Wild Turkey
By Andrew F. Smith

Eastern Wild Turkey
(meleagris gallopavo silvestris)

When America was settled, wild turkeys were common throughout the east coast. They were relatively easy to capture and contained generous amounts of badly-needed protein. Without the turkey, the colonization of the American continent might well have been delayed. However, aggressive hunting brought the wild turkey to near extinction almost two centuries ago. Wild turkeys were re-introduced into many parts of the United States beginning in the 1950s and are now plentiful again in most states. Here's a 19th century recipe for wild turkey that, with some modification, can be used today.

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This stately bird stalker of Southern forests and Western prairies is eagerly sought after by the lovers of good eating in those regions. The dark meat and game flavor proclaim his birthright of lordly freedom as truly after he is slain and cooked, as did his lithe grace of figure, lofty carriage, and bright eye where he trod his native wilds. I have heard sportsmen declare that when they have inveigled him up to a blind by imitating the call of his harem or younglings, they have stood in covert, gun at shoulder and finger on the trigger, spell_bound by pitying admiration of his beauty. But I have never seen that sensibility curbed appetite while they told the story at the table adorned by the royal bird, have noted, indeed, that their mouths watered rather than their eyes, as he crumbled, like a dissolving view, under the blade of the carver.

Draw and wash the inside carefully, as with al [sic] /179/ game. Domestic fowls are, or should be, kept up without eating for at least twelve hours before they are killed; but we must shoot wild when we can get the chance, and of course it often happens that their crops are distended by a recent hearty meal of rank or green food. Wipe the cavity with a dry soft cloth before you stuff. Have a rich forcemeat, bread_crumbs, some bits of fat pork, chopped fine, pepper, and salt. Moisten with milk, and beat in an egg and a couple of tablespoonfuls of melted butter. Baste with butter and water for the first hour, then three or four times with the gravy; lastly, five or six times with melted butter. A generous and able housekeeper told me once that she always allowed a pound of butter for basting a large wild turkey. This was an extravagant quantity, but the meat is drier than that of the domestic fowl, and not nearly so fat. Dredge with flour at the last, froth with butter, and when he is of a tempting brown, serve. Skim the gravy, add a little hot water, pepper, thicken with the giblets chopped fine and browned flour, boil up, and pour into a tureen. At the South the giblets are not put in the gravy, but laid whole, one under each wing, when the turkey is dished. Garnish with small fried sausages, not larger than a dollar, crisped parsley between them.

Send around currant and cranberry sauce with it.

Source: Marion Harlan. Common Sense in the Household: A Manual of Practical Housewifery. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1871. Reprint. Birmingham, Alabama: Oxmoor Press, 1985. 179-180.