

CHRISTMAS DINNER

Christmas dinner is a very special meal. I often start planning it a month or more in advance. We always had it on Christmas night—and even if there were only my parents and me present, Mom always made a wonderful meal. And it didn't involve turkey—that was for Thanksgiving. Here are some ideas of what to have for the centerpiece of your Christmas dinner.

Of course, if you really like turkey, be my guest. But as you just had it a month ago—why not try something else? My father's favorite Christmas dinner was roast beef. When I lived in San Francisco, I used to bring home a 5 or 6 rib roast from the Harris Ranch outlet at their restaurant on Van Ness. You had to take out a second mortgage, but the smile on Dad's face was worth it. And he ate on the leftovers all week. The last of the leftovers were always used to make roast beef hash, with potatoes, onions and a bit of heavy cream.

Sometimes we'd have a crown roast of pork. The crown roast of pork comes from the rib portion of the loin, perhaps the tastiest of all pork cuts. Your butcher can make one by bending this cut into a circle so that the two ends are almost joined, and then tying it with kitchen string. You can bake stuffing in the middle of the roast, such as a pork sausage and breadcrumb stuffing, or an apple and onion stuffing, or a chestnut stuffing.

Cover the bone ends with bits of tin foil while baking, then put on the little paper frilly ornaments that your butcher will give you after you take the roast out of the oven. Cookbooks used to want you to cook pork to an internal temperature of 185 degrees, but as trichinosis has been eradicated in this country, cooking to pork to an internal temperature of 155 degrees, or medium, results in much more tender and juicy meat. Not every butcher can or will prepare a crown roast, so be sure to ask ahead.

One of my favorite Christmas dinners, which I make every few years, is roast goose. Don't buy a goose weighing over 12 pounds or it may be tough. Remember that all goose meat is dark meat, and the bird will be a bit fatty, like duck. Be sure to render out the goose fat and save it, as cooking potatoes in goose fat makes the world's best home fries. Goose is delicious with an apple or prune stuffing, and braised red cabbage, or *rotkohl*, is a traditional accompaniment.

One year, in an excess of enthusiasm, I did roast pheasant. I got the pheasant from a specialty pheasant farm in the Santa Cruz mountains. It was terribly expensive and came out dry. The chestnut stuffing was good, but the bird itself was rather dry. If you really want pheasant I would recommend braising it.

Last year I did a roast leg of lamb. You can't stuff it, but I baked a wild rice and blueberry stuffing on the side that went very well with the lamb. I made a paste of mashed garlic, coarse salt and finely chopped rosemary leaves. Then I made slits in the leg of lamb, and pushed a little garlic/rosemary paste into each slit. I did that the day before, so the flavors would have time to get all through the meat. I then sprinkled the leg with salt and pepper and roasted it in a hot, 400 degree oven until medium-rare, and then made a gravy out of the pan juices with some white wine and chicken stock.

If you're not a meat eater, think about roasting a whole large fillet of salmon. Or if you're feeding a large crowd or don't want to do all that much cooking, try a baked ham. I used to get bone-in hams at the Corralitos Market near Santa Cruz, and I'd baste the ham as it baked with most of a bottle of Bargetto's Apricot wine. I don't like boneless hams, they get too dry and the leftovers don't stay moist. A couple of times, when I was serving a crowd, I bought a Honeybaked spiral-sliced ham, and I must say it was extremely good. If it's only going to be the two of you, try roasting a Rock Cornish Game Hen with a wild rice and dried cranberry stuffing on the side.

Whatever you choose as the main course of your Christmas dinner, your family and friends will appreciate the love and care that goes into this festive meal. Wishing you all the best for a wonderful Christmas, this is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.