



Podcast Script
Season 1 / Episode 13 -
[Brining / Understanding Your Spice Cabinet / Systems that Help You Control Your Environment]
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Introduction

Hello chefs, today we talk brining poultry, understanding your spice cabinet, and systems that help you control your environment. I am Mark Grigsby, your chef and guide through this experience, and this.. Is the IncrEDIBLE Discourse.

UPDATE / INTRODUCTION

A quick update before we get started on what we've been up to..

So a couple of weeks ago I started doing youtube shorts to promote the show. I started out doing a bit called "hard truths" to promote the show and had some pretty good success. So over the last few weeks I have started doing different categories as kind of a spin off to the episodes for the show. If you haven't seen them yet, check them out.. Some of them are kinda funny, all of them are really informative. My wife and my mom say my hair looks funny.. Comment on them and let me know.. I think the hair is amazing... it's my signature look lol.

Also the resources page on the website is now up and going. It takes a lot to produce those pages, but it's packed with information. I feel like, for a free resource, it gives a lot of information in one place. A lot of it may or may not be common knowledge, but the goal was to create a foundational piece to refer to help you grow.. Or at least reinforce the basics. I also created a PDF version that gives you all of the information in a downloadable document in case you want to have a hard copy of this information. So if you get a chance to check those out, let me know what you think.. Or if you have a suggestion or if there is a resource you'd like to see, drop me a comment and share your thoughts.

Anyhow.. So today I wanted to continue on with poultry. 2 weeks ago we talked about breaking down the whole bird and the benefits of doing so. This week.. I wanna talk about brining poultry and why that's important. It's a simple method, but has a huge impact on your product. According to multiple online sources, chicken and poultry in general is the second most consumed protein in the entire world, so let's make that shit taste good. Our second segment today will be about understanding your spice cabinet and touch on how you can use these relatively inexpensive ingredients to transform basic cooking into next level,

restaurant quality dishes. We'll tie that back into the brine, as in most brines we lean on that spice cabinet.

For my pros.. We're going to be talking about systems.. What they are and what their purpose is. Restaurant systems help keep the routine in tact, track costs and keep them down, track inventory and a bunch of other things. Not every single restaurant has the same exact systems that do the same as the next restaurant. Today we will go over the most common systems, how they work and why if used properly they keep you on track.. And your head above water.

So without further ado.. Let's get this show on the road.

So I suppose to be fair we should define what a brine is and then go on from there. Brining is the process of soaking meat in a solution of salt and water (sometimes with sugar, spices, or aromatics) and can be done as a wet brine or dry brine.

So why do we do it? And that too is a fair question. We do it for 3 main reasons. The number one reason I think is to retain moisture. Salt changes the protein structure in the meat, allowing it to absorb and retain more liquid. During the cooking process, brined poultry loses less water.. Meaning it stays juicy even if it's slightly overcooked.

And this is true.. I know that when I did my first couple of thanksgiving turkeys.. Before my culinary life started.. It felt like such a chore. The first one.. I was younger and my focus was more about getting stuff out on the table on time and looking good. The bird was slightly overcooked and by the time it was carved and hit the plate it was dry.. And I could tell my guests knew it because there was a ton of turkey leftover and ZERO gravy left..

So.. the next year when I did the bird I became borderline obsessive.. I pretty much stood next to the oven the last 30-45 minutes with a thermometer in hand checking compulsively.. And then in the end started questioning everything because the timer went off but the bird wasn't done.. I realized that it took longer because I kept opening and closing the oven to check it and let the heat out every time.. By the time it got hot again I was already opening it to check once more. Rookies.

So let's fast forward.. I go to culinary school I'm working constantly and I don't do thanksgiving for a long time.. BUT by then I learned the power of brining.. Paid some attention to the thanksgiving dinners and how they were prepared on the occasions that I actually could attend and realized where I had gone wrong those times in the past. Now I brine my bird every year and it's delicious. I get the crispiest skin.. The juiciest bird.. Almost to a point where I don't even need a gravy. Almost.. My gravy is pretty fuckin banging in my opinion. But this process is easy.. And anyone can do it. Evidently it took me time to learn and discover it on my own.. But I'm going to give you guys the tip.

Brine your poultry. All of it. Turkey, chicken, squab, fowl.. A brine always does justice to your birds.

The second reason why we brine our birds is because it enhances the flavor. I think this is a pretty obvious one, but can be expanded so much more. Salt travels into the meat, seasoning it beneath the surface. Aromatics like ginger, garlic, citrus and herbs can gently infuse flavor into the muscle. And a brine doesn't have like a set recipe. There's really just one ingredient that you need whether it's a wet brine or dry brine and that's salt.

In my restaurants for a long time running now, I have religiously brined my chicken wings. When I first began doing this I was pickle brining them.. This was an amazing way to showcase such a simple ingredient and went along with the concept of the restaurant. One of our signature beverages was the pickle-back... you know the shot of irish whiskey and a chaser of pickle juice.. If you have never had one of those.. And you like pickles.. You should indulge yourself. It is really an amazing combination. Some say we were the first bar in Miami to come up with and feature this pairing a long time ago...

Anyway.. The wings were brined for 24 hours in pickle juice and then fried in the deep fryer naked until the skin crisped up nicely and were juicy as shit on the inside. I sold a huge amount of these wings without any sauce at all.. Just salt and pepper dusted.. That's how good they were.

Now.. many years later.. I still brine my chicken wings in every restaurant I feature them in.. although the brine has changed to more of a spicy brine. Now I use a combination of vinegar, water and scotch bonnet peppers with a ton of aromatics and spices to create a different, just as flavorful wing. But the premise is still there... the brine. And that little story leads me to the last reason why we brine our poultry...

It improves the texture.

Brining poultry gives the skin of the bird that nice crispy outside that traps the moisture inside of the meat. That bite of crispy and contrasting soft and juicy is one of the best bites as far as texture goes that there is when executed correctly. For leaner cuts like the breast, brining prevents them from going dry which is a typical characteristic of those particular cuts... brining results in a tender, succulent bite every single time. I myself am not a breast kinda guy.. I always find it to be chewy and dry.. So I tend to always go for the thigh.. But a brined breast is truly amazing. If I know that the bird has been brined.. I'll eat a breast any time. It really is that good.

So let's break down the science behind the brining process so that we can get a better idea of what we're actually doing. Salt dissolves myosin and partially denatures it. What is myosin? Myosin is a motor protein that generates movement within cells. Basically Myosin is a protein that makes up muscle fibers in meat — like chicken, turkey, pork, etc.

Think of it like the ropey structure inside muscle tissue. It's responsible for muscle movement when animals are alive, and after they're processed, it's what gives meat its firm texture. So when you brine your poultry, The salt dissolves some of this myosin, loosening the muscle fibers

causing the meat to become tender. When we “denature” it.. It means to change its shape.. Similar to how heat scrambles an egg.. When this myosin gets denatured by salt it uncoils and opens up, creating tiny gaps and channels.. In these gaps and channels water and flavor becomes trapped making the meat juicy and flavorful.

So instead of staying tight and squeezing all of the natural juices out when you cook the meat.. Brined poultry holds onto moisture and makes the meat taste seasoned all the way through.

Basically... salt helps the bird hold its juices by softening its muscle fibers.

Brining dates back thousands of years likely with early civilizations using salt to preserve food way before refrigeration existed. The earliest records show salting and brining were used to preserve meats and fish in ancient mesopotamia. China and Egypt used salt solutions, like a brine, to preserve everything from meats to vegetables and get this.. Even mummies. The romans pickled and brined fish and meat as a common practice and roman soldiers often carried these items with them on long campaigns.

Originally, brining was a method of preservation and extending the life of food in pre-refrigeration times. By the middle ages, brining evolved from a food storage technique into a flavor and texture enhancement.. Particularly in Europe where it became used for many things like pork & sausages, poultry and fish. In colonial America, households often had brining barrels for storing pork, poultry and game meats.

Today in the modern kitchen, brining shifted from survival to strategic cooking for moisture retention, flavor infusion and better texture. It's a deliberate step used by chefs and home cooks to elevate lean meats like chicken, turkey and pork.. All of which tend to dry out when cooked.

So let's go through a basic wet brine formula and then expand a little bit on where you could go with it. Then we'll touch on how long you should brine different types of meats so you get an idea of the process in its entirety.

A typical basic brine, that doesn't offer a variation in flavor, but just does the job of keeping your bird moist with crispy skin is this simple:

¼C of salt

1 quart or 4 cups of water

Literally that's it. And it's more of a ratio than a recipe.. For every 4 cups of water.. Or quart of water.. You need ¼ cup of kosher salt. And it must be kosher salt, it cannot be table salt. Table salt is more dense, meaning you need more which will oftentimes leave your meat salty. There is such a thing as too much salt in this ratio. Stick to this ratio and you'll be a winner every time.

Now to enhance this basic ratio or recipe is quite really up to you. You can flavor this however you want to.. I think my only suggestion would be to think about your entire dish as a whole and create your brine recipe. You wouldn't wanna add caribbean flavors if you're making a classic

american southern style dish.. Or maybe you would.. Maybe you're creating a fusion dish and using this brine to enhance certain flavors.. I don't know.. It's really up to you and what you're going for and what you're trying to create. Some suggestions I have for brines that are kinda universal components in just about every brine would items like.. Smashed garlic cloves, bay leaves, black peppercorns, lemon peels, vinegar and tons of herbs.. All different ones... parsley, rosemary and thyme are go tos for brines. They infuse so much flavor without overpowering your end dish.

Another tip for brining that I have is boiling the brine. This isn't a necessary step at all, but I have found in my experience that boiling the brine somewhat concentrates it. I usually cut the water amount in half, add all of my ingredients, bring it to a boil and then cut it off immediately as it comes to that boil. I then add the other half of the water in ice form so that it rapidly cools the brine. You wanna make sure that the brine is at least room temp before adding your bird.. And always refrigerate while brining.

And that's the basic brine.. But there are so many other ways to brine poultry. Buttermilk brine, sweet tea brine and cola brine are staples in american southern cuisine and then there are brines that are made with cider or beer where the acids in the solutions tenderize the meat.

So you've gotten this far and you got the motor going in your head and ready to brine the shit out of some bird... but there is one question we haven't covered yet.. And that's how long should I brine my bird??

And this is an important question. Different birds take different times for brining. But for today's episode we're going to stick to the most common birds, turkey and chicken. I'll include a chart in the downloadable resource and on the resource page of the website that will list all of the poultry and their brining times... but for whole bird chicken you should brine your birds for 4-6 hours. This will allow the brine to penetrate the bird all the way through, ensuring a juicy bird from skin to bone. Now for chicken parts, it would be a little less. Like, 1-2 hours. Since the bird is broken down, it takes less time for the brine to do its work. Now for a larger bird like a turkey.. Time is an important factor.. You need between 12-24 hours. And that may seem like a large window, but birds don't come in all the same sizes. Larger birds like 18-24 pounds, you need more time.

Now let's chat about dry brines. First the question is, what are the benefits of dry brines? Well.. when you dry brine you get an even crispier skin, it's easier to set up, while still boosting moisture and retaining flavor. It takes a longer time to dry brine than soaking, but is definitely worth it. To me, there's not a better one of the two.. It's really the application that you're going for and the time you have to pull off what you wanna do.

Now let's not confuse dry brining with curing. Let's define. Curing is used for long term preservation of the meat as well as flavor development and texture. The ingredients of curing usually contain salt & sugar as well as a curing agent like sodium nitrate. The process takes anywhere from several days to even weeks.

Now on the flip side of that is dry brining where the goal of the process is to boost flavor and retain the moisture of the meat before cooking. Dry brines contain mostly salt and take a couple of hours to a couple of days.

The processes may seem similar, but are very different and are used for 2 different applications. Now how long should you dry brine your birds? Remember we touched on it being a little longer than soaking in a wet brine. Chicken usually takes anywhere between 12-24 hours and a turkey upwards of about 2 days.. So you can see it takes longer, so you gotta have the time to pull this one off.

A basic example of a dry brine recipe would be 1 tablespoon of kosher salt, 1 teaspoon of sugar and a ½ teaspoon of black pepper, for every 4-5 pound of meat. Now the sugar and black pepper are optional pieces that help enhance flavor and texture. The sugar helps to brown the meat and the black pepper compliments the salty flavor. Pat the meat dry with paper towels before adding this mix, then rub all over including under the skin if you can. Refrigerate uncovered on a wire rack over a plate. Do not rinse the meat before cooking! Instead you should pat dry the bird again before cooking. Doing this will result in a much crispier skin.. Which is always the best part! Here's a pro tip.. The longer the meat sits with the dry brine, the deeper the seasoning.. Keeping it uncovered helps dry out the skin and give you that really nice crispy bite.

Now it is possible to over brine poultry, which would be bad. Letting the meat sit in the brine for too long can lead to a mushy texture and over salted meat. So you always want to keep an eye on the time when brining. You also want to rinse and pat dry the meat when wet brining. This will wash away all of the aromatics and flavorings leaving their tastes and essence within the meat. Pat drying gives you that really nice sear or crispy skin.

Brining will help you level up your bird game for sure. Try it.. Try different combinations and recipes and then send me photos and comments about your work on X or the website. I'd love to hear and learn from you too! I'll for sure put up a resource that expands and details the entire process for brining. It's a tool for chefs and cooks that give you that restaurant quality bird that's great for all occasions.

Well.. now that our brains are stuck on birds and brining.. That brings me to my next topic: understanding your spice cabinet.. And you know what that means..

It's time for

Food For Thought

Or what I like to call

Pro Tips From A Chef's Lips

Today's advice topic is about understanding your spice cabinet. I think as a chef home or pro this is a really important topic. When I build a recipe I usually build it in categories and the spice cabinet is one of the best pieces of that. The spice cabinet adds great flavors and aromatics and almost everything in it has a very long shelf life.

So let's get into what exactly spices are..

Spices are many things.. Seeds, barks, roots dried fruit parts.. They are also herbs.. The leaves and soft stems. Spices bring depth, warmth and intensity to recipes while herbs offer brightness, freshness and lift. Think of it this way: salt wakes up food, herbs and spices give it character.

When I was a young line cook, I was working at a place where the chef was fairly new and was changing the menu. We were offering farro as a side of a whole fish dish and I guess I made the dish and sent it to the pass, and when he tasted he brought it back to me to explain that there just wasn't enough herbs in it.. He then had me taste it. And when I did.. I didn't taste anything wrong with it at first. It had the salt, it had the acid from the tomatoes.. And my young palate just didn't recognize that this farro was begging for herbs. In this brief training moment, I was put on the spot in front of my fellow cooks and he said "herbs give dishes brightness.. Do you notice how flat the farro is?" I tried to give an honest answer, but it was an answer of ignorance. He came around the pass onto the line and we made it together.. Or should I say he made it and I watched.. He did exactly as I did when I made it, except at the end he threw a handful.. Literally a handful of herbs into the farro. Then he had me taste it. And I was blown away.. The farro.. The base was still there but the herbs brought out such a brightness.. A lift. And he was generous when he added them.. A young cook like me thought "damn this is going to taste like grass" but instead it complimented the base. It was one of those "ah ha" moments in my career and helped me think about dishes in their entirety and how to round out flavors. It helped me understand the salt, the acid, the herbaceousness.. All of the components of flavor. It was a revelation for myself and my palate. As I grew into a chef, I built all of my recipes and dishes to include herbs and spices as components that complimented the final flavor of the dish I was trying to create.

To organize spices a little better I have divided them into 4 different categories.. And no this isn't an official list, but it does help me when thinking about where they fit into recipes. So the categories are:

Warming/deep spices

In this category I like to put spices like cinnamon, clove, nutmeg and allspice. These flavors are warm, dark and rich.. A little goes a really long way. They're great for braises, desserts, stews and sometimes stocks or demis.

Earthy/toasty

Cumin, coriander and turmeric are some spices that highlight this category. And I like these a lot. I use them for roasted meats, curries and starches like lentils, rice and potatoes. I also use this category heavily when I make spice rubs for meat or marinades. They also compliment herbs extremely well.

Hot/pungent

This category has a lot of powerful flavors that are used similarly to the earthy and toasty category. Chili powder, mustard ground and dry, black pepper, dried chilis.. These are very pungent spices and also take very little to make a huge impact on your dishes. They're good for BBQ rubs, stir fries, marinades, starches.. They make an upfront presence on the palate, they don't hide underneath.. Usually you can taste these right away.

And then there's the aromatic/fresh category.

These flavors brighten dishes, but have distinct flavors that if not careful can easily overpower dishes. These flavors include: cardamom, fennel seed, sumac and star anise among others. I like to use these in brines and pickles as well as dishes from the Mediterranean, Caribbean and African dishes.

Again, this is not an official list and they easily mix and match with each other depending on where you're trying to go with your recipe and they can be profiled by cuisine, which is also not a "set in stone" official list. Many of these spices are used across many cultures and cuisines. For instance cumin is prevalent in Indian cuisine, but also in Mexican cuisine. Both have their places within traditional recipes in their respective cuisines and are not tied to any one in specific. Allspice shares a cuisine with jamaican and middle eastern cuisines, saffron in spanish and north african.. So you can see here that these flavors intertwine, mix and match and marry well with many different flavors. When this thought comes to mind, the possibilities are endless and I think that's what makes cooking great. It becomes unique to the person cooking and is a representation of the cook's palate.

Spices can last a long time if stored in cool, dark places. Ground spices can last up to a year for their peak flavor and whole spices can last as long as 2 years if you grind them as you need them. My advice is to purchase in small batches, date them and never store over the stove where it can heat up. Good rule of thumb.. If your paprika is older than your drivers license.. Throw it out.

To unlock your spices full potential and flavor I'm gonna give you a few tips.. The first is toasting. Heat your spices in a dry pan to bloom the oils and bring out the flavors. Be careful not to overheat your pan and burn these spices.. Charring them would cause them to become bitter.

The next method to unlock the flavor of spices is blooming.. This process cooks the spices in oil at the start of the building of a dish. An example of this would be achiote in Mexican or Latin

cooking where you toast the seed in oil before toasting rice in the oil before boiling. This method is also used heavily in Indian and Caribbean cooking as well.

Fresh ground spices pack a big punch as well. I like to toast them to bring out the oils and then grind them in a coffee or spice grinder. This is probably one of the best ways to use spices in my opinion. Yes you can buy spices that are already ground, but they just don't have the same punch and brightness. I always buy whole seed, toast and grind.. And sure it's more work, but the difference is surely night and day. Ground spices that you buy at the supermarket come off flat and not as vibrant. This method gives you the richness of a freshly ground spice. When using ground spices, I recommend layering these flavors by adding some early for depth and later for brightness.

Understanding your spice cabinet is like learning the chords before you write the song. Master the flavor notes, and you can cook anything.. And probably invent some outstanding things along the way.

Alright, this last section is for my young professional chefs. I want to talk about systems that help you control your environment in the kitchen. A great cook makes food, a great chef runs a system. This segment digs deep into **professional kitchen systems** that keep chaos in check — because flavor means nothing if the kitchen's a mess behind the scenes. This segment will walk you all through the tools every chef and kitchen manager should master to ensure consistency, efficiency and control. These systems are the backbone of success in both high-end restaurants and efficient home kitchens.

First let's talk about an obvious one.. The schedule. This covers labor needs, defines labor costs and sets the tone for morale and accountability. Most restaurants nowadays use an app or digital system to schedule, record time off, track shifts and the costs that go along with it. The schedule is always built at least a week out and restaurants that have a lot more going on or are busier, the schedules are built as far out as a month in advance. The chef scheduling accounts for key prep days, parties and banquets, holidays, new menu drops and any other event that the staff required would need to know in advance. Chefs.. Use this tool to set clear expectations in advance for your staff. Give them the respect of letting them know beforehand. If your schedule's a guessing game, your teams already lost.

The order guide is as important as the schedule. Your costs usually boil down to 3 things mostly.. Payroll, food cost and overhead. Payroll is governed by the schedule and a tool to help you with the food cost is the order guide. Now this won't save your food cost, but it will help you keep consistency in ordering and tell you high cost items. A proper order guide is organized with the vendor name, the category or location of the item, the item's name, cost and par. Then it usually has columns that are divided in two.. The left side is usually for the on hand count and the right side for the amount needed to order. When you subtract the on hand count from the par you get the amount you need to order. Notice how there is a formulaic way.. There isn't guessing. The pars are set by the P-mix, another tool that chef's use to help them understand

consumers' buying habits so that they can more accurately set pars on this order guide. Everything in a restaurant works hand in hand with each other. It's a formula that every successful restaurant has been using for years and years.. And years to come. If you're running out of onions on a Saturday.. It's usually not a shortage.. It's a systems failure.

The prep list is an extremely useful tool that all professional kitchens should be using in some capacity. Not every list is the same, but every functioning kitchen has one. This organizes the kitchens workload and keeps everyone accountable and focused during prep hours.. Which is kinda key as most prep hours are done before service when the restaurant isn't open and making money. Being intentional and deliberate in its planning will help maintain payroll costs as well as monitor and maintain ingredients freshness and quality. When designing the prep list, it should include quantities, weights and deadlines that are prioritized based on cooking time, space and or station needs. As the list is completed BOH staff should be crossing things off the list to indicate their completion to the chef. It should also have a space where the person in charge of this list is actually counting and making quality control checks on all of the prep so that the list is as accurate as possible. I don't know how many times I have had a sous chef or a cook do the prep list and say that we have it.. Only to find out mid service that the shit is bad and unusable and there is no time to prep it. Bad business. Without a prep list your cooks are just guessing, and guessing is like throwing cash into the wood burning stove.

The pull thaw list is a list that is usually used at night time or early in the morning to pull products from the freezer to thaw for service or processing. It ensures that product is ready for service and is safely defrosted in time. It reduces food waste and that last minute panic that happens when you realized something that you need is frozen, 10 minutes before service starts. Then you start doing dumb shit like submerging it into water or microwaving it. That's shoemaker shit. Don't do that. Proteins, sauces, soups and pastries often highlight this list, but it's really anything that you freeze that needs to be thawed for service and should mark weights and quantities that you need pulled. You can't serve what's frozen solid. The walk-in doesn't care how busy you are.

The recipe guide may be the most important system and resource in the entire building. It ensures consistency from cook to cook, shift to shift and helps train new staff and maintain quality under pressure. In the industry this is often called "the bible" and should be written in detail. These details should include weights, yields and visual cues. All of the recipes included should be consistent in measurement and flow and should point out what the person who is prepping it should be looking for. I try to write my recipe books as if my kids were the ones who are performing the prep. It must be simplified and use the correct language. Attached to the recipe portion of this book should be the dispatch specs. The specs detail how each dish should be plated with how much product and the placement of those products. It should also list allergens, potential substitutes, which plate it's plated on and any accompaniments that go along in the final presentation of the dish. This "bible" becomes a source of accountability to all members in the restaurant and is their reference when questions about food and service arise. This should be updated as the menu is updated. Recipes are necessarily rules, they're more like tools.. But if you don't follow your own tools.. What exactly is going on? Chaos.. That's what.

Today's final thought has us focus on what it takes for a professional kitchen to succeed. And although it does take more than just these 5 systems.. These create a base that helps you recognize costs and trends that will help you stay on track. Systems don't make the food - people do.. But strong systems make food possible. When you build a kitchen around tight systems, you don't just cook better.. You lead better. You have a grip on your business. And that's how careers are built, restaurants grow and cooks become chefs.

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