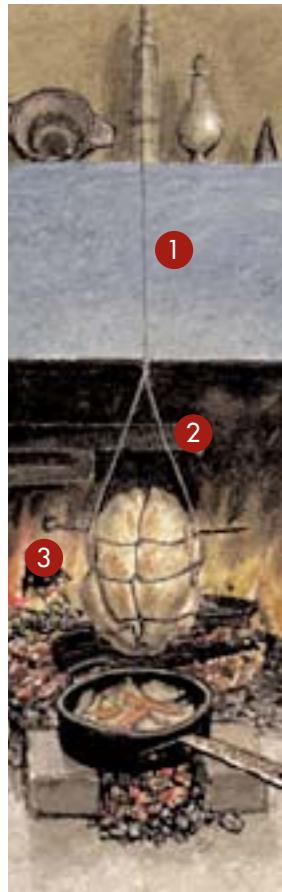
**Hook placement:** Mount a small hook in the ceiling or mantle so that it is centered over the fireplace and so that when the meat hangs in front of the fire from a string attached to the hook, the leading edge of the meat, the side that is closest to the flames, hangs exactly over the imaginary line that divides the inner hearth from the hearth extension. Because Rumford fireplaces are shallower and reflect more heat into the room than more conventional fireplaces, owners of Rumfords may need to position the hook so the meat will hang a little farther away from the fire.

The longer the string, the longer the meat will turn without being given a push by the cook. Therefore, the ceiling is the ideal location for the hook. However, the position of the mantle may preclude a ceiling hook because the string must clear the mantle by 1 inch (2.5 cm). Some mantles will push the meat too far from the fire; if this is the case, place the hook on the underside of the mantle.

**The string:** Use only natural-fiber string. In addition to length, the thinness of the string influences the length of time the meat will turn before needing a little push. A 12-pound (5.5-kg) turkey hanging from a loop of thin rope 5 feet (1.5 m) long turns for a little more than 1 minute, while the same bird hanging from kitchen string of the same length turns for 10 minutes. Therefore, use the thinnest string that will handle the weight.

**The loop:** Make two loops, one out of household string for a turkey and heavy roasts, and one out of kite string or No. 10 crochet yarn for chickens and smaller roasts. When stretched taut, the looped string should hang 2 to 6 inches (5 to 15 cm) below the top of the fireplace opening. The loop can be reused.

**The handle:** Think of the handle in terms of the handle of a shoulder bag. In this case, the handle is made of string and has a loop on each end. I would start by making a set of four string handles, one 12, 18, 20, and 22 inches (30, 45, 50, and 55 cm) in length when stretched out—including the knotted loop on each end. The loop on each end should be big enough to easily slip over the end of the skewer, about 1 inch (2.5 cm). The bottom of the meat should hang about 8 inches



- 1 Loop
- 2 Handle
- 3 Skewer

(20 cm) above the hearth. Through experimentation, you will determine the length of string-handle appropriate to your fireplace and to what you are cooking. A turkey, for example, will require a much shorter string-handle than a Cornish game hen. The handles can be reused.

**Note:** *String roasting is usually the most practical method for roasting more than one of something, two roasts, three chickens, five ducks, twenty-five quail. This is accomplished by hanging a stick from the hook, and then hanging the roasts, chickens, etc., from strings tied to the stick.*

## TILE BAKING

### Recipe using this method

*Tile-Baked Breads, 174*

**This is a bread-baking method that is poorly documented.** The concept is simple: place terra-cotta tiles in the fireplace until they glow dull red, then remove them to the hearth, and when they have sufficiently cooled, stack them sandwiched with dough, and bake until the breads are cooked. This method makes it possible to bake large quantities of bread without an oven in what amounts to waste heat, the heat of the fireplace fire that would otherwise be lost up the chimney. There is an archeological record of bread baking on tiles that goes back at least to a Babylonian excavation of 1750 B.C. I have seen a documentary showing people of the Omo tribe in Ethiopia baking breads by surrounding hot rocks with dough, a method that would not leave an archeological record. Besides baking in ash (see Ash Cakes, page 158) and on griddles or in pots (see *Les Galettes de Sarasin*, page 172, and Irish Soda Bread, page 170), how did people in isolated European farmhouses without bread ovens bake bread when snowed in during the winter? Was the technique of baking bread between hot tiles, a method still practiced on special occasions in a small region in northern Italy, practiced elsewhere in Europe?