

The Menu



Traditionally, my menu for Thanksgiving gets set this week. Here's a little bit of the history of Thanksgiving in my family.

I always tell people it was my mom who taught me not to be intimidated by any holiday meal or the size of the crowd. As I analyze it, I realize my mom boiled Thanksgiving down to a minimalistic meal that anyone could enjoy. Our family was always taking in the "orphans" – people who didn't have anywhere to go on Thanksgiving. That meant we might have a parish priest, or we might have a roommate from college, or even a neighbor. All were welcome at our table. Add seven kids to that, maybe a boyfriend or girlfriend or two and we had a crowd.

My mother always ordered a fresh turkey straight from the farm. It was huge every year, 20 pounds plus. To get a 20# turkey in a regular oven in the '60s, you had to take out the bottom rack, and really pray that it would squish in. You couldn't have it touching the top element, so it was touch-and-go sometimes.

The turkey contained homemade stuffing that my mother got up really early to mix up. The turkey took all day to roast. The rest of the things on the menu repeated every year with little or no change. Around the turkey my mother would manage to crowd

in some sweet potatoes, some acorn squash cut in half and filled with a butter pat that would melt into goodness. We might have some baked potatoes or more likely those would be cooked on the stove and mashed. Beyond what was in the oven, we always had a fruit plate, but nothing fancy. We kids wanted un-fancy anyway. We delighted in the canned pear halves, the canned peach halves, the maraschino cherries, and more. Of course, we had gravy. My job as I got tall enough to reach the stove was to stir it. Our rolls and pumpkin pies came from the bakery. Anything else we had was probably made by me as I got older. I think I made a Waldorf salad once. I can't remember much more. We all enjoyed our meal and the turkey provided enough extra to have a meal of leftovers. I never felt deprived.

This leads me to the story of my Thanksgiving menu. I have made over 30 years of Thanksgiving menus and no two menus look alike. The only thing they had in common was turkey. But there was always a twist. One year the turkey might be Cajun. Another year, it might be Italian. You never knew. There'd be barbecued turkey one year and roasted the next. And you know what? My guests never complained. We'd invite family members, friends, and even their families.

I know in some families the menu has to be exactly the same every year or there'd be an uproar. Not in my dining room. My guests just went with the flow. Every year I did about a month of research to figure out what I wanted to make and how it would all coordinate. I'd get out my Bon Appetit and my Gourmet magazines. I'd pour through those looking for ideas. I'd even buy some additional magazines featured at the store. Each year I was sure to also pick up a copy of Southern Living Magazine. Even though I lived up North; I always thought they had some good offerings. I'd highlight my ideas, and this is the week when I would nail down what I was making so I could start my grocery list. It took a lot of thought to know how to time

everything so it could make it to the table in a coordinated effort. I went beyond the regular meal too and incorporated appetizers to eat while watching football and a dessert buffet rather than just pumpkin pie. I look back on it now and realize I was a bit of a nut. But I'm not unhappy or embarrassed. Cooking was (and in some respects still is) my favorite hobby. I thought of holidays or big parties as a way to exercise those "muscles" and challenge myself to pull it off.

This year our Thanksgiving will be teeny in size. Just the two of us.

The only thing I will be making is dinner reservations. Yup. Going out. We don't know a lot of people in Chattanooga yet and those we do know have their own family obligations to attend to.

There is a little, romantic place that serves Italian food that we have not been to yet. We are looking forward to trying that out. This year my pumpkin might just come wrapped in ravioli.

BIG YUM

Cheers to you and yours,