

Roasting a Chicken, One Sense at a Time

BY RUSS PARSONS

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A celebrated food writer and columnist at the *LA Times* for over 25 years, Russ Parsons is also the author of *How to Read a French Fry* and *How to Pick a Peach*. For this issue of chef Thomas Keller's glossy food magazine, Parsons thoughtfully deconstructs the kitchen process of a supremely mindful cook.

Here are the basic instructions for roasting a chicken: season the chicken; roast at 450 degrees for one hour. It's that simple. You could probably program a robot to do it. But any good cook will recognize that there's a lot missing. During preparation of almost any dish, there are hundreds of variables that come into play. Noticing them is the difference between being a good cook and being a machine that performs certain tasks.

And noticing them means being aware of what is going on in your kitchen on many levels. It means being engaged with what you are doing with all of your senses. It means paying attention to what you're smelling, what you're seeing, even what you're hearing. So put away your cellphone. Turn off the TV. Facebook will wait. Focus on what you're doing. Be aware. What does the food look like? What does it smell like? How does it sound? These are all important hints the dish is giving you. File the information away and remember it next time.

Not only will doing this make you a better cook, it'll make your time in the kitchen more enjoyable. By paying attention to your senses, and calling on your collected experiences of cooking, you'll be working

intuitively rather than just following orders from some dumb recipe. You'll more fully appreciate cooking as a process, not a chore.

If all of this sounds a little far out, let's go back to that chicken.

I like to salt my chicken a day before it's going to be cooked. I allow a tablespoon of salt for every five pounds of weight. But to tell you the truth, I don't remember the last time I actually measured. I can recognize the right amount of salt by the way it looks—like the chicken has been coated with a very light frost, maybe a little bit more over the thigh and breast, where the meat is thickest.

One of the things that's important to getting a crisp, well-browned chicken is having it well-dried before cooking. The refrigerator is great for this if you leave it uncovered for an hour or so. You'll know when you run your finger over the skin and it feels slightly stiff and papery rather than supple.

When you're checking on the bird while it's roasting, the first thing you'll probably notice is the smell. There's a perfume to a roasting chicken that is sweet and mellow. If the oven is too hot and the skin starts to scorch, you'll notice that smell turning acrid and harsh.

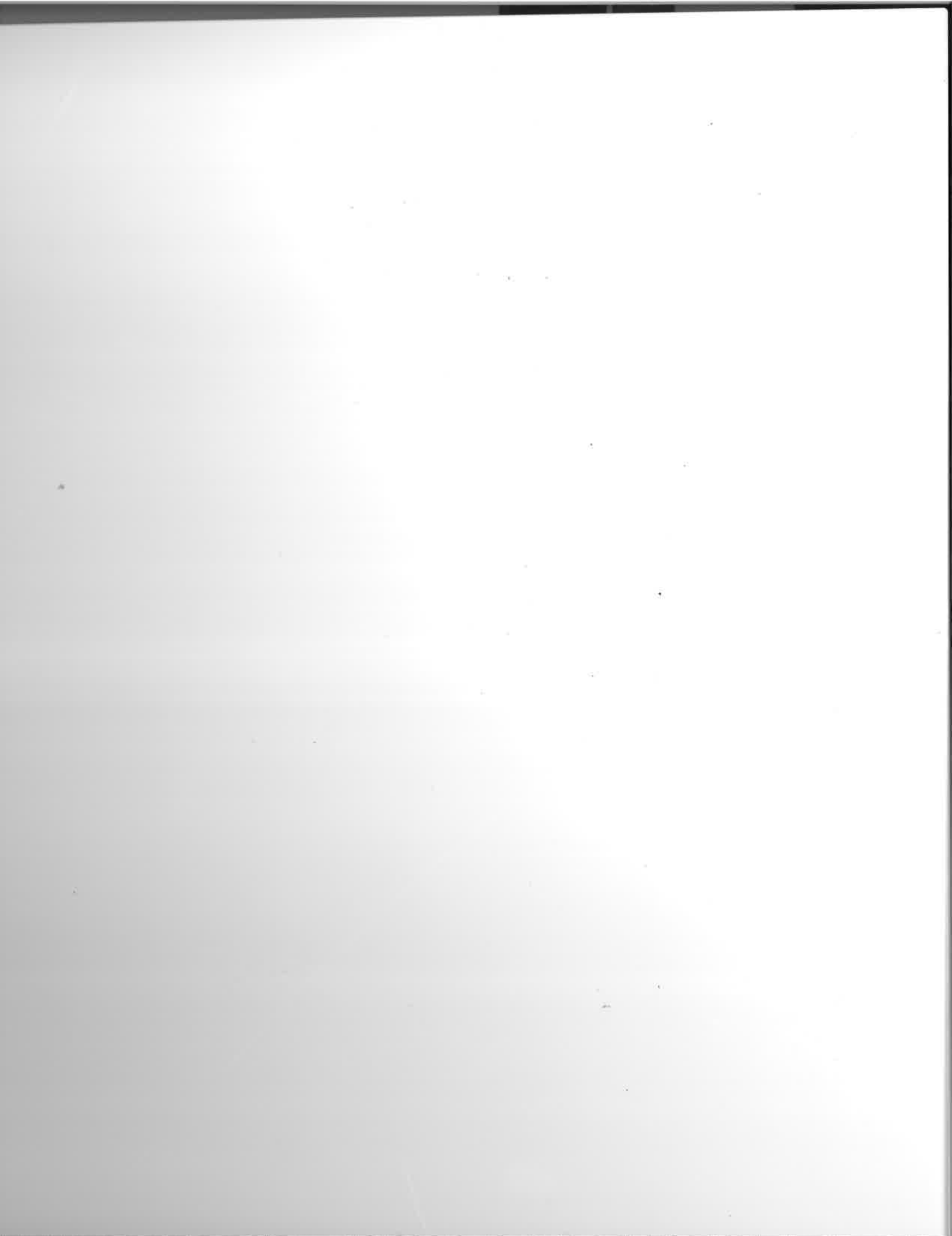
After 10 to 15 minutes of cooking, the skin will start blistering; that's the predecessor to browning. It'll start on the breasts and legs and gradually move into skin around the joints. That's how you know when you need to turn it to get the most even color.

Listen to the bird. That's a sense that isn't usually associated with cooking, but it can give you important clues as well. During the early roasting, you'll hear the rendered fat sputtering happily in the roasting pan. But at a certain point, usually around the 45-minute mark, the tone will change when the chicken starts to release its juices. The bubbles will come closer together and they'll be snappier, angrier almost.

That's the first tip-off that the chicken is almost done.

Now, grab a drumstick and wiggle it. Before the chicken is done, it will feel stiff and resist a twist. When it's done, the ligaments will have loosened enough that it will move more easily. You'll probably also notice that the skin has started to pull away from the bone and the "heel" of the drumstick. That's another good clue.

Now, just to be safe, you'll probably also want to be taking the temperature from time to time with an instant-read thermometer. But



when you plunge it into the thigh near the hip joint, notice the resistance and how the probe slides more easily into the muscle as it gets closer to done.

And that's just a roast chicken!

Think about it, and I'm sure you'll come up with hundreds of ways your senses are tipping you off if you'll only pay attention.

Smell, of course, is a key sense in the kitchen. It tells you when the nuts and grains you're toasting have hit the perfect golden note. It lets you know when pastry has browned. When the raw alcohol has burned off of a sauce.

And touch, too. You can feel the spatula scraping the fond from the bottom of the pan when you're deglazing a sauce. You can tell when a steak is done by pressing it with your finger or when a piece of meat is not done browning by the way it sticks to the pan and resists turning. When you are making jam, you can feel the change in viscosity as the fruit starts to jell. How would we ever make bread, pasta or pastry dough if we couldn't feel that perfect moment when it just comes together, baby smooth?

Still, smell and touch are obvious. For the most part, we're aware of them and take them into consideration already. But what about sound? How often have you paid attention to what you're hearing (or should be hearing) in the kitchen?

One of the surest signs rice is ready for broth to be added when you're making risotto is that it will make a light "singing" sound when it is stirred. Along the same lines, you can tell when pilaf rice is almost done because you don't hear the water bubbling the same way.

When you're whipping egg whites or heavy cream, pay attention to the sound the whisk makes when it scrapes against the bowl; it will be muffled and softer as the eggs or cream thickens.

There's that crackling sound meat makes when it has browned and is ready to turn. Or the soft susurrant when butter starts foaming and it's time to add the eggs for an omelet.

The list goes on. The "crackle" bread makes when it comes out of the oven. The change in volume and timing of the bubbles in jam as it jells. The "ping" of a properly sealed jar of preserves. The change in sizzle when you're deep-frying as the moisture reduces in the crust. The

slightly muffled sound of a mortar and pestle when pesto or aioli starts to come together.

All of these things together, if you pay attention to them, add up to what we call intuition—that ability to sense what is about to happen in the kitchen before it actually happens. The way you know without looking that that tart crust has reached the right stage of brown, how you know from another room that that chicken is about to be roasted.

It's funny when you think about it. Your food is always talking to you when you're cooking. All you have to do is listen.

