Slow roasting, deep frying, even grilling over hardwood coals — there's more than one way to cook a turkey, just ask our panel of veteran cooks and butchers

It seems nothing frazzles a cook more than preparing the Thanksgiving turkey.

We turned to some experts to get some last-minute advice.

The most popular method is roasting a turkey in the oven, but some prefer cooking it in a roaster, such as a Nesco, while others swear there is nothing tastier than a bird grilled over hot coals or deep fried in peanut oil.

At Bernie's Fine Meats in Port Washington, more than 250 turkeys — all of them fresh, natural or free-range birds without preservatives — will go out the door this week.

Although he's heard about other cooking methods, owner Steve Bennett says roasting the turkey at 325 degrees, basting as desired with the pan juices, is the best way.

"Don't cook it too hot or you end up burning the outside and the inside is still red," he said.

A free-range turkey will get done about a half-hour sooner than a frozen, thawed bird because

it's leaner, Bennett said. That's the type of turkey he provides for his family's Thanksgiving.

"I have to tell my mother, who's been roasting turkeys for years, when it's time to check it. She'll say it needs another 30 minutes, but I'll be right," he said.

"The important thing is to take the turkey out of the oven and don't touch it for 20 minutes. When you have hot meat, all the juices are still cooking and finishing off the meat around the bone. If you cut into it right away, all the juices and flavor runs out. It also messes up your tablecloth."

Butcher Dan Lanser of Sanfilippo's Sentry Food Store in Port Washington prefers lowering the turkey into his fryer and deep frying it in peanut oil.

"It's nice and quick, about three minutes per pound," he said. "I like the taste. When I have Thanksgiving, I make both (oven roasted and deep-fried) and that's the one that goes first."

He sets the fryer on concrete "far away from the house and garage."

"Make sure the turkey's thawed and there's no ice inside or it will splatter," he said.

When Lanser cooks a turkey in the oven, he roasts it breast side down.

"It tastes a lot better because all the juices go into the breast and it gets juicier," he said. "Right before it's done, I turn it right side up, rub a little peanut or olive oil on it and it browns up nice."

Ozaukee Press photographer Sam Arendt has been saying for years that the turkey he grills over natural wood coals is the best.

The key, he said, is to put a stainless-steel pie plate over the coals and under the rack, so the heat is out and around the bird.

Arendt adds cooked Italian sausage, sautéed onions and garlic and a couple tablespoons of his homemade spicy salsa to packaged seasoned bread stuffing. He uses orange juice to moisten the stuffing, which he packs loosely into the cavity of the bird. He puts the remaining stuffing in a roasting pan, adds more orange juice, and cooks it, covered, in the oven or over coals.

He starts a 20-pound turkey on the grill at 7 a.m. and it's done by12:30 or 1 p.m. He checks the bird about every half hour and covers the wing tips, drumsticks and breast with foil when they're browned.

"You can also add a couple dry cayenne peppers to the stuffing for more of a kick," Arendt said. "I like the flavor of it. You have the smoke, orange juice and little extra spice and pizzazz."

Mary Fran Lepeska, retired University of Wisconsin-Extension home and consumer education agent for Ozaukee County, uses a Nesco roaster to cook her turkey.

“I normally stuff it, but the trend seems to be away from that and to bake it separate. I stick in a meat thermometer and cook it according to the directions on the package,” Lepeska said.

“If I don’t stuff it, I usually put a cut-up apple inside for flavor. I might put a little olive oil and seasonings on top.

“The best turkey we had was one my nephew, an aspiring chef, made. He brined it and cooked it over the grill. Boy, was that good, but it’s time consuming.”

This year, her mother and sister will prepare the turkey, but Lepeska has already bought a turkey to roast at home.

“I love leftovers. I think turkeys are easy to make,” she said.

“Just remember to take the giblets and neck out of the cavity before roasting it. You can roast a turkey that isn’t completely thawed; it will just take a little longer.”

Agnes Halverson of Port Washington has been cooking turkeys for 50 years, which makes her an expert.

“I don’t know if I’m an expert. I follow the timetable on the label. I usually cook it through the night because we also have a ham that has to go in the oven,” Halverson said.

She puts the turkey in a Nesco to keep it hot until dinner time. She and her husband Duane “Swede” have five children, 22 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren, and most will be around the table on Thanksgiving Day. Two daughters live across the street, so all their ovens are used for cooking the meal.

Halverson usually roasts a 25-pound turkey so there are leftovers for everyone to enjoy.

“One year I ordered a fresh turkey from a woman and it was 39 pounds,” she said.

It was so big, she had to rinse it in a laundry tub.

“I used two cooking bags, one on each end, that overlapped,” Halverson said. “It was so big, we were afraid the platter would break if we tried to carry it to the table, so we cut it up in the kitchen. It was really good.

“Turkey is always good. It seems when you cook something big, it always tastes good.”

Bennett, who specializes in making European style-sausages and bacon that he smokes in the shop’s smokehouse, said he expected business would be slow this year because of the economy.

“But it isn’t. We have more turkey orders than last year and we sold a lot of steaks and smoked meats to hunters. People really like our sausage,” said Bennett, who spends January and

February inventing new sausage recipes and spice combinations.

This is a busy time for Bennett, who has a degree in finance but became fascinated by the art of sausage making when he helped his wife's uncle in his sausage shop in Milwaukee.

"I love this job. When people come into the shop, they're happy. They have a smile on their faces. They like the smoked smell and seeing the sausages hanging and all the things in the cases. It takes them back to simpler times. It's like a European market," Bennett said.

"The main thing about Thanksgiving is to give thanks for your family and friends and help people in need. We have to make sure that everybody has food on the table."

Steve Bennett, owner of Bernie's Fine Meats in downtown Port Washington, will sell more than 250 fresh turkeys this Thanksgiving. Photo by Sam Arendt