

Thanksgiving Thoughts: Passing Along Some Positive Perspective with the Pumpkin Pie

By Sara Ambarian

<http://www.condortales.com/bridestouch.html>



This morning, when reading a local news site on the internet, I saw a poll about Thanksgiving. It asked, basically, “Are you going to cook Thanksgiving dinner this year?” It was a logical poll question, I thought. Many people do not cook a traditional Thanksgiving dinner for a number of reasons including (but not limited to, of course) living alone, disinterest, finances, travel and eating at someone else’s house or a restaurant that day. I found the answer options for the poll much more striking, however. The most positive and enthusiastic option was something about not minding cooking “once a year”, and the other three choices got progressively more negative from there. The results (unscientific, of course) were equally striking to me. Only 40% of respondents could even stoke up enough enthusiasm about Thanksgiving dinner to say they “didn’t mind” cooking it– a tepid response at best.

Now, I must confess at the outset that Thanksgiving is personally one of my favorite holidays. What could be more inspiring than setting aside a day to join together with family and friends to remind ourselves of –and celebrate– the many blessings in our lives? I have always thought that was a wonderful idea. Add to that the fact that the traditional seasonal foods are delicious, the weather most places is pretty darned good, there is plenty of football on television (and if you don’t enjoy that, you can always pop in a good movie <giggle>), and there aren’t many obligatory “events” to the day besides some toasting, eating and enjoying one another’s company. To me, a holiday can’t get much better.

I also have great memories of Thanksgiving (and all holidays) in my childhood as relaxing days filled with the smells and tastes of my mother's excellent cooking and a general feeling of happy togetherness. I realize that I was fortunate in this experience, and not all families have pleasant relationships –at the holidays or anytime. I also realize that “home-making matters” do not come easily or naturally to everyone. I'm sure that these facts contribute to the rising cynicism and negativity about holiday dinners, weddings and other big family events.

However, I find it disappointing how many people seem to have jettisoned even the attempt at creating this sort of atmosphere for themselves and their loved ones. We may not be able to dictate the actions or attitudes of others; but in our own homes, I believe that we do have the opportunity to set the tone, at least to some extent, through the ways in which we approach traditions and milestones in our lives. In fact, as parents I believe that, to a large extent, we owe our children at least the effort of trying to show them the positive side of the traditions we practice.

Getting Started

I don't believe it has to be particularly difficult to approach Thanksgiving, or any holiday or family event, with a positive attitude and reasonable perspective. In embracing them, please know that I am not talking about every family aspiring to a flawless, “domestic diva” type of celebration. That would be neither practical nor appropriate. It would not even be fun!

Every family has their own style, and I think that is a wonderful fact. It is also an important factor in making YOUR family's celebrations meaningful and enjoyable. I always serve fancy holiday dinners at our home, with china and candles and a table full of food... but I almost always serve them in my stocking feet. You see, there aren't any real rules when it comes to planning and presenting a pleasant family feast. It only requires some thought, some enthusiasm, some common sense, and perhaps a “dash” of sense of humor.

Begin With the Basics

First of all, you need to know and understand your own (and your family's) preferences and limitations.

Try to be realistic about the time, energy, budget, skill and even equipment and utensils you have to (or want to) devote to the meal. If you do not cook, or do not want to cook, there are many restaurants, delicatessens, and supermarkets where you can order a complete dinner that you only need to heat and serve. Have the family help you set the table and maybe decorate a bit, and you could be all set.

If you like to cook but don't have a lot of time or energy, or if you are not very experienced at cooking but would like to try, keep the menu simple. The first Thanksgiving dinner I cooked on my own (at about age 20) consisted of a roast turkey, some dressing, instant mashed potatoes, frozen peas, canned cranberry sauce, and an apple crisp, I think. Several of my girlfriends thought I was nuts to tackle even that much of a meal at the time, but I had fun and the meal was tasty. One year when my husband was away, and I was cooking for myself and our two toddler children, we made a very happy and festive Thanksgiving dinner of a whole chicken, some potatoes, mixed vegetables and canned cranberry sauce. It isn't always important what you make, or how much you make. The most important thing is often the spirit with which you serve and share what you have.

Consider, too, the space and equipment you have for preparation and cooking. Think through the timing of each step to be sure you will have enough utensils, mixing bowls, pots, pans, casseroles, stove and/or oven space, and serving dishes (if you will use them) for all the dishes you plan to make. Also think through which recipes can be made in advance and refrigerated until mealtime, then served cold or cooked/reheated at the last minute. This will help your time, energy, utensils and equipment go farther and reduce any stress you may have on the day.

If you have been cooking Thanksgiving for a long time and are feeling it is becoming a bit routine, it might be time to involve the kids more, try a new recipe or two (but be careful about changing old favorites!), decorate a little more or differently, or invite a friend or family member who doesn't have anywhere else to celebrate. It may help you adjust your perspective and ratchet up a little fresh enthusiasm.

If you have (or will be hosting) small children, keep in mind their behavioral limitations and tastes. It can be fun and educational to practice one's table manners a bit and try a new food or two; but unrealistic expectations and too many unfamiliar foods (especially if paired with a houseful of people and a couple of distracted parents) can be stressful.

Meal Planning

Decide on the basic number and types of dishes you would like to serve—appetizers, turkey or other main dish, stuffing/dressing, potatoes/sweet potatoes, vegetables/salads, fruit/fruit salads, bread, gravy and/or other extras and condiments, dessert, beverages, etc. Then you can decide the specific ingredients and/or recipes.

Keep in mind your family's level of comfort with new and/or different foods. Some families bore easily and have no interest in having the same dishes every year; in other families changing the "family recipe" for certain (if not ALL) dishes can border on a sacrilege. In our household, a few key dishes are "required" and should be served in their "normal"/traditional form in order for everyone to feel they have had a "real" Thanksgiving meal. The rest of the side dishes and desserts are "cook's choice" each year; and I choose them carefully, looking mainly for recipes which have ingredients and characteristics that might qualify them as potential new family favorites.

Plan your menu, as well as your place settings and any decorations, to be appropriate to the gathering, with your goal being making people feel welcome and comfortable.

Also, do consider making a dish or two for a family member or guest who might have special tastes, a special diet, or a sentimental favorite (though a good variety on your menu will give most everyone something they like and can/will eat). It is often well worth the extra time and effort in the comfort and enjoyment it gives that guest. For example, an unadventurous child might welcome a familiar, but untraditional (or less traditional), side dish like tater tots, macaroni and cheese (actually traditional in some families for the holiday, and so delicious), biscuits or applesauce. An older relative might feel it's "not really Thanksgiving without" some traditional dish like green bean casserole or candied yams. A vegetarian guest might appreciate an alternative to your traditional sausage stuffing. Perhaps one family member or guest really loves sautéed mushrooms or pickled beets; it can be your gift to them to add that to the fare, even if no one else would request it. Besides, I have been surprised at many family meals who "discovers" some dish I would never have expected them to enjoy. Sometimes variety really IS the spice of life.

Speaking of spice, Thanksgiving is a wonderful time to enjoy the cozy tastes and smells of traditional herbs, like sage, parsley, rosemary, tarragon, black pepper,

and spices, like cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, allspice, mace and ginger. If you don't use a lot of herbs and spices normally, experiment with using them lightly until you and your family decide whether you enjoy them. You can also vary your use of them so each dish has a distinctive taste or complimentary dishes share a delicious harmony of flavorings.

Balance is important in a well-planned meal. Plan to have a selection of dishes which includes both hot and cold, sweet and savory, smooth and chewy/crunchy, colorful and neutral, rich and/or creamy and light and/or fresh, bold and bland, and (perhaps most important for the cook!) made-ahead and prepared at the last-minute.

Last but not least, learn to value leftovers. This seems to be a "lost art" in many families, perhaps because many of us are too busy to cook regularly. However, one of the real benefits of the time and effort it takes to "cook big" for Thanksgiving (or any other meal) is that what is not eaten immediately can often be frozen for an easy treat at a later date (steamed, heated in the oven or microwaved according to your preference and the type of food) or incorporated into other simple, tasty meals for a few days after. So think ahead about what you could do with anything that is left, and plan to get extras put away appropriately while they are still fresh and wholesome. Turkey meat is wonderful in salads, sandwiches, soups, eggs and many recipes like turkey tetrazzini (one of our family favorites). Leftover roasted or scalloped potatoes make a nice breakfast side dish as well as being useful for lunch, dinner or snacks. Some plain vegetables can be useful in soups or casseroles next day. Cranberry sauce is as tasty with a pork chop or chicken breast (or in a pork or chicken sandwich) as it is with your turkey dinner. Knowing that you have a plan so extra food will not go to waste means that you look forward to the extra reward for your time and effort later. It also makes it easier to stick with healthy, practical portions rather than stuffing yourself (unless that's part of the enjoyment of the experience for you!)

Involving Children and Others to Increase Everyone's Enjoyment of the Holiday

First, please do share with your children the message of Thanksgiving. Setting aside any conflicting attitudes about the origins of the holiday or political correctness concerns that any of you might have, I personally see it as a thoroughly positive and enriching experience for children and young people – all people, in fact!– to pause to reflect on the blessings in their lives and feel gratitude for them. Whether it be appreciating the beauty of the weather that day,

celebrating the chance to fellowship with loved ones, being grateful for having food on the table, or just being happy that someone made your favorite dessert, gratitude is an important virtue for us to demonstrate and try to instill in our children. Even in the toughest times, a grateful and appreciative heart can see their blessings; and honestly, most of us generally are quite blessed and fortunate. For children, going from the EXPECTATION of having every need met and being “made happy” to the true APPRECIATION of well-being and good fortune, along with a conscious decision of happiness, is an important step in maturity. I think that Thanksgiving is a wonderful opportunity to introduce or reinforce that concept.

Also, as I mentioned before, do try to include at least one favored (if not “favorite”) food of each family member, if possible (and it ought not be hidden in a dish full of other, less-favored ingredients). Everyone wants to look forward to something in the meal.

Encourage children to participate in meal planning, preparation and decorations in age-appropriate ways. It can add meaning to the event if it is “our meal”, a cooperative project.

- Even very young children can help with setting the table and putting up simple decorations. If you have very young children, do consider using extra visual decorations, like patterned tablecloths and/or napkins, themed party-type decorations, etc. Many kids enjoy the imagery, and it helps to set the scene.
- School-aged and older children may enjoy helping you shop for interesting and unusual ingredients. “What do you use this for?” is a very useful question that opens many interesting conversations.
- Teach an older child how to make one of their favorite traditional dishes (so they will be able to carry on the tradition someday in their own home!); or encourage them to look for a new or interesting recipe in cookbooks, at the library, or on-line. (The internet has recipe sites for just about any type, style and/or skill level of food you can imagine. You can also use a search engine and type in an ingredient or two, plus perhaps a dish name, then add the word “recipe”, and usually get dozens of suggestions!)
- For very small children, try to plan at least one make-ahead dish that contains all ingredients that are safe to taste raw –a fruit salad with whipped cream or sour cream, a gelatin molded salad, an ice cream pie, meat-and-cheese appetizers, or a

batch of Chex Party Mix or Muddy Buddies, for example. This gives them a chance to help out with preparations at a time when it is more convenient and appropriate to make a mess than it would perhaps be on Thanksgiving Day, as well as giving them that most delightful and memorable aspect of childhood cooking – taste-testing! It also adds two other important elements to their appreciation of the celebration: anticipation and pride of participation. In my opinion, these very young experiences in the kitchen also build a foundation for later confidence and competence with not only cooking but other new experiences as well. Also, remember that cooking is a wonderful blending of agriculture, mathematics, chemistry and physics, with experiments you get to eat!

- Be willing to delegate some duties and to accept help, if those are difficult for you to do. Sometimes it is a great gift to others to allow them to help out.

Keep the Day in Perspective

Plan well, but be flexible and keep your sense of humor if things do not go smoothly. You will enjoy the day more if you keep your expectations reasonable and your attitude positive. Your behavior also affects the perceptions of your family and guests about what sort of an experience Thanksgiving is or can be. Hosting a family gathering ought to be neither a test nor a chore. A happy holiday is a gift of memories that you and your family and guests give one another.

Keep the “big picture” firmly in mind as you go through the day. If everyone gets fed and has some laughs and hugs, that’s a successful Thanksgiving, in my opinion. Focus on what the kids DID eat, not those dishes at which they turned their noses. Focus on the fun that was had, not the mess that was made. Focus a camera, if you are so inclined, on the family and friends who attend, to help you all remember the day years from now. Focus on the blessings you have, because there are probably many. Last, focus on the opportunity you took to share your love and gratitude through new and old traditions, and hope that it encourages others, especially the young, to be loving and grateful and value traditions, as well.

Now, I’m off to finalize my own Thanksgiving plans. Best of luck with yours! :)

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