

# Turkey in the Hole

By Liz Crain

On the day of our second Thanksgiving in Portland, it was cold and rainy. I was slightly feverish from an early flu, and my boyfriend Tyler and I were preparing to entertain a house full of friends.

The turkey was brining in a stockpot and all the other holiday foods—garlic cheese grits, stewed green beans, buttery sage stuffing, fried pickles—were ready to be cooked as folks arrived.

Seeing that everything was in order, I settled down for a quick nap, only to wake up to a horrible, house-filling stench.

In the kitchen I found Tyler inspecting the stove, the cause of the olfactory assault. “I can’t find anything but it must be a mouse,” he said, craning his head around inside the oven.

For the better part of an hour we scrubbed every surface of that old gas stove, inside and out. We turned it on again. It still reeked.

Tyler returned with a car jack and cranked up the stove right there in the kitchen. Like a fiendish mechanic, he took it apart, tearing out every last bit of yellow, mouse-burrowed insulation from within, scattering rodent grenades (read: mouse droppings) all the while.

We scrubbed again and Tyler reassembled the stove. With fingers crossed, we turned the knob. The house was bombed yet again with the same knee-weakening stench.

This is when Tyler set his sights on the backyard.

With our friends due to start arriving any moment, I rummaged for incense to mask the malodorous morning. After striking through all my matches, I found Tyler in the backyard, feverishly digging a hole right where I had planted my garlic.

## New rule: no birds in the house.

I registered the destruction, let out a cry, and ran to salvage the 30 or so upturned garlic cloves, each green with inch-long sprouts.

As I quickly replanted, Tyler scanned for an alternate cooking site. That’s when he saw the crucible. At the time, Tyler was working at a local artisan glass factory and had taken home a spent crucible—the open vessel in which glass is melted. We had been using it as a backyard fire pit for several months and he immediately recognized its bird-roasting potential.

Would you believe me if I told you that that Thanksgiving we cooked a 12-pound turkey, wrapped several times in aluminum foil and placed directly on a wood fire, in 45 minutes? It’s the wing-flapping truth. (As for all the other food, we borrowed a neighbor’s small convection oven and made do with that.)

The turkey, cooked in all its juices, was to this day the best turkey I’ve ever tasted. It was juicy, tender, and just slightly smoky.

After that, the tradition was firmly established—outdoor turkey-in-the-hole every year.



The backyard hobbit oven.

LIZ CRAIN PHOTO

The following Thanksgiving we did just that, but we also cooked a goose in our new gas oven. Our roasting pan was too shallow for the goose fat, however, and with a kitchen full of guests, the oven caught fire. Someone grabbed a bag of flour, someone else a box of baking soda. The flames were smothered and the goose was salvaged, but the kitchen was a bomb site.

We now have a simple rule: no birds in the house.

Last Thanksgiving, with a forecast of stormy weather and more than 20 guests invited for dinner, Tyler got creative. He spent a day in his shop fabricating a low-carbon-steel outdoor turkey oven with hinged doors and a chimney on top. Although it is still essentially turkey-in-the-hole (the bottom of the stove is open and sits over a fire pit) it is now a come-hell-or-high-water operation.

It did rain last Thanksgiving. It rained a lot, in fact, so the backyard hobbit-oven (the soil on top of it is now covered in grass) saved our feast. While the house filled up with friends and non-bird dishes made their way in and out of the oven, Tyler and a friend shucked oysters on the back porch and kept an eagle eye on the turkeys.

Despite a holiday disaster in the making six years ago, every Thanksgiving since then has been, as a direct result, all the more memorable. And who knows, with talk of extending the hobbit-oven’s chimney into a chamber for smoking, perhaps this year as we sit down to Thanksgiving dinner we’ll have turkey jerky to go with our turkey-in-the-hole.



Portland writer Liz Crain is a frequent contributor to *Northwest Palate*.