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When we were really little, my grandmothers hosted Thanksgiving, trading off every other year. Eventually a broken hip and other ailments got the best of them. For a year or two they took us all out to a noisy, over-crowded restaurant. It didn't take long for my mother to declare that SHE would now be cooking Thanksgiving dinner. No one argued.

Since my grandparents didn't like to drive after dark, the feast was mandated to start at the stroke of one. To meet this deadline, my parents were up and in the kitchen early, stuffing the turkey before the dawn. Snuggled under the covers, I could hear them having what could have been misconstrued as an argument. Within the family, we considered it to be nothing more than an enthusiastic discussion.

And what critical question could possibly merit so much predawn attention? Without fail, year in and year out, they engaged in an intensive debate on how long to cook the bird. In those days, my dad spent almost zero time in the kitchen but was surprisingly opinionated on this matter. Eventually they came to some kind of agreement, gave the turkey a kiss and pushed him into the oven.

Hours later the topic was revisited when they poked and prodded and opined if the bird was done. This second debate was even more interesting because at least one of my two grandmothers was more than apt, ready and able to pipe in with an opinion.

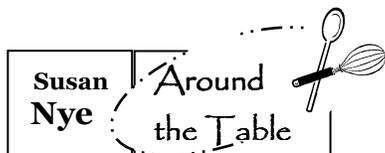
Eventually some kind of consensus was reached. Beautiful and golden brown, Tom Turkey was pulled from the oven. At that point, the activity in the already busy kitchen was turned up a notch. After everyone had given the requisite ooh or awww, my dad went to work carving the bird. My mother and grandmothers bustled around at top speed getting everything else ready and on the table. In short order, the sideboard groaned under the weight of the huge turkey and all the fixin's.

Ours was a traditional New England feast and the menu remained more or less unchanged for decades. As in 1621, the vegetables were hardy and local. A salad never graced our Thanksgiving Day table but the spread always included a huge mound of mashed potatoes, a big pot of butternut squash and a bubbling casserole of creamed onions. Lots of gravy, homemade cranberry sauce, two kinds of stuffing and Nana Nye's Cape Cod turnip completed the meal. Nana insisted and the rest of the adults seemed to agree that Cape Cod turnip was something special. I thought it tasted like bitter baby food. But then again I thought the squash tasted like bland, slightly sweet baby food. The meal ended with a trio of pies, apple, pumpkin and pecan, served with a dollop of vanilla ice cream. No one ever felt the need for change; it just seemed right to have the same menu year in and year out.

My mother happily retired as Thanksgiving's head cook several years ago. I now have that honor. Mom is more than delighted to peel a few potatoes but otherwise stay out of the fray. In spite of a few grumbles, I have made a change or two to the menu. (Blame it on all those years I lived in Europe!) The meal is a little simpler now. We make do with one stuffing instead of two. The squash is no longer boiled and mashed but roasted for soup. I've switched out the onions and turnip for broccoli and a salad. My sister-in-law Jennifer and her three girls bake beautiful apple and pumpkin pies. And my dad. Some things never change. He leads the annual Thanksgiving Day debate on how long to cook the bird.

Have a wonderful Thanksgiving with family and friends. Enjoy!

Bon appétit!



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Roasted Butternut Squash

Roasting squash is a delicious alternative to the boiled and mashed dish of my childhood. It is great on Turkey Day and wonderful in leftovers so make a little extra. Enjoy!

Serves 6-8

2 large butternut squash (about 2 pounds each), peeled, seeded and cut into bite-size pieces
2 tablespoons olive oil
2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
1 teaspoon dried sage
1/2 teaspoon dried thyme
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 large onion, chopped

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees.
2. Place squash in large roasting pan. Drizzle with olive oil and balsamic vinegar, sprinkle with herbs, salt and pepper and toss to coat. Roast for about 15 minutes. Add the onions, toss to combine and continue roasting, stirring occasionally, until tender and lightly browned about 45 minutes total.

Thanksgiving Leftovers Gratin

Use the leftover squash in salads, soups or baked in a cheesy gratin.

Serves 6-8

12-16 ounces dried penne pasta
1 pound baby spinach
About 2 cups leftover turkey cut into bite-sized pieces
About 2 cups leftover roasted butternut squash
4 ounces grated cheddar cheese
2 ounces grated Parmesan cheese
3 tablespoons unsalted butter plus more to butter the baking dish
3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
3 cups milk
1/2 teaspoon dried sage
1/2 teaspoon dried thyme
1/2 teaspoon paprika
Pinch nutmeg
Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Butter a large baking dish.
2. Cook the pasta according to package directions, less 1 minute. Drain and return the pasta to the pot. Combine the spinach with the hot pasta; let the spinach wilt. Add the turkey and squash and combine.
3. Heat the butter in a saucepan. Add the flour, herbs, paprika and nutmeg and whisk for 30 seconds. Gradually whisk in the milk. Bring to a simmer over medium-high heat. Reduce the heat to low and simmer until the sauce thickens slightly, whisking often, about 5 minutes. Add about 2/3 of the cheddar and Parmesan cheeses and cook over low heat for 3 to 4 minutes. Check for seasoning and add salt and pepper to taste.
4. Add the sauce to the pasta, toss to combine and transfer to the baking dish. Sprinkle the top with remaining cheeses. Bake at 400 degrees for 20-30 minutes or until the gratin is piping hot and golden brown.

