

Sumac-Rubbed Butterflied Chicken

I knew my kids were eating boil-in-bag food they could carry in their packs all week. I wanted to make them something homey, rustic, and comforting for their first night home. I'd been traveling, too, so I couldn't spend all day cooking (nor did I particularly want to).

Butterflying is a technique that speeds up the chicken-roasting process. By removing the backbone and flattening the bird with a firm palm, you're able to cook the white meat and dark meat more evenly, and in less time, than roasting a bird whole. A quick rub-down with sumac-butter added a rustic burnish and Middle Eastern flavor. (Don't have sumac? Try smoked or regular paprika instead. The flavor profile's wholly different -- sumac is sour and lemony -- but they all go beautifully with chicken.)

Serves 6 (leftovers are great)

One 4-1/2- to 5-pound whole chicken, preferably organic
2-3 tablespoons soft butter
2-3 teaspoons sumac (available in Middle Eastern markets)
Salt and pepper
Lemon halves, for serving

Prep the chicken at least 2 hours before roasting. Remove the goody bag from the chicken's cavity. (You can decide how to handle this.) Flip the bird breast-side down, back facing up. Using kitchen shears, cut along either side of the backbone from cavity to cavity. Remove the backbone and freeze for stock. Set the chicken breast-side-up now on a parchment-lined baking sheet, easing the now split-back slightly open. Pat very dry with paper towels. With the heel of your dominant hand, lean onto the chicken so it flattens.

In a small bowl, shmush the butter with the sumac. Season the butter liberally with salt and pepper. Sprinkle a generous five-fingerful of salt and pepper directly into the cavity as well. Now rub the chicken all over with the sumac butter. Loosen the skin over the breasts slightly and work your way onto the breast meat, too, rubbing with sumac butter as you go. Sprinkle the outside of the bird with coarse salt, if you like a bit of crunch and haven't already oversalted. Set the bird in the refrigerator for a few hours, uncovered. I find this sets the butter and makes for crisper skin once the bird hits the oven.

When ready to roast, preheat the oven to 450°F with a rack in the upper third. Slide the chicken into the oven and roast for 10 minutes. Without opening the oven, reduce the heat to 375°F. Continue roasting until the meat is cooked through and the juices between the thigh and drumstick run clear, about 40 minutes longer. Let rest for 10 to 15 minutes before carving. (This is important!)

To carve, use a heavy knife to slice off the drumsticks, thighs, and wings. Slice the breast meat from the bone and cut crosswise. Serve with lemon.