

HOW TO KILL A CHICKEN FOR FOOD

By Jennie (Chooken)

Unfortunately there is no perfectly painless way of killing a chook for food. I wish there was. However there are some extremely fast methods and the aim of this article is to outline some basics.

FATTENING:

It's debatable whether fattening produces more than bloated meat. A well fed and unwormy bird will supply as much meat as its breeding permits; fattening it will probably only add fat. However if your birds seem particularly scrawny then you might want to segregate whichever one you intend to eat to make sure it's not being bullied out of food. You can certainly produce a heavier carcass by giving extra rations and particularly by including fresh meat offcuts, skim milk and softened grains (excepting barley, which is not well digested by chickens). Limiting the bird's range will also tend to make it gain weight, but a flighty bird may become stressed if away from the flock.

AGE AT KILL:

When a cock begins to crow he is pretty much mature and will start to toughen quickly. Until this point you can roast, fry or poach, with frying being most suited to younger birds. An older rooster or aged hen will probably suit only mincing, stock or pet food. However you can make a fine meal out of even a two year old bird (depending on its breeding) using a pressure cooker and plenty of herbs.

The other issue to do with age concerns the presence of pin feathers, which are softish feather buds just protruding from the skin of birds while replenishing after a moult. Some breeds always have pin feathers no matter what age you try to dispatch them and others only produce these hard-to-pluck feather buds every now and then. When you want to cull, it's best to check each chicken's body to see if pin feathers are present. If they are, you will probably prefer to wait until the feathers have fully grown before killing the bird.

STARVE:

After choosing the bird you want to dispatch, isolate it and starve it for at least 14 and preferably 24 hours to empty the gullet and intestinal tract. Make sure it has water and is kept in a calm place to minimise distress. Emptying the crop and gut will make evisceration cleaner.

TOOLS:

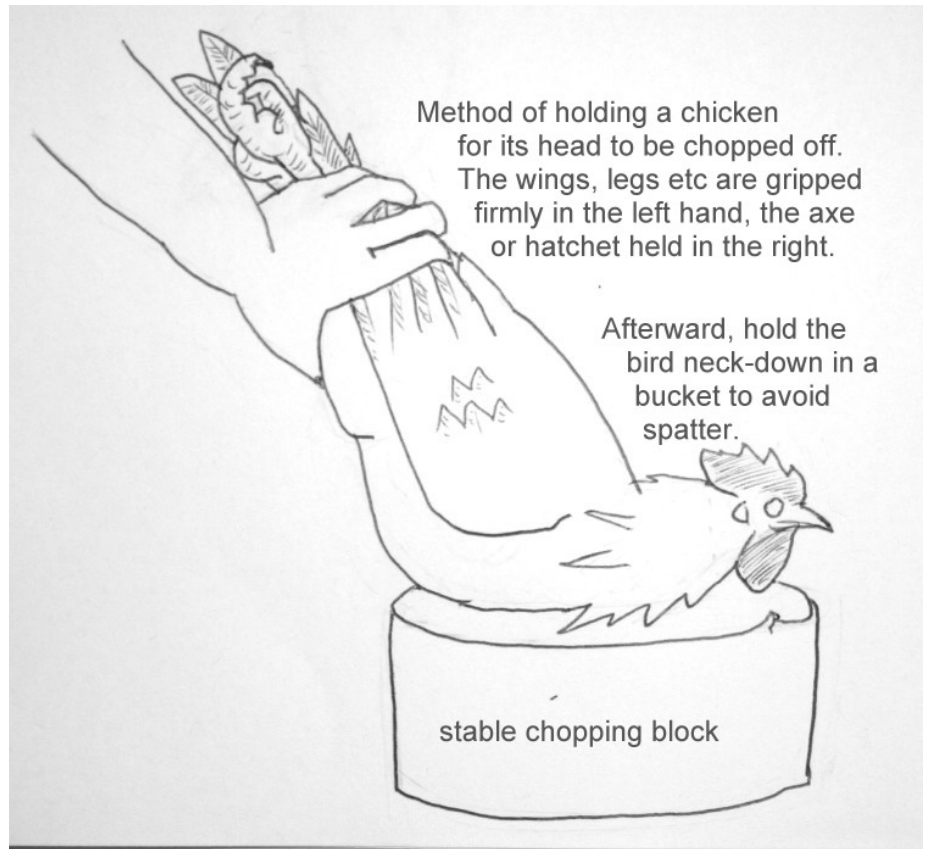
You will need an extremely sharp, point-ended knife, a large bowl (e.g. stainless steel salad dish), a bucket and a hose; or else instead of the last two a stainless steel outdoor sink with running water. Other tools depend on the method you choose for killing.

KILLING METHODS:

1. THE CHOP

You will need an extremely sharp axe or hatchet and a chopping block. This is a horrifying but quick method that can make you feel rather sick. Another drawback is that it makes the bird's feathers tighten so that plucking is harder. However it is still the method of choice for many home growers as it's efficient and sure. I would recommend this as the easiest way to achieve a clean kill on the first try.

It's useful to practice your hatchet swing on something inert first. A bought chicken neck in a thin old sock would approximate the texture and feel of what you have to chop through. As you can see, the hatchet needs to be sharp, but it's not important to completely sever skin.



When you are satisfied with your aim and the force required, hold the bird by the legs and tail with its neck touching the chopping block. You will find that the bird will respond to being tipped up by pushing its head back against its body, keeping its beak horizontal. When you have the bird's neck as flat on the block as possible, strike with a clean hard chop.

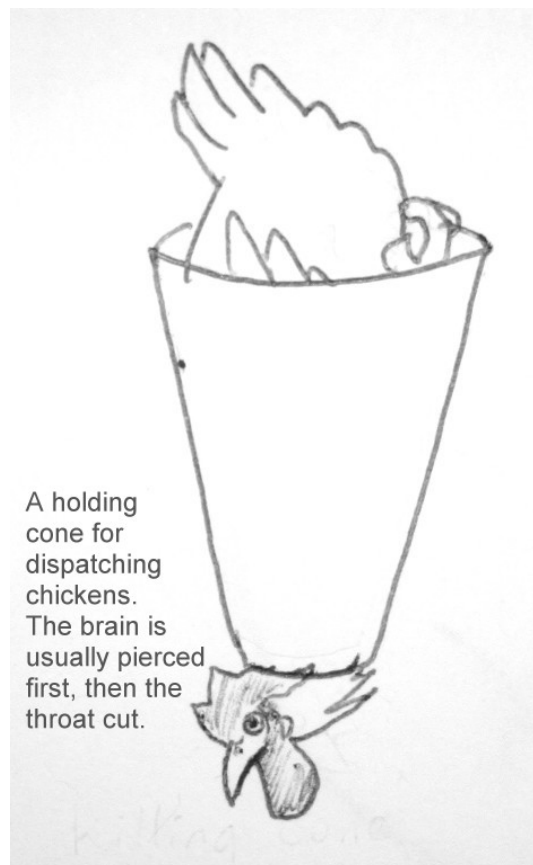
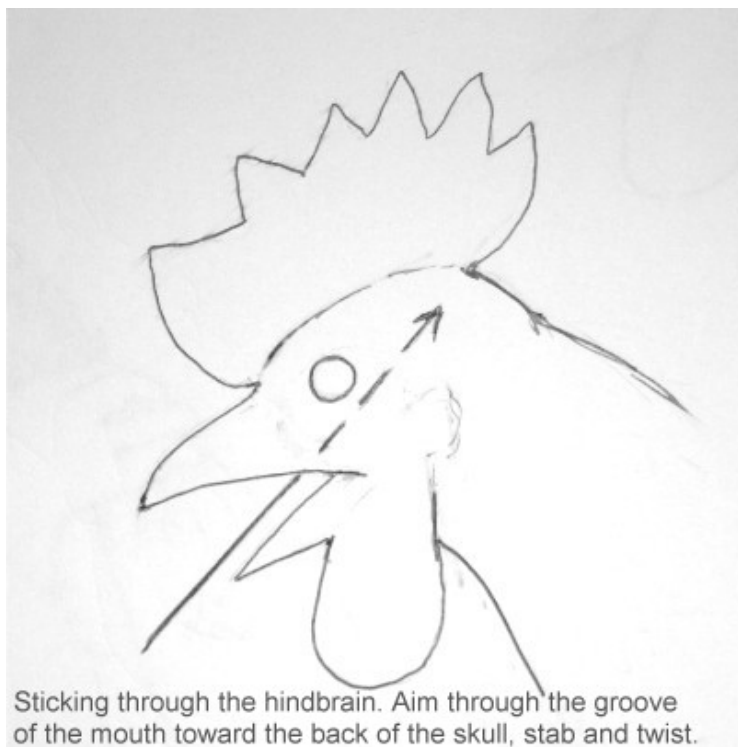
If you miss, don't run inside weeping; steel yourself and do it again. At once the bird will begin to flounce around, fluttering and spraying blood. The flutterings are strictly reflex. The best way to avoid getting blood spattered is to hold the body neck-down in a bucket, wings tight, until movements cease. Then you can hang it by the legs until the blood has drained, and for plucking.

If you want to pluck without scalding (see further on) the best time is immediately. While you might not feel like being around the beheaded creature, the longer you leave it the firmer the feathers will set inside skin and the harder the next job will be. NB You can make the chopping job easier and less messy by putting the chicken inside a purpose-made sleeve cut and sewn from a triangulated pillowslip with a hole at the end just big enough for the head to emerge. This will constrict the bird and prevent it from flapping. Obviously any fabric sleeve should be thoroughly washed between kills.

I'm not a fan of the axe because I believe that having to hew through neck as well as bone must be terribly painful for the creature. To my mind, cutting a chicken's throat just behind the jowel, which produces a far less sizable wound and very little other trauma, would be a kinder method even though it involves bleeding the bird to death. However that is not an accepted killing method because of the length of time the bird takes to die.

2. STICKING AND THROAT CUTTING.

I've never been able to perform this because I know that an animal's mouth is highly sensitive, and this involves a skewer or thin knife entering through the chicken's beak. However it causes brain death quickly and has the benefit of being able to loosen feathers for plucking if it's done correctly. The down sides are that you need some skill at opening a bird's beak while aiming a skewer, and you'll also most likely need a killing cone, which is a stainless steel or plastic cone a little like a roadworker's witch's hat, only with the tip cut off for the chicken's head to poke through. This is fixed to a wall or fencepost with the wider open end upward. You can still do the job by hanging the bird up by its tied legs.



Place the bird in the cone head-down, trapping the wings (or just hang it from a hook). Gently but firmly take hold of the bird's head with its skull cupped in your palm and its beak between forefinger and thumb, then ease open the beak. Stab a thin knife or skewer through the groove in the roof of its mouth into the back of the skull, and as soon as you have reached the back of the head, give a sharp twist of the knife. The bird should give a brief cry (reflex) and immediately start to spasm. At once, using a razor sharp knife, cut the bird's throat just behind the jawel on both sides to allow the blood to drain.

NB: if your skewer clips the front of the brain--that is, if you accidently pierce straight upward toward the middle of the comb--you'll actually set the feathers tighter. Only aiming from the groove in the roof of the bird's mouth toward the rear of its skull will achieve the desired effect.

3. NECK DISLOCATION.

If done properly, this method is as fast as chopping and far less bloody. The bird never seems to know what happened. But you need to have reasonable upper body strength and a good deal of determination, as it's the fast, deft snap of movement that dislocates the neck. A neighbour once showed me his technique: he walked through the chook yard, swiped up the chosen bird by the head and flipped it around his hand using its body weight to separate head and neck, a little like a whipcrack motion. His hand was so fast it was a blur and right away the bird began to flap spasmodically. He simply held the legs and let the bird bleed into the cavity inside its neck, as you do with all neck dislocation methods. I've never had the nerve to try it but it sure seemed fast.

The recommended neck dislocation method is to grasp the bird's legs in one hand (usually the left), holding the legs at about waist level, and the head in the other hand going diagonally across your body down to below your right hip. The beak should protrude between your first two fingers and, gripping tightly, you use the heel of your palm against its upper neck to provide the necessary pivot. In the one movement, you're supposed to wrench downward (that is, up with the legs, down with the head) and twist the head sharply up and back. There should be an audible click of dislocation but the very strong may pull a head right off, which would be rather upsetting. If you practice beforehand (perhaps on an already deceased chicken) you will certainly know what force to use as well as if you have the strength to do it.

A variant method for those without quite enough upper body strength is to lay the chicken on the ground, holding the tail and legs together, and gently rest a broomstick across the neck behind the head. This doesn't hurt the chicken until the last second, when you place your feet on the broomstick to either side of the head and pull the chicken's body swiftly upward. Done properly, this remains a quick and clean method, as the blood drains into the gap between vertebrae and remains inside the skin until the head is cut off.

I find the neck dislocation method the quickest, with an added benefit of being relatively clean. The blood clots inside the neck cavity and can be cut off with the head. For birds used to being handled, they really don't know what's coming.



PLUCKING

It's arguably best to dry pluck immediately, beginning at the extremities, which cool first (hardening the feathers in the skin). However some breeds have very tight feathering no matter how quick you are to pluck.

For dry plucking, hang the bird by its legs and don't take out too many feathers in one go (or with too much force) or you'll pull off skin. I find it best to start at the forewings and clean those before embarking on the legs, as the wings cool first. For large flight feathers you may only be able to pull out one at a time. Use a pinching rather than fist-gripping motion and you'll be less likely to tear the skin. A bucket of water sitting below the bird lets you rinse feathers off your hand every few grabs.

SCALDING

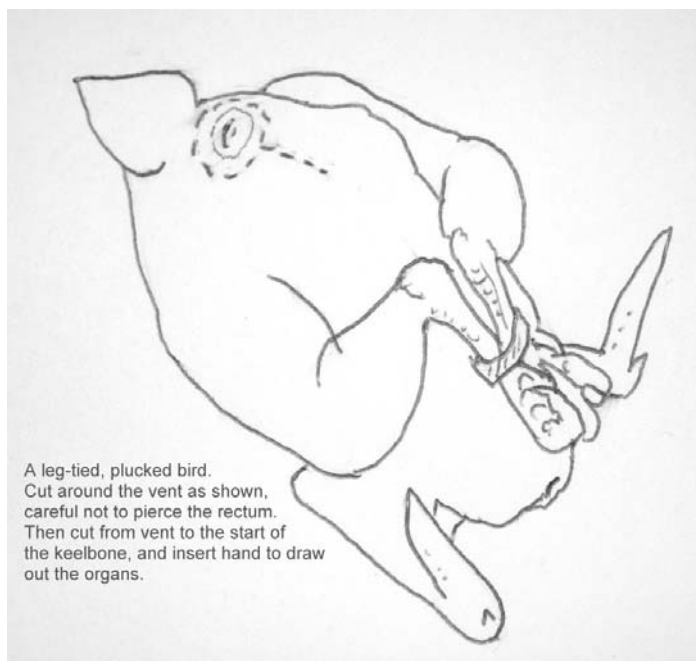
A tough-to-pluck bird may be scalded, i.e. dipped into water at about 53 degrees celcius for 20-30 seconds. You don't want to cook the skin, just break down a little of the grip around each feather shaft. Hotter water works faster but you will probably have to dip the bird in cold water right away afterward so the heat doesn't continue to cook.

After dipping, rehang the bird and pluck as above, taking care not to grasp too many feathers at once.

If your bird has a large number of pin feathers, it might be easier to skin and fillet the chicken. Otherwise you can grasp the pin feathers against your thumb using a knife and take them out one by one.

EVISCERATING

If you haven't cut the bird's head off do it now. Hang the bird right way up (e.g. loop twine around its body under the elbows), or hold it upside-down while you cut in a line from the base of the neck down to the beginning of the breastbone. Be careful not to poke the knife in or you'll open the crop; instead, hold skin out to begin the cut. When the opening is large enough, loosen all the membranes around the crop (which should be empty and flaccid) and prise it partly out of the body. You can either cut it off below the bottom of the crop or loosen it and the windpipe from the neck so it will be able to be pulled out backwards (the best way unless the crop is full).



Then rehang the bird by its legs, and poke a knife carefully into the skin just beside the pelvic bones to one side of the cloaca. Cut around the cloaca but don't puncture the underlying intestines or rectum. This is quite hard to do but with the bird hanging, all its intestines should tend to fall away from the cloacal opening. You should be able, if you're careful, to make a wholly circular hole around the cloaca without damaging the guts.

Next cut a straight line from the bottom of this circular cut to the beginning of the underside (before the bone) to allow your hand to enter the body cavity. You will have to cut through a thin wall of muscle to expose the gut. If you do clip the intestine or rectum, wash the bird with running water.

Put your hand in above the guts and loosen all the innards from above, below and the sides. The lungs will adhere to the ribcage so you will have to scrape them out. Pull the innards out toward the rear of the bird, loosening any adhesions so that the cloacal sphincter (the round muscle through which droppings and eggs pass) falls outside the bird also. Gizzard and heart can be cleaned and used (split the gizzard and wash out any internal grit; open the heart and peel out the clot). The liver can be used but you have to cut the dark bile sac from the liver at the point where they join without getting bile everywhere (which will render the liver too bitter to eat). Eventually you will drag the crop out through the large rearward hole.

Now all you have to do is cut off the legs. Untie the bird, and cut around each leg at the point where leg skin changes into body skin (i.e. the knobbly bottom end of each drumstick). Flex the leg fully forward so you can cut through the tough tendons at the back; then you can push the leg hard backward and, cutting the front tendons, break it away. Don't let any contaminated matter (e.g. dirt on the feet) fall into your large bowl. Only food grade meat should go into the bowl.

Now take the bird inside or to a sink and rinse inside and out. It should look pretty much like a bought bird.

MEAT TREATMENT

If you cook a bird that's been freshly killed it will very likely be extremely tough, as the muscles have not had time to relax after hardening in rigor mortis. That usually begins about 20 minutes after death, so if you're extremely fast you can cool and freeze a chicken before rigor mortis sets in. However more than likely your bird will have already started to toughen up by the time you get to chill it.

Meat needs to be stored for around 48 hours to give time for the muscles to relax again. Naturally in Australia this means refrigeration. You can either put the bird in the freezer right after that time or, having frozen it at once, let it stand in the fridge for one to two days until it's softened.