



## FINGER-LICKING WHAT?

ONE WOMAN'S  
BRAVE FIGHT  
TO OVERCOME HER FEAR  
OF CHICKEN TARTARE

**I**'ve always had a troubled relationship with chicken. ■ Before the poultry enthusiasts in the audience start throwing (free-range) eggs, I should clarify: I have nothing against the bird in its live, feathered state. My distaste is reserved for dead, bald chickens. I can't even claim ethical concerns about the method of execution, because the root of my disgust is purely selfish. And it has a name: salmonella. ■ A bit of background: My mother is not what anyone would call an imaginative cook. Awesomely responsible? Yes. Enthusiastic? Not so much. Mom prepared

all those childhood dinners because she loved us, but also because she suspected (correctly) that if she didn't, my brother and I would simply forget to eat.

And so she developed a repertoire of dishes that were reasonably easy and largely inoffensive to unadventurous palates. We ate a lot of chicken: baked in the winter, grilled in the summer. And while I can't remember much about the food, one image is burned into my memory: My mother, submerging raw chicken into a marinade with the terrified deference usually associated with enriched uranium.

Once, just once, I offered to assist in the dinner preparations. I must have picked up one of the paper towels she'd used to transfer the raw chicken to a plate.

"Stop!" My mother's voice rang out. "Do. Not. Touch. Anything." It was a command that did not invite dissent. I felt a lurch of panic. Had a shard of glass lodged near my carotid artery? Was a tarantula inching across my back? "Throw. That. Away. And. Wash. Your. Hands."

I spent the next 25 years assiduously avoiding contact with raw chicken. When I was a guest in a home unfettered by an irrational fear of poultry, I would subject my dinner to painstaking dissection, examining the meat for any hint of pink.

I continued in this grim manner until a few weeks ago, when I happened upon a class offering at The Chopping Block in Lincoln Square: "Chicken 101: A Totally Hands-On Experience." Or, as I came to call it: "One Night. Three Chickens. And Four Hundred Hand Washings."

It wasn't until two weeks later, surrounded by stainless-steel appliances and butcher-block tables, elbow-deep in uncooked poultry, that I entertained second thoughts. I cringed slightly as I rubbed a concoction of macerated garlic, salt, pepper and olive oil into (and under) the yellowish skin of a very raw chicken.

As I massaged billions of virulent bacteria with my bare hands, Brett, our chef-instructor, circled the tables, gently correcting our technique and dodging errant splatters; assistants Devlan and Tobin had tackled the dirty work for us, stocking our stations with cleaned birds, plus butter,

cream and fresh herbs.

Our four-person crew glowed with pride as we maneuvered our brilliantly seasoned Greek-Style Roasted Chicken into the oven. The rest of the group got back to work cutting a giant pile of leeks, but I, overcome by the implications of my raw-chicken handling, was lost in a fantasy involving a witty iteration of myself, dinner guests and perfectly roasted, 100 percent salmonella-free chicken.

Reality reasserted itself when I remembered that a) I am never witty at my own parties because I'm worried about the candles starting a house fire and b) maybe I was getting ahead of myself given that I was less than a third of the way through my first cooking class and had yet to conquer Chicken Fricassee with White Wine, Cream and Tarragon, or Mushroom, Spinach and Leek-Stuffed Chicken Roulade.

Initially, when Brett announced she would demonstrate "butterflying" the chicken for the "roulade," I was impressed by her ability to form a sentence using made-up words. But "butterflying" is apparently an actual process, in which a chicken breast is cut from the side, and opened to create a flat, butterfly-shaped piece. It's then pounded, lined with cheese and/or vegetables, and rolled up. Voila! Roulade, ready for the oven.

Our final dish, a fricassee—bubbling with cream—is the perfect dish to eat on a cold winter's night, preferably in the company of someone whose arteries can take a beating. The final result looks like a hearty stew, but the beginning looks like a pan of sad, sizzling chicken thighs. We're searing, Brett tells us, a technique that should only be attempted using oils with high "smoke points"—that can withstand high temperatures before burning. (This does not include olive oil, which has co-starred, alongside extremely high heat, in my many culinary failures/kitchen fires.)

Hours later, we pulled the last bird from the oven and sat down to eat. Maybe it was fatigue, or raging hunger. Whatever it was, I totally forgot to scrutinize my dinner. I just stuffed it into my mouth. And it was the best darn chicken I've ever had. □

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