

THANKSGIVING DINNER

Some folks can wait until the day before Thanksgiving to start planning and preparing their Thanksgiving dinner, but I'm just not one of them. I like to know in advance how many people I'm serving, what I'm serving, and how I'm going to pull it all together. And that includes not just the meal itself, but all the related topics, including setting the table, home decorations, beverages, hors d'ouvres, and so on. Thanksgiving's just a week away, so by now I'm starting to make lists and plan my meal.

Here's the way I go about putting together Thanksgiving dinner. First of all, there's the guest list. How many am I serving, and does anyone have any dietary restrictions or issues? No point in putting chestnuts in the stuffing if someone is deathly allergic to them. If one of my guests is a vegetarian, that's usually not a problem as we'll have enough other side dishes going that the vegetarian is going to be able to get enough to eat. But it may change the way I make things.

For example, I may make a vegetable based gravy as well as the traditional one with giblets and turkey stock. Simply simmer some chopped carrots, onion, celery and garlic in a couple of cans of vegetable broth with some fresh parsley sprigs and maybe some thyme. After 20 minutes or so, let the mixture cool and put it in your electric blender and whirl it up. Strain it into a bowl, pressing down on the solids to extract the maximum flavor. Put the strained sauce back in the saucepan, bring it to the boil, and thicken either with cornstarch, or a thin flour and water paste, or use some Wondra flour, which is a mixture of cornstarch and flour and is great for thickening sauces and gravies.

Next is the issue of how you're going to cook the turkey. Aside from baking it in the oven, I've made some wonderful turkeys on the barbecue or in the smoke oven. And I've enjoyed some deep fried turkey that was absolutely delicious. This month's *Sunset* magazine has an article on a Hawaiian thanksgiving dinner that looks just delicious, with linguica in the stuffing and a soy marinated turkey cooked on the barbecue.

I get away with being inventive on rare occasions, but usually I end up going the traditional route. Sometimes I like to experiment with the stuffing, like making an oyster stuffing or a Cajun-inspired cornbread and andouille stuffing, or even wild rice and blueberries, but most of the time what the folks at my house want is your basic bread, onion and celery stuffing, flavored with sage.

A word here—use real bread. The bags of stuffing cubes, particularly the pre-seasoned ones, just aren't as good as using real bread. I buy several loaves of good French or Italian bread, let them get a little stale, then cut off the crusts and tear the bread into bite-size chunks. This can be done a day or two ahead of time while you're sitting in front of the TV. Leftover bread can be ground into fresh breadcrumbs in your food processor and kept in the freezer for whenever you need it. The crusts go into doggie dinner or feed the birds and the squirrels—they need Thanksgiving too!

The number of side dishes I make will depend on the number of people I'm feeding, plus whatever family traditions I'm honoring this year. Mashed potatoes are a given. My family was never big on candied yams, but for other families that's a requirement. My dad always liked creamed onions, with a little bit of grated nutmeg in the sauce. Mom liked Brussels sprouts. One good way of fixing Brussels sprouts is to peel all the leaves off the sprouts and then sauté the leaves in a little butter and garlic. It's a bit of a bother, but it's delicious and milder in taste than cooking the sprouts whole, and often people who think they don't like Brussels sprouts discover they love them cooked this way.

And don't forget about the beverages. Pick your wine or wines ahead of time, and make sure you have something festive for the non-alcohol drinkers at your table as well. Trader Joe's has wonderful bottles of sparkling blueberry or pomegranate, or French lemonade—much more fun than sparkling cider or iced tea. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen