How to Spatchcock a Chicken

By Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

I freely admit to anyone who will listen that I love to spatchcock a chicken. To be candid, I've become so enamored with spatchcocking that I will sing its virtues whether people intend to listen or not. Just the other night, on New Year's Eve, I waxed so poetically about this latest in a tragically long line of episodic preoccupations that we just about missed the big ball's descent. That's how much thrill I get out of good spatchcock.

And I won't stop at spatchcocking chickens. I actually started out years ago on a lesser scale, performing the glorious deed on small fowl. More recently I have been climbing my way up the poultry ladder, taking on larger and larger birds. Indeed, only last week I performed a spatchcocking tour de force: a turkey that I spatchcocked with abandon. And yesterday I amazed even myself by spatchcocking two chickens at once. Imagine, a double dipping spatchcocking spectacular, right in my own home.

It's been years since I so enjoyed one of these inane infatuations. Not that I haven't had my share. At some point during the 80s I had an excellent time wondering aloud how vinyl got to be virginal and what happened to vinyl that lost its virginity. When I went on one of these low carb diets that had a definitive list of "good" and "bad" foods, I decided that life itself could become more manageable if I classified everything as either "good" or "bad." My friends and family had to endure endless, Rain Man-style categorizations: "James Taylor good, Mariah Carey bad. Real crab good, imitation crab bad. Blitzing good, prevent defense bad."

Last year's month-long enthrallment involved this idea I had that people who wanted to discover happiness should forget about therapy, medications, and self-help groups. Instead, I

offered the advice that they should get in touch with their Inner Idiot. In retrospect I'm not sure this was the best idea I ever had and it certainly wasn't good for business. But it was productive in that I wrote a faux treatise on the subject and won a prize in a writing contest.

Next was a phase when I decided that the only way to cook most foods was to use an oven heated to the max. For months I cooked about everything you might imagine at 500 degrees, all the time pronouncing to the world that I had found the ultimate and only way to prepare a meal. I've mostly held on to this premise, but not with quite the same maniacal fervor.

The joys of falling headfirst into one of these rhapsodic interludes are countless. The predominating feeling is that you, once and for all, have absolutely and undeniably Figured It Out. Sure, life may be confusing, the finger of fate fickle, and the Dow unpredictable, but dammit you have nailed an all-important element of your existence. This special form of delusion empowers you no end. Really, it infuses you with an air of competence, savoir-faire, and a touch of omniscience. This insight you've had or technique you've discovered is so profound that it simply places you far and above the rest of the human race, no question about it.

Take spatchcocking, for example. No doubt exists in my mind that spatchcocking a chicken is the way to go. It's hard for me to fathom that everyone doesn't routinely spatchcock his chickens, and with gusto. It has such obvious advantages over kindred practices that I'm thinking there should be a rule against those who regularly fail to spatchcock a chicken.

I downright pity those who have never been taught this ancient art. It should be a regular part of our national curriculum. Maybe the topic should be on one of those national competency exams that our President wants to foist upon the nation. No child should be left behind when it comes to learning how to spatchcock a chicken.

Because I've discovered the special art of spatchcocking, I figure that I must be superior to those who are spatchcock naïve. Imagine, all these people walking around and most wouldn't know a good spatchcock even if it sat on their poor, dull faces. Fortunately for personkind, my zeal about the benefits of a spatchcocking (in tandem with an inexhaustible supply of narcissism) propels me to educate the masses at every turn. It's the least I can do for my circle of friends and family. And I didn't get to be a full professor for nothing, you know. I can find a way to work the topic of a spatchcocked chicken into any conversation. With even the slightest of provocations I'm off and lecturing with passion about how I just love to spatchcock a chicken.

If you happen to be a golfer, you are undoubtedly familiar with the phenomenon I'm trying to describe. It happens on the driving range after you've hit about two jumbo buckets, shanking most of them off to the right or at best gumming a weak slice barely far enough downrange to justify having swung the club at all. As you walk dejectedly toward the ball shack to fill your third jumbo bucket, you suddenly remember that you've often swung best if you start by moving your left shoulder toward your chin (or if you move the "V" formed by your shoulders and hand straight back along a line parallel to your feet or if you begin by turning your hips instead of moving your hands or if you put 62.3% of your weight on your right side as opposed to your left or if you cock your wrist early or if you cock your wrist late or if you turn your right foot slightly outward or your left foot slightly inward or if you maintain a nice tempo by humming the Blue Danube or if you start your downswing by aiming the butt of the club toward the ball, or if you focus on rotating your wrists through the swing or bringing your right elbow toward your hip or if you follow whatever other bit of advice you've picked up from watching the Golf Channel or reading Golf Digest or from a golfing buddy who has lapsed into the notion that he's Got It Figured Out).

Now buoyed by this sudden revelation, you return to the hitting area and launch five perfect strikes down the midline. You're ecstatic, slightly frustrated that it took you two jumbo buckets to remember what you already knew to be successful, but nonetheless you're on top of the world. All that self-loathing, deep humiliation, and chronic depression about your lack of golf prowess melts away in the bright light of this insight. You've hit on the key to success, that one critical cog in the machinery of a masterful swing. Damn, come this Saturday's round, you will beat the course into submission, win all bets, and amaze every one of those so-called golfing buddies who have snickered at you lo these many years.

Armed with the power of a good suggestion, you don't hesitate to share it with others in the practice area, those poor, hapless souls who have not yet been blessed as you have with The Answer. You walk up to a struggling range companion and, with an air of confidence and serenity worthy of the Dalai Lama, you impart knowledge certain to produce a shining future. You understand now why those Evangelists on TV are always smiling: they're just so damn happy to be spreading the word to all those who sin. Lord, pave the way for me to help those who cannot help themselves.

The glow that suffuses your very being spreads well beyond the narrow confines of your golf life. Its radiance warms the totality of your existence. You return home and even that damn dog, whose aging bladder now releases immediately upon paw contact with your best Oriental rug, looks kinda cute. The wife's nightly fusillade of assaults on your weak character bounces off you like bullets off of Superman's chest. It's all ok because you finally have it all together, even though, in the back of your mind, you have some inkling that you've been through this process many times before and that your Key to Success has a half-life shorter than a New Year's resolution.

But I think it will be different with my spatchcocking obsession. This is more than just a momentary brain lock on a compelling idea. In this one instance I think we're talking about a life-altering type experience.

I supposed I shouldn't assume that you're necessarily the kind of person who already knows how to spatchcock a chicken. Lucky for you, I will explain the process in some detail: First, what you do is find a chicken, turn it breast-side down, and bone it. Specifically, with a pair of poultry shears and starting at the neck of the chicken, cut down one side of the backbone. Now cut down the other side of the backbone so that you can remove it entirely. Without the spine in evidence, you can fold the chicken open like a book, skin-side down, and remove the breastbone by making slits on either side and pulling out the cartilage. Turn the chicken skin side up, cut off the wing tips if you prefer and maybe even the bulbous drumstick ends, and there you have it, your first spatchcocked chicken.

The consequence of this brief operation is that the chicken, thanks to its now relatively uniform height, can cook quickly and evenly. A 3-pound chicken that might have taken almost 2 hours to cook will be done in more like 45 minutes and with white meat as juicy as the dark because it didn't have to sit in the heat waiting for the once-thicker regions to cook. You can get fancy and make "Chicken Under a Brick" by putting foil-covered bricks on top to flatten it all the more. That's a general idea in cooking, as I understand it: the more consistent the volume of something you're heating, the more evenly it will cook. Like when you're cutting vegetables for a stew or stir-fry: Everything should be about the same thickness so that it will cook consistently.

You can't believe how perfect poultry cooks if you spatchcock it first. My preference is to get the oven as hot as it gets and preheat my old cast iron skillet along with the rest of the oven. When I'm ready to roll, I take my spatchcocked chicken, lay it down in the skillet, and let it roast

away. If I want super-crispy skin, I turn on the broiler for a few minutes before serving time. (Actually, to really make poultry perfect, you've got to take one all-important, pre-spatchcocking step: first brine the chicken by soaking it in salted water [use kosher salt] and some brown sugar for a few hours or longer. If you do so, you'll find that the chicken is far more tender and seasoned than you could have ever imagined).

The benefits of spatchcocking extend far beyond the palate. You probably figured that the pure entertainment value of saying the word "spatchcock" in mixed company is priceless. Try it the next time you're at a restaurant with friends. With all the innocence you can muster, wonder aloud if the chef prefers to spatchcock his chickens. If you have a reputation like I do for sexualizing about anything, the quick assumption will be that you're once again crossing the line (I've notice that most people are considerably more successful than I when it comes to locating that damn line. It would help me out some if the same people who figured out how to generate the yellow first-down line on TV could do the same for the one that apparently demarcates social appropriateness). But then they'll learn that their accusations are woefully unfounded and that you're only curious about local culinary technique. Of course, no one will actually buy that you're motivations in broaching the topic were pure, but that's more their problem than yours. You can't help it if their minds are in the gutter.

From my personal experience, the briefest mention of spatchcocking ignites a fireworks display of questions, comments, and free associations. The latter form of reaction is naturally the best. One of my friends decided that spatchcocking, because it involves removal of the spine, is the perfect metaphor for what happens to a man who marries. Someone at the party even less sober swore that he would dedicate his life to spreading the word about this blessed practice. He wanted to organize an annual Spatchcock Festival with a Spatchcock Queen in attendance. He'd advertise

by establishing a website whose URL was www.spatchcock.com (fact is, one already exists) and by creating pop-up ads on AOL. He was the same guy who suggested we design a t-shirt that read, "I got a spatchcock last night at the Gordon's."

I admit most of these flights of fancy do have a distinct sexual flair. In a rare display of good judgment, I won't elaborate here because I do have a job that requires the perception of wholesomeness. But take my word for it: private parts and their public display can serve as bountiful grist for this particular mill.

You'll get questions like, "Can you spatchcock a cow?" and "What special precautions should you take when you spatchcock an animal?" Most inquiries, though, are etymological. While it's natural enough to wonder about the derivation of such an intriguing word, answers are aloof. Here's the entry from the American Heritage Dictionary:

> **spatchcock**
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> SYLLABICATION: spatch·cock
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> NOUN: A dressed and split chicken for roasting or broiling on a spit.
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> TRANSITIVE VERB: Inflected forms: spatch·cocked, spatch·cock·ing, spatch·cocks
>
> 1. To prepare (a dressed chicken) for grilling by splitting open.
>
> 2. To introduce or interpose, especially in a labored or unsuitable manner: "Some excerpts from a Renaissance mass are spatchcocked into Gluck's pallid Don Juan music" (Alan Rich).
>
> ETYMOLOGY: Perhaps alteration of spitchcock, a way of cooking an eel.

This derivation stands at some variance to others. According to “Forthright's Favourite Words,” spatchcock probably derives from “dispatch” and “cock” (the English use the term to denote a freshly killed young chicken). But according to another source, the “popular interpretation as a shortening of ‘dispatch cock’ is etymologically not confirmed.” These lexicographers don’t mind the word’s hazy origins all that much, though, because they love the figurative meaning. One wrote, “The idea of hurriedly killing, stuffing and cooking a bird has enormous metaphorical value. As a verb, spatchcock is a term that should be picked up and used by every editor who has ever had to read a manuscript that has been prepared in such a manner.” I didn’t even know I was spatchocking all during high school when I’d blithely combine nearly random sentences in the fervent hope that I’d finally make the assigned word limit.

So perhaps now you understand why I absolutely love to spatchcock a chicken. Nothing could be more perfect: In one fell swoop you’ll have yourself a wonderful culinary experience alongside intensely animated intercourse. The word has an almost magical ability to spark whimsy, erotic imagery, literary metaphor, and uncontrolled tangential thinking. I personally am unaware of another word with more power, exotic charm, and practical application. It’s beats all to hell my former favorite word “interdigitate” or its predecessor “defenestration.” Great words but they can’t hold a candle to “spatchcock.” You’ll agree with me, I’m sure. After all, I’ve Got It All Figured Out.