



A Traditional Holiday Table

From Halloween to New Year's, celebrate the holidays with these traditional holiday dishes.

By Adrienne L. Shtop

About the Author

Adrienne L. Shtop is a writer, photographer and natural healer. Passionate about nature, crafts and community, she offers workshops on herbs and wild edibles, knitting and energy healing. Her memoir service helps people savor and share their personal histories. She can be reached at als9@att.net The holiday season is a sparkling time of family, togetherness and joy. Decorations and gifts contribute to the festive setting, but nothing says "Celebrate!" quite like food. Signifying love and abundance, traditional holiday dishes are as nourishing to the soul as they are to the body.

It's no wonder people gather in the kitchen at parties. The hearth is, and will always be, the heart of a home, radiating warmth and well-being to all who enter. The mingling scents of baking pies, roasting meats and bubbling side dishes can banish all worries and instantly set the mood for gracious celebrations.

Special dishes prepared just for these occasions are anticipated all year long: "Of course I'm coming home for Thanksgiving, Mom. I wouldn't miss your pumpkin pie!" Holiday meals also provide excellent forums for recounting family history, as traditional dishes have the power to refresh tucked away memories. Recipes that are handed down through generations carry these tales with them and become cherished family heirlooms. They connect us with times and loved ones passed, and mark our place in the family lineage.

Recipe Lost and Found

Not all of us are lucky enough to have a recipe box full of such fare, however. Time and distance obscure many important connections with the past. Often we grow so accustomed to a particular dish that we simply expect it will always be there, awaiting us on the table. Sometimes we assume a sister or cousin will maintain the treasured family recipe trove and we're disappointed to find out we are wrong. When this happens, we need to create tradition anew.

Caring for the Cook

The role of Holiday Chef can be tremendously fulfilling. A special glow comes from knowing that you are the architect of so much happiness. Anticipating the laughter, closeness and satisfied smiles of your diners turns the preparation of even the most involved recipe into a joyous adventure. With so many delicious dishes to cook, it's easy to overdo it, so here are a few ways to be good to yourself at holiday time, even while you're making it memorable for everyone else.

You'll be spending a great deal of time in the kitchen, so why not make it a fun and comfortable place to be? Play music you like, make sure there's enough light and sharpen your knives before you start cooking.

Expecting guests from out of town? Prepare their rooms early and bar further entry. Shortly before they arrive, place some fresh flowers and plump the pillows to make it look extra-inviting.

Plan time to rest and relax on the day of your event. Remember that it's a holiday--you shouldn't spend the entire day working! Why not employ those loitering in the kitchen? Small children can set tables and make decorations or place cards. Older kids can chop vegetables, stir sauces and make baked goods. Suggest a barter with a family member: "I'll cook, but I'll need you to give me a good shoulder rub while the turkey is in the oven!"

However you arrange your holiday cooking tasks, your day will be more joyous when your ingredients list includes a little extra care for the chef. To get you started, or to complement the collection you have, several inspired home cooks have contributed their families' favorite holiday recipes. Some of these courses have survived the passing of years, while others only recently became tradition. All are offered here in the spirit of sharing and with the understanding that, be it holidays or any other day, the human family eats at one table.

Halloween



Barm Brack

In Ireland at Halloween, small charms and coins are wrapped in wax paper and baked inside this fruit bread. It's said that whoever gets the ring will soon be married, the thimble means spinsterhood and a button betokens a bachelor. The sixpence symbolizes great wealth, which is exactly what it felt like to Alice Glynn when she found the sixpence a child in Limerick, South-West Ireland. This is her family's recipe.

Ingredients

A pot of hot Irish tea
2 cups mixed currants, raisins, candied citron
1 tsp. sugar
1 tsp. fresh yeast
1/2 cup lukewarm milk
2 cups flour
1 tsp. mixed spices (see Notes, below)
A pinch of salt
1 egg
3 Tbsp. butter
2 Tbsp. superfine sugar
1 beaten egg white for the crust

Preparation

Soak the dried fruit in the hot tea overnight.

In a small bowl, mix sugar with yeast. Add to milk, cover and let sit 5 to 10 minutes until frothy.

Sift together flour, sugar and spices in a large bowl. Cut in butter until crumbly. Make a well in the center and add the yeast mixture and the egg. Beat with a spoon for about 10 minutes until smooth. Work the fruits and salt into the dough by hand and knead well. Put dough into a greased bowl, brush top with melted butter, cover and let rise in a warm place until doubled in bulk.

Knead lightly and place into a lightly greased, 7-inch round baking tin, cover and let rise until doubled again.

Preheat oven to 425 degrees F. Bake dough in the top third of the oven for 40 to 45 minutes. A few minutes before baking is finished, take the brack from the oven, brush with egg white, sprinkle with superfine sugar and return to the oven for a minute or two.

Notes

1. Mixed spices: equal parts cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice, cloves and mace.

Thanksgiving

The next three recipes come from Marianne Rutter of Boxford, Mass. The Potato Filling was created by Marianne's mother, Lucy Pantano, in the 1950s and has been a staple on their family's Thanksgiving table ever since. Marianne says it's the first thing her children ask for at dinner.

Marianne herself created the other two dishes, all of which became instant favorites with her family. "It just wouldn't be Thanksgiving without my Sausage, Leek and Fennel Stuffing," she explains. "The Red Wine Cranberry Relish is very easy to make, but never lasts long at our house because it gets more flavorful by the day and makes a delicious, low-fat spread for leftover turkey sandwiches."

Lucy's Potato Filling

Ingredients

2 lbs. potatoes, peeled, cubed and boiled until fork-tender
3 eggs, beaten
1 small onion, chopped finely
2 stalks celery, chopped finely
2 Tbsp. fresh parsley (or more, to taste)
Salt & pepper to taste
2 slices white bread, toasted and torn into cubes
Up to 1/2 cup milk, if needed
Butter (to dot top of casserole)



Preparation

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. In a large bowl, coarsely mash the potatoes. Add the remaining ingredients, except milk and butter, and mix thoroughly with a wooden spoon. If mixture seems dry, add milk to achieve desired consistency.

Place the potato filling in a glass casserole or other ovenproof dish. Dot the top generously with butter. Cover with foil and bake for about one hour. Remove foil and bake another 20 minutes for a crisp top.

Marianne's Sausage, Leek & Fennel Stuffing for Turkey

Double this recipe if you are stuffing a turkey of 22 pounds or more.

Ingredients

8 cups dry, crusty bread, cut into 1- to 2-inch cubes
8 Tbsp. butter
3 leeks, rinsed well, green tops discarded and white sections chopped
Half a large bulb of fennel, chopped (about 2 cups)
3 Tbsp. fennel leaves, chopped
3-4 sprigs fresh thyme, stripped from the stem (or 1 tsp. dried thyme)
3-4 sprigs fresh parsley, coarsely chopped
Salt & pepper to taste
1 lb. sweet Italian sausage meat
(Or 1 lb. ground pork, seasoned with 1 Tbsp. fennel seeds and salt & pepper to taste)
Chicken or turkey stock
Additional melted butter

Preparation

Melt 2 tablespoons butter in a large pot or skillet. Add the sausage meat (or seasoned ground pork), breaking it up with a fork until lightly and uniformly browned. Set aside in a large bowl; do not drain.

In the same pot, melt the remaining 6 tablespoons butter. Add leeks and cook until wilted (about 5 minutes), then add chopped fennel bulb and cook about 10 minutes more.

Remove from heat and add fennel leaves, thyme, parsley, salt and pepper. Add browned sausage and mix well. Let mixture cool. (You can prepare up to this point the day before, refrigerating overnight.)

When cool, stir in the bread cubes and mix well. If stuffing seems a little dry, add chicken or turkey stock (1/4 cup at a time) until moist. You can add additional melted butter, as well.

Stuff your turkey! Singly this recipe should yield plenty for a 16- to 18-pound bird with some left over. Roast your turkey as directed, using minutes per pound for a stuffed bird.

Put the excess stuffing in a 3-quart casserole or baking dish. Pour 1/4 cup stock over all and dot the top with butter. Cover with foil and bake 30 minutes at 325 degrees F. For a crisp top, remove the foil after 15 minutes.

Red Wine Cranberry Relish

Ingredients

1 cup sugar
1 large cinnamon stick
Zest of one orange, cut into julienne strips
One 12-oz. package fresh cranberries, rinsed, picked over and drained well
1 cup red wine (preferably zinfandel or cabernet sauvignon)

Preparation

In a medium saucepan, bring sugar and wine to a boil, cook one minute. Add all remaining ingredients and return the liquid to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer 10 to 15 minutes or until berries pop and liquid thickens slightly. Remove from heat, discard cinnamon stick and allow to cool. Serve chilled. Store refrigerated in an airtight jar.

Christmas



Marianne Rutter originated the following recipe, which she serves every year for Christmas dinner.

Balsamic-Glazed Pearl Onions Ingredients

2–3 lbs. assorted pearl onions (white, yellow and red if available)
2 Tbsp. olive oil
1 cup good-quality balsamic vinegar
1/2 cup water

Preparation

In a saucepan filled with boiling water, blanch onions for 1 to 2 minutes, remove outer skins and set aside.

Heat oil in a large saucepan. Sauté the onions about 5 minutes, add vinegar and water. Simmer 10 to 12 minutes. With a slotted spoon, move the onions to a warm serving bowl. Let the vinegar mixture continue to simmer until it is reduced by half, pour over the onions and serve.

Christmas Pudding

Traditionally started five weeks before the holiday, Christmas pudding can be made up to two months in advance. It's customary for each member of the household to take a turn stirring the pudding while making a wish. This recipe is another timeless treasure from Alice Glynn.

Ingredients

1 cup self-rising flour (see Notes, below)
1 heaped tsp. mixed spices (see Notes, Barm Brack)
1/2 tsp. grated nutmeg
1/4 tsp. cinnamon
2 cups white bread crumbs, freshly grated from a stale loaf
2 1/2 cups brown sugar
1 cup suet, shredded (see Notes, below)
4 cups currants
1 cup raisins
1/4 cup mixed candied peel, finely chopped
1/4 cup citron peel, finely chopped
1/2 cup almonds, blanched, skinned and chopped
1 apple, peeled, cored and finely chopped
Grated rind of 1 orange and 1 lemon
4 eggs
1/4 pint barley wine (see Notes, below)
1/4 pint Guinness or other stout
4 Tbsp. rum

Preparation

Mix together flour, spices, bread crumbs and sugar. Stir in the suet. Gradually mix in all of the dried fruit, dried peel and nuts. Add the apple and the rind of the orange and lemon.

In another bowl, beat the eggs. Mix in the rum, wine and stout. Pour over the dry ingredients and stir like mad! This mixing is essential, so get help if you like. The mixture should fall from the spoon when tapped against the bowl. Add more stout if it is too dry. Cover with a clean cloth and leave overnight at room temperature.

The next day, grease two 2-pint pudding basins (see Notes, below) and pack the mixture in right up to the top. Cover with wax paper and secure tightly with string under the rims of the bowls. Steam for eight hours, making sure the water doesn't boil dry.

Replace the wax paper with a fresh piece and store the puddings in a cool place.

Steam for an additional two hours on Christmas Day. To serve, unmold the pudding onto a large plate and sprinkle with rum or brandy. Take to the table, or a nearby serving cart. Hold a long lit match near the pudding to ignite the alcohol fumes. Wait for the flame to go out or cover with a metal lid to extinguish before slicing.



Notes:

1. Self-rising flour: Mix 1 cup all-purpose flour with 1 tsp. baking powder and a pinch of salt.
2. Suet: The delicate fat surrounding beef kidneys. Some say you can substitute butter or vegetable shortening, some say, "Don't you dare!"
3. If you can't find barley wine, substitute brandy or whiskey, or add extra rum.
4. Pudding basins are thick, ceramic bowls with wide rims.

New Year's Eve

Cilantro Poppers

My friend Simone Allender loves cilantro so much that she once bet me the fragrant herb would even improve chocolate chip cookies. As a joke, I baked those very cookies for her at Christmas. Surprisingly, they were delicious. Always brainstorming new ways to enjoy her beloved cilantro, Simone created these tempting morsels for a recent New Year's Eve gathering.

Ingredients

- 8 oz. cream cheese
- 1 bunch fresh cilantro, chopped
- 1 cup flour
- Salt & pepper to taste
- 1/2 cup milk
- 1 egg, beaten
- 2-4 cups high-heat oil

Preparation

Using a deep fryer or a cast-iron pot, bring oil to frying temperature (approx. 370 degrees F).

Beat milk and egg together, set aside. Combine flour and seasoning, set aside.

Mash cream cheese to soften. Mix in cilantro. Using a teaspoon, scoop portions of the mix and roll into 1 1/2-inch balls. Dip balls in egg/milk mixture, then into flour mixture.

Place 6 to 8 balls at a time into the oil and cook for 1 to 3 minutes. Remove and place on a paper towel to drain. Let cool slightly before serving.

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