

How to Know When Food Is Done

Don't flub a beautifully rosy steak or a perfectly chewy batch of cookies because you couldn't pinpoint the moment to stop cooking. BY ELIZABETH BOMZE

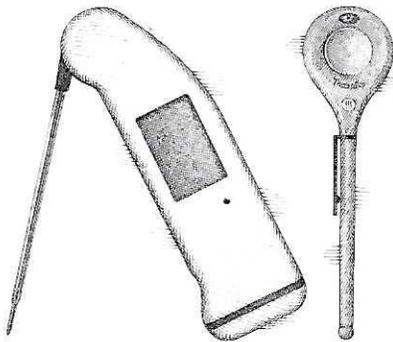
For the Best Results, Get Out Your Thermometer

The axiom "knowledge is power" holds especially true in the kitchen—the more you know about what's going on inside your food as it cooks, the more you can control the result. That's why we're so gung ho about using an instant-read thermometer in the kitchen, as more control means less stress and better results.

➤ Our Favorite

Instant-Read Thermometers

The ThermoWorks Thermapen Mk4 (left, \$99) and our Best Buy, the ThermoWorks ThermoPop (right, \$29), are accurate, fast, and easy to use.



➤ Take Multiple Readings

Especially with large roasts and turkeys, it's important to take the temperature in multiple places since it can vary in thicker and thinner areas, as well as near bones. Food is only done once all parts reach the target temperature.

MEAT AND POULTRY

Don't Forget Carryover Cooking

The temperature of many proteins will continue to rise once they're taken off heat and allowed to rest before serving, a phenomenon known as carryover cooking. This is particularly true for thick roasts cooked at high temperatures, which must be removed from the heat as much as 10 to 15 degrees below the desired doneness. We've also learned that carryover cooking is negligible in burgers, whole chickens, and whole fish; the loose grain of the burgers and the hollow cavities of the chicken and fish allow heat to escape, so these items should be cooked to the desired degree of doneness.

	COOK TO	SERVE AT
BEEF/LAMB		
Rare	115°F–120°F	125°F
Medium-Rare	120°F–125°F	130°F
Medium	130°F–135°F	140°F
Medium-Well	140°F–145°F	150°F
Well-Done	150°F–155°F	160°F
GROUND BEEF		
Medium-Rare*	125°F	125°F
Medium*	130°F	130°F
Medium-Well*	140°F	140°F
Well-Done	160°+	160°+
PORK		
Medium	140°F–145°F	150°F
Well-Done	150°F–155°F	160°F
CHICKEN		
White Meat	160°F	160°F
Dark Meat	175°F	175°F

Cook Some Cuts Longer

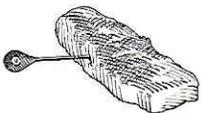
Whereas most proteins are best cooked just to an internal temperature at which they're safe to eat, items like braised or slow-roasted dark-meat chicken, pork butt, and beef chuck often taste better when they're cooked longer. That's because these tough cuts are loaded with collagen, which breaks down into gelatin between 140 and 195 degrees and lubricates the muscle fibers, making them seem more moist and tender. It's also important to cook these cuts slowly; the longer they spend in that collagen breakdown window, the more tender the meat will be.

Pink Poultry and Pork Can Be Safe

Pink-tinted turkey and pork aren't necessarily undercooked. Often, the color is an indication that the pH of the meat is relatively high, which stabilizes the meat's pink pigment so that it doesn't break down when exposed to heat. As long as the meat registers the prescribed temperature, it's safe to eat.

*The USDA recommends cooking all ground beef to 160 degrees.

Tips for Taking Meat's Temperature



Steaks and chops: Hold the steak or chop with tongs and insert the thermometer through the side of the meat. This method also works for chicken parts.



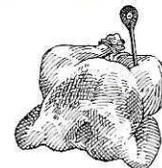
Burgers: Leaving the burger in the pan (or on the grill), slide the tip of the thermometer into the top edge and push it toward the center, making sure to avoid hitting the pan (or grate).



Roasts: Insert the thermometer at an angle, pushing the probe deep into the roast and then slowly drawing it out. Look for the lowest temperature to find the center of the meat.



Whole poultry, breast: Insert the thermometer from the neck end, holding it parallel to the bird. (Avoid hitting the bone, which can give an inaccurate reading.)



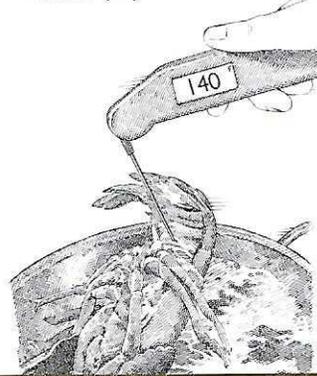
Whole poultry, thigh: Insert the thermometer at an angle away from the bone into the area between the drumstick and breast.



Whole stuffed poultry: In addition to taking the temperature of the white and dark meat, insert the thermometer directly into the center of the cavity. The stuffing is food-safe at 165 degrees.

FISH AND SHELLFISH

SALMON	Cook To
Farmed	125°F
Wild	120°F
TUNA	
Rare	110°F
Medium-Rare	125°F
OTHER	
White-Fleshed Fish	140°F
Sea Scallops	115°F
Lobster (tail)	140°F



Salmon: With less fat than farmed salmon, wild salmon is more prone to drying out and overcooking, so we cook it to a lower temperature.

Swordfish: The exterior of cooked swordfish should feel firm while the inside is just opaque but still moist.

Shrimp: Cooked shrimp should look pink, feel just firm to the touch, and be slightly translucent at the center.

Mussels: An opened mussel is cooked, but one that remains closed might just need more cooking. Microwave it for 30 seconds; if it still doesn't open, discard it.

Clams: Open clams are done—and overcook quickly. Remove clams as they open and keep them warm in a covered bowl while the rest finish cooking.

DISCOVERY

Temp Baked Potatoes

Baking a potato to between 205 and 212 degrees ensures that the interior will be uniformly fluffy. To learn why, go to CookIllustrated.com/bakedpotato.

BAKED GOODS AND SWEETS

We use a thermometer to gauge the doneness of not just proteins but also many baked goods and desserts. And when a food doesn't lend itself to temperature-taking, our visual guidelines can be just as helpful.

WHEN TO USE A THERMOMETER

Yeast Breads

We have found that yeast bread can reach its recommended temperature for doneness well before the loaf is actually baked through. You should take the temperature of your bread as a backup, but stick to the recommended baking time and make sure the crust is well browned before removing the loaf from the oven and checking its temperature.

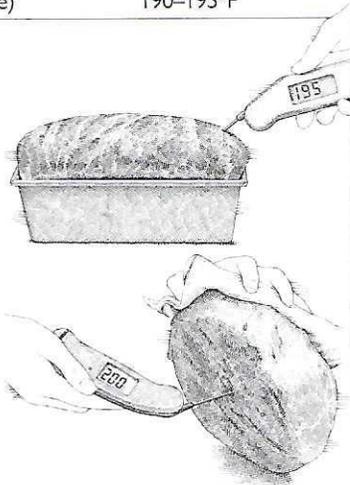
Lean (e.g., sandwich bread)	205–210°F
Enriched (e.g., brioche)	190–195°F

Loaf-pan loaves:

Insert the thermometer from the side, just above the pan edge, and direct it at a downward angle into the center of the loaf.

Free-form loaves:

Tip the loaf (cover your hand with a dish towel) and insert the probe through the bottom crust into the center.



Cheesecake

New York cheesecake:

The velvety consistency of this style is achieved when the center registers 165 degrees.

Other baked cheesecakes:

For an all-over creamy consistency, we bake them to between 145 and 150 degrees.

Custards and Puddings

Stovetop custards: We cook custards like *crème anglaise* to a relatively low 175 degrees to prevent the egg proteins from curdling.

Ice cream bases: Custard bases for ice cream should be thicker than conventional stovetop custards, so we cook them to 180 degrees.

Baked custards: Applications such as *flan* and *crème brûlée* should jiggle but not slosh when gently shaken and should register between 170 and 180 degrees (depending on the ratio of eggs to other ingredients).

Custard Pie Fillings

Because baked custard fillings like pumpkin pie filling continue to set up as they cool, it's important to remove custard pies from the oven when they're slightly underdone. The edges of the filling should be set, while the center should jiggle slightly (but not slosh) when the pie is shaken and should register between 170 and 175 degrees.

WHEN TO USE VISUAL CUES

Cakes, Muffins, and Quick Breads

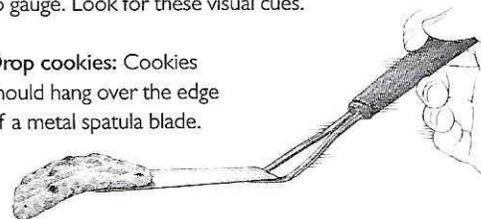
➤ For thin (less than ¾-inch) items: Test for springback. Gently press the center of the food; it should feel springy and resilient. If your finger leaves an impression or the center jiggles, it's not done.

➤ For thick (at least ¾-inch) items: Use a skewer. Poke a wooden skewer or toothpick into the center; it should emerge with no more than a few crumbs attached. If you see moist batter or lots of crumbs, bake it longer.

Cookies, Bar Cookies, and Brownies

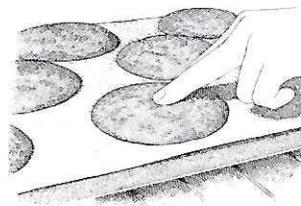
➤ For chewy centers, underbaking is key—but tricky to gauge. Look for these visual cues.

Drop cookies: Cookies should hang over the edge of a metal spatula blade.

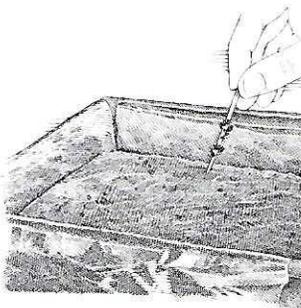


Crackly cookies: Cracks should appear shiny. **Stamped and sliced cookies:** Edges should be light brown and centers slightly moist.

➤ For uniformly crisp cookies, remove the cookies when the edges are deep golden brown and crisp, and the centers yield to slight pressure.



➤ For perfect brownies, poke a wooden toothpick into the center and look for a few moist crumbs; moist batter means they're not ready. Overbaking will yield dry, chalky results with diminished chocolate flavor.



Pie Crust

The pastry should be well browned (deep color equals deep flavor). We bake in glass pie plates, which allow us to monitor browning on the sides and bottom of the crust.

Fruit Pies

Filling should bubble at the edges and in the vents.