

# SODIUM GIRL'S Holiday Cooking Tips

The holidays; my favorite time of year. Thanksgiving, my birthday, Christmas, and Chanukah are just a few of the family gatherings I look forward to every time the Halloween decorations come down and the radio stations (96.5 for those in the Bay Area) begin to play Christmas carols. Smells of cinnamon and cloves fill the air; twinkling lights fill the streets; parties fill the calendar; and tradition fills our plates, minds, and bellies. But when my kidneys failed in 2004, and I began to keep a strict, low sodium diet, the holidays suddenly looked and tasted a different.

For many, the holidays are all about food; slow-cooked, well-spiced, filled-with-love food that is served in gigantic proportions. Like Pavlovian dogs, the simple utterance of the word “holiday” makes the mouth water for juicy turkey, crunchy pecan pie, and succulent honey baked ham. These dishes, though, are not only full of memories. They’re dripping with sodium too.

Before you toss the recipe for Grandma’s stuffing, though, let me say this: these classic holiday meals may be filled with salt and brine and other high-sodium ingredients. But there is no reason you cannot enjoy them. Or at least enjoy highly impressive approximations of them.

With savvy substitutions, you can make a low sodium holiday meal with all the flavors you remember. And the creativity you are forced to use to get around the salt will not only dazzle you and your guests, but it will put a real personal stamp on your feats. With some tricks and some time, the credit this holiday season will not belong to Chef Emeril, or Julia, or Ina, or anyone else with their name on a cookbook. The magical holiday memories, the dishes, and the culinary genius will belong only to you.

Now isn’t that something to be thankful for.

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## TURKEY

Let’s start with Turkey, because it is a very good place to start.

Here’s the deal: A lot of poultry, especially around the holidays, is already plumped and brined with salt solutions.

So when you buy your bird, to make sure it is absolutely as low in sodium as possible, you have to do a little research.

### The Bird

The best option is to shop at a butcher or at stores like Whole Foods, which tend to provide in-depth information about their meat products and the farms on which they are raised. You can explain your situation to the people behind the counter and make sure you have a bird that works for your dietary needs.

**Quick Tip:** If you buy your turkey from a larger grocery retailer, like Safeway, I would suggest contacting the company that farmed the meat

or looking on the manufacturers website for information about plumping, brining, or any other pre-packaging treatments.

Another option, which I have taken for the last seven years, is to actually not use a turkey at all. Instead, while I bake a nice-sized turkey for guests, I make a whole roasted chicken for myself. It’s juicy, it’s birdy, and it’s all mine. And if you look for chickens labeled “air-chilled,” they are guaranteed to be free of brine and salt-water solutions.

### The Brine

Once you choose the bird you are going to cook, the next question becomes how you will make your meat as juicy as the brined version, without the salt. There are a few different techniques you can use to help mimic the succulence you would expect, keeping the outside nice and crispy and the inside moist and tender.

First, butter rubs. A good slathering of herbed butter, under the skin and out, will keep the meat moist and will protect it from overcooking. Mix some unsalted butter with herbs, lemon or orange zest, and spices like black pepper, cumin, and smoked paprika. Then, use the opening towards the bottom and neck to loosen the skin from the flesh, expertly maneuvering the butter mixture inside. A spatula will prove quite helpful to push the butter towards the center of the bird. Make sure to rub the bird with butter on the outside as well and then throw it in the oven as you normally would to cook.

If butter, or touching raw meat, is not your thing, another option is to invest in a flavor injector. Yes, that's right, a flavor injector. By filling this syringe-like utensil with salt-free broth, oil, melted

butter, or even white wine, you can inject moisture directly into the bird meat – much like what brining accomplishes. And finally, don't be afraid to use dry rubs (fresh or dried herbs, spices, and zest) or even glazes (like a mixture of apricot jam and molasses). This will not only help with the juicy-factor of your finished product, but it will add more flavor, texture, and color to the skin.

This holiday season, don't be afraid to mix it up, whether you go with a Game hen or a Turkey and use a combination of the methods mentioned above. In the end, you'll have a golden entree begging to be gobbled.

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## MASHED POTATOES

My mother is quite famous for her creamy, Parmesan mashed potatoes. I remember eating them as a kid, scooping seconds and thirds onto my plate.

When I switched to a low sodium diet, though, Parmesan and a lot of other cheeses were suddenly off limits. But I quickly learned that the decadence of velvety mashed potatoes didn't have to be. There are three things you need this holiday season to create truly outstanding mashed hash that will stand up to (if not outdo) your favorite childhood recipes: 1) technique, 2) special ingredients, and 3) genius dairy substitutes.

### Technique

When it comes to making mashed potatoes, you have two choices – make it chunky or make it smooth. If you do not have any special tools, like a ricer or a food mill, a smashed potato recipe is the way to go.

**Quick tip:** Do not use a blender. This will result in potato glue, not a delicious side dish.

To start, boil or steam your spuds until they are soft and then use a masher or a fork to break them down. It's that simple. And most recipes actually call for the skin to be left on, resulting in less work and dish that has a charming, rustic look. For extra flare, you can also pop your tots in the oven for a

quick broil before serving. The top layer will become brown and crisp, adding interesting texture to an otherwise simple meal.

If you do have a ricer or food mill, though, you can create those silky looking pillows of potatoes you remember from childhood, or famous cookbooks, or KFC commercials. One of my favorite recipes that I've seen is from Serious Eats, from Mark Peel, for lump-free, restaurant quality potatoes. Peel steams his potatoes and then passes them through a ricer. And with just a little extra seasoning – unsalted butter and pepper – the potatoes are done and perfect.

<http://www.serious-eats.com/recipes/2009/11/mashed-potatoes-without-lumps-smooth-recipe.html>

### Surprise

A few years ago, with help from my husband and brother, I treated my parents to a delicious Thanksgiving lunch (just to warm up for the family dinner. While I spiced and rubbed and stewed the meats and veggies, it was really the mashed potatoes that had stolen my heart and my attention. I was determined to make them so delicious and flavorful that there wouldn't be a drop left for leftovers.

I decided to make them creamy and I also decided to pack them full of unexpected flavors. I browned butter, roasted garlic, and made pesto, which were all then blended into or layered on top of the potatoes. I scooped portions of the good stuff into individual ramekins. I broiled them, giving it a nice brown color and crunch, and just because I could, I topped each with a fried basil leaf.

Sure, this first try out of the low-sodium gate was a bit overkill – were there even potatoes in there? – but it was a wonderful lesson in all the possibilities available from taking your spuds from simple to simply genius.

Potatoes are a great culinary canvass and they work well with everything from herbs to orange to horseradish and wasabi. So feel free to play around with one or two (or in my case, twenty five) special ingredients to make your potatoes more complex. Or, mix in some beets, sweet potatoes, radishes, or other root vegetables for unexpected color and flavor.

#### Dairy Substitutes

Nutritional yeast. If you haven't ever tried it before, head to the bins at your local Whole Foods or health.

Nutritional yeast is deactivated yeast. It is popular in vegan and vegetarian cooking and, get this, it is naturally low in sodium and high in B12.

I first discovered nutritional yeast when someone sprinkled it on popcorn. I thought, just by the

name, that this was going to be disgusting. Yeast does not sound appealing. But in truth, it was delicious. It was nutty, it was umami, it was cheesy – it was the perfect Parmesan substitute. And it is a wonderful secret low-sodium weapon to have on hand.

Sprinkle a little into or on top of your mashed potatoes, or green bean casserole, or low sodium garlic bread and give your taste buds a parmesan-like treat without the salt. But do be warned: make sure the product you buy does not contain MSG. And for some people, nutritional yeast has been known to cause bad headaches. So do be conscious of how it makes you feel. Full and satisfied is a good thing. Headache is not.

Of course, if you are looking for more classic cheese additions for your potatoes, you have a few great low sodium options. If the recipe calls for ingredients like sour cream or cream cheese, use low-sodium crème fraîche, mascarpone, and even soy, coconut, and Greek yogurt instead. Just remember to read the labels for sodium content.

If it calls for milk, replace it with heavy cream or go completely wild and really defy tradition by using coconut milk and a dash of curry powder. And finally, if the dish requires a melted layer of cheese on top of the potatoes, use a low sodium cheese (like Heluva Good Cheddar or Alpine Lace Swiss) or even some crumbled, low-sodium ricotta or Lucerne low-sodium cottage cheese (again, just check the label).

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## GREENS

During the holidays, I cringe at the thought of stewed carrots and overly-steamed green beans. But I find myself stumbling when thinking of other things to serve. What can one feed an army of relatives that retains color, flavor, and texture and doesn't just turn to mush? This Thanksgiving, I am not going to let my greens play sloppy seconds to the turkey.

After a bit of Internet research, I came upon a gorgeous recipe for prosciutto-wrapped asparagus spears with a prune and walnut purée. And you may be thinking, prosciutto wrapped asparagus spears? That is full of salt and sodium! This is

impossible. But the lesson here is that anything is possible. And you should feel confident that you can salt-free any holiday recipe that catches your eye. No matter what is on the ingredient list.

#### How to Salt-Free A Salty Recipe

To make the recipe low-sodium, I replaced the prosciutto by asking my butcher at Whole Foods to cut very thin slices of pork loin. I marinated the loin in orange juice and beer for a few hours to make it especially moist and from there, I patted them dry and pounded them out with my fist (and a hammer) until they were thin, resembling the thickness of prosciutto. I then spread a spice

mixture of smoked paprika, black pepper, and cumin on the pork to give it a husky flavor.

**Quick tip:** to make the pounding process easier, I placed the meat between two pieces of saran wrap. The butcher can also do this part for you if you don't have the time or fist power to thin the meat out yourself.

From there, I followed the recipe as it was written. I flash-steamed two large bundles of asparagus. I spread the fig and seed mixture on each strip of pork and rolled them around a bundle of five asparagus spears. I tied them with cooking twine and seared them quickly (5 minutes each side) in a pan with 2 tablespoons of hot grape seed oil until the meat was cooked and caramelized. And right before serving, I drizzled honey over each bundle and

threw them under the broiler for 5 minutes, giving the meat a crispy texture.

And voila, a side dish with flavor and flare. And no sodium.

These greens are proof that show-stopping, low-sodium side dishes can be made from any recipe. So go ahead and open all of those cookbooks and food blogs you drool over and pick out some dishes to salt-free this holiday.

If you have your creative hat on, nothing will stop you. Not a Parmesan. Not a slice of bacon. Not a leg of lamb. Not a grain of salt.

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## ABOUT SODIUM GIRL *Jessica Goldman*



I'm a girl on a mission.

Faced with kidney failure and a handful of other medical complications, I decided that nothing would stop me from having a full life and a full belly.

I discovered that a well controlled, salt-free, low-sodium diet was key to staying healthy and active. But it took time and years of experimentation to achieve the delicate balance of eating well while maintaining a busy schedule and a budget.

With a few years of salt-free cooking, eating, and living under my belt, I started this blog to give others a jump start in their own journey.

Whether motivated by reasons medical or personal, I hope these tidbits of information are helpful to everyone seeking to lower their sodium intake without losing the flavor and the thrill of eating. I also hope that others, not limited in their choices, will find my advice, recipes, and general shenanigans equally enlightening.

So read on, chow down, and get cooking. Low-sodium can be flavor full.