

# TWICE-COOKED DUCK

BY JACK BISHOP • COOK'S ILLUSTRATED • SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 1995

**Bruce Cost demonstrates a two-step Chinese method that draws the fat out of a duck by steaming and then crisps the skin by roasting.**

"Westerners still cook duck like the cavemen, by basically putting the duck in a fire," says author, restaurateur, and Asian food expert Bruce Cost. "The Chinese take advantage of the layer of fat on a duck to affect the skin and meat. Their technique is much more sophisticated."

Anyone who has roasted a duck and filled the kitchen with thick smoke understands Cost's point. Roasting will eventually render most of the fat, but too often at the price of charred skin and meat that has lost all of its moisture.

"In the West, we often treat duck just like chicken, but they are really very different," says Cost, who runs two Bay Area restaurants, Ginger Island in Berkeley and the Ginger Club in Palo Alto. Cost employs a two-step Chinese technique that uses steam to melt away the fat, followed by a short roasting period to crisp the skin. Cost says that, unlike Peking Duck, this preparation emphasizes both the skin and meat.

## Season, Then Steam

Cost starts by seasoning the skin and inside cavity of the duck (see illustration 1, below). The recipe that follows relies on a traditional Chinese spice combination although other variations, including Western seasonings, are possible. (See "Alternative Flavors" to right, for suggestions.) The toasted spices are combined with salt and half of this mixture is rubbed on the duck. The other half is served with the cooked duck.

After rubbing the duck with the spice mixture, the next step is to let the bird dry and "cure" slightly. In traditional Chinese kitchens, this would involve hanging the duck to air-dry for up to a day. Cost uses a simpler technique. He places a rack on top of a deep roasting pan and then rests the duck on the rack (fig. 2 next page). As long as the pan is fairly deep, plenty of air will circulate underneath the duck, causing the skin to dry out and become highly seasoned with the spice mixture. Four hours is the minimum time that Cost allows for drying; overnight is the maximum.

The next step is steaming. A 16-inch / 30 cm wok or large Dutch oven fitted with a rack are the best options. The duck is placed on the rack above the boiling water (fig. 3 next page). After about one hour, the skin becomes taut as the fat underneath melts into the simmering water

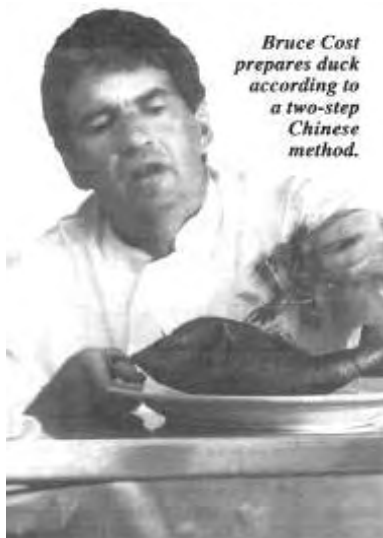
below. When the skin begins to pull away from the joints on the wing (fig. 4 next page), the meat is fully cooked. "The best part about steaming is that it causes the seasonings to melt into the meat, basting the bird with flavor," says Cost. "Steaming also makes the meat very tender and juicy." Losing most of the fatty layer beneath the skin is an added benefit.

## Smoke If Desired, Then Roast

Cost's next step is to cool the steamed duck and to brush the skin with dark soy sauce to help give it a better color when it is roasted. At this point, the duck can be wrapped in plastic and refrigerated overnight. To prepare an elegant weeknight dinner, simply pull the duck from the refrigerator, roast it for thirty-five minutes, and serve.

Those who wish to may also smoke the duck before it is roasted, an intermediate step that adds a somewhat different character to the duck (see "Adding Smoky Flavor" to right). With or without the smoking step, the final part of this technique is quick-roasting at a high heat to brown and crisp the skin and heat the meat through. Cost says to let the duck cool to room temperature after steaming (or smoking) and before placing it in the hot oven. "If duck is at room temperature, the oven heat hits the skin and crisps it right up."

As soon as the skin is brown and sizzling, you should remove the duck from the oven, cover it with foil, and allow it to rest for ten to twenty minutes before carving. Carve the duck into small pieces according to the Chinese method outlined in the illustrations on the next page.



*Bruce Cost prepares duck according to a two-step Chinese method.*

## ADDING SMOKY FLAVOR

"Smoking this duck is definitely optional, but it gives the bird a nice flavor," says author and restaurateur Bruce Cost. To accomplish this, Cost lines a large wok or Dutch oven with aluminum foil and places 3/4 cup / 180 ml of raw white rice and six tablespoons each of black tea and sugar in the bottom of the pan. He sets the steamed duck (brushed with soy sauce) on a rack above the mixture and then covers the inside of the lid with foil, crimping the bottom and top pieces of foil together to seal in the duck and protect the pan from burning.

Cost turns the heat to high and waits for smoke to appear. He smokes the duck for ten minutes, turns off the heat, and leaves the wok covered for thirty to forty minutes, depending on how much smoke flavor he wants to impart. At this point, the smoked duck can be cooled, wrapped in plastic, and refrigerated for a day before roasting and serving. Since the smoking step is merely for flavor (steaming and roasting do the cooking), you can smoke the duck for as much or as little time as you want. The times that Cost recommends will give the duck a lightly smoky flavor with a nice hint of sweetness.

## ALTERNATIVE FLAVORS

Bruce Cost often varies the seasonings used to cure the duck. Here are some recommendations for other mixtures, but feel free to make up your own.

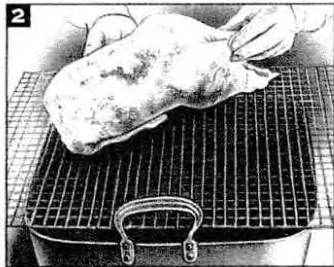
**Rosemary-Sage Salt:** Mix 2 tablespoons each minced fresh rosemary leaves and sage leaves with 2 tablespoons kosher salt and 2 teaspoons ground black pepper. Rub half the mixture over outside and inside cavity of duck; reserve other half for use at table. Place fresh rosemary sprigs in cavity instead of ginger and cilantro.

**Three-Seed Salt:** Toast 1 tablespoon each cumin, coriander, and fennel seeds in dry skillet until they start to smoke. Grind toasted seeds and combine with 2 tablespoons kosher salt. Rub half the mixture over outside and inside cavity of duck; reserve other half for use at table. Place fresh ginger and cilantro leaves in cavity as in master recipe.

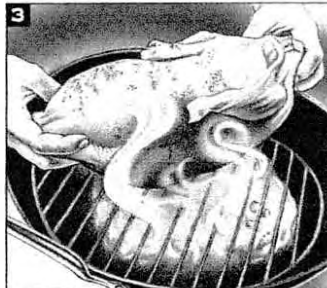
## PREPARING STEAMED/ROASTED DUCK



1. Rub half of the seasoned salt mixture over the skin and inside cavity of the duck.



2. Set a rack on top of a deep roasting pan. Place the duck on top, making sure that air can circulate underneath. Set the duck aside in a cool, airy place for 4 hours to dry out the skin and allow the seasonings to penetrate.



3. Set a rack in a large, 16-inch wok or a wide, deep pot. Fill the bottom with water and bring it to a boil. Place the duck back side up on rack, making sure the duck rests one inch above the water.



4. After the duck has steamed for fifty or sixty minutes, the skin will become taut. Look at the wing to see if it has steamed long enough. The skin should have started to pull away from joints, and the meat will be exposed.

## TWICE-COOKED DUCK WITH ASIAN FLAVORINGS

Serves 4

As an alternative to the spice mixture that appears in this recipe, you could serve the duck with hoisin sauce and Asian pancakes or steamed white buns. If you go with the seasonings provided here, serve the duck with vegetables in a Western-style meal. Those who do not have kosher salt can substitute one tablespoon of regular table salt.

- 1 duck (about 4 1/2 pounds), thawed, rinsed, and patted dry (reserve giblets for other use)
- 4 whole star anise
- 2 teaspoons Szechuan (or black) peppercorns
- 1 small cinnamon stick or 1 large piece cassia bark
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt
- 4 thick slices unpeeled ginger
- 1 cup fresh cilantro leaves
- 1 teaspoon dark soy sauce

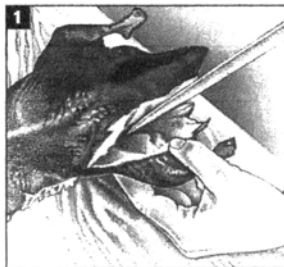
1. Toast star anise, peppercorns, and cassia bark / cinnamon stick in dry skillet just until they start to smoke. Grind in spice mill and combine with salt. Rub half the mixture over outside and inside cavity of duck (see illustration 1 above). Set aside remaining mixture.
2. Place ginger slices and cilantro in duck cavity. Set duck on rack above roasting pan and leave uncovered in cool, airy place for at least 4 hours or overnight (illustration 2 above).

3. Bring several inches of water to boil in large, 16-inch / 30 cm wok or wide, deep pot fitted with rack one inch / 2.5 cm above water level. Place duck, back side up on rack (illustration 3 above). Cover pot and steam over high heat, adding more boiling water if necessary, until skin becomes taut and starts to pull away from joints on wings, 50 to 60 minutes (illustration 4 above).
4. Cool to room temperature and brush skin with soy sauce. (Duck

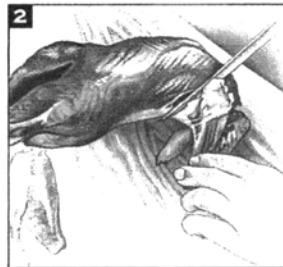
can be wrapped in plastic and refrigerated up to 1 day. Bring to room temperature before roasting.)

5. Heat oven to 400°F / 200°C. Place duck on rack inside roasting pan. Roast until skin is crisp and quite brown, 35 to 40 minutes. Remove from oven, cover with foil, and let rest for 10 to 20 minutes. Carve, following illustrations below. Serve, using reserved portion of spice mixture as seasoned salt.

## CARVING DUCK, CHINESE STYLE



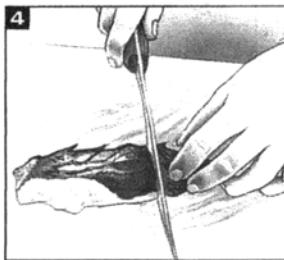
1. Cut off the wings at the third joint to separate them from the body; split the wings at the joints if desired.



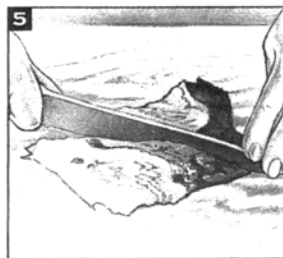
2. Cut around the legs, probing into the thigh joint with a knife to pop out the leg. Cut the thigh joint to remove leg and thigh in one piece.



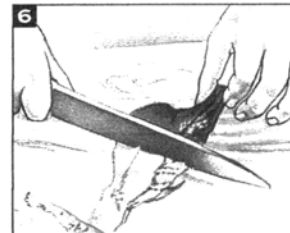
3. Hold the leg/thigh piece by the drumstick and cut through the joint between them. Split the thigh into two pieces and slice the meat off the drumstick.



4. Slice between the back and breast and then along the side of the breastbone to peel off the entire breast in one piece.



5. Slice the breast crosswise into three or four pieces. Repeat this process with the other breast.



6. Turn the duck over and split the backbone down the middle. Cut each side into three pieces containing crisp skin and pockets of "oyster" meat for nibbling.