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FOOD

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It's about thanks and giving

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Thanksgiving. It's one of the easiest holidays to define: Thanks, and giving. Time to be thankful for what we have been given; time to give because we are thankful. It can be expressed in numberless ways, depending on who we are and what season of life we are in.

Because my own family, like many others, is now spread across the country, it's not always possible to have the old fashioned Thanksgiving dinner that we've grown accustomed to. So this year, we are doing something different; perhaps the start of a new tradition. We will be gathering in the tiny town of Due West, S.C., to help serve meals at the annual community Thanksgiving at Erskine College. Though it is not the tradition that I grew up with, the love behind it hasn't changed one bit. Hopefully, one day, our grandchildren will be able to tell their own grandchildren about "the way things used to be" in their day.

But for now ...

Morning

It is early Wednesday, the day before Thanksgiving. Noises and shushed laughter seep from the kitchen. The smell of fresh coffee, sausage and biscuits, tobacco. Climbing out of bed, I wander toward the commotion. My hair, a huge curly mess, is an entity unto itself. From the hallway I can see that Daddy has just come in from a trip to town, where he has been scouring the grocery stores for the biggest turkey he can find. Near the door where Daddy has just come in, bitterly cold air lurks like a ghost.

Lizzie, who has been married for not quite a year now, is an early riser and has come over for coffee. I lean on the kitchen portal and watch, still half asleep, as she pulls items out of a grocery bag: celery for the dressing, bananas for the fruit salad, and butter for nearly everything else. My sister, Suzi, who lives two houses down, has stopped in, too, on her way to work as a school bus driver. She and Mama are trying to fit the huge bird in the sink. It is just over 32 lbs. Everyone is laughing, even Daddy, whose laughter is more of a big smile than anything else. He is explaining that Mama was the one who told him to get the biggest bird he could find.

Gina and Neanie have been in the bathroom nearly all morning, pampering and chattering like monkeys. Suddenly they fling open the door and race upstairs to change outfits one more time. There is a half-day of school today but I have hay fever, something that happens nearly every year at Thanksgiving time, so Mama lets me stay home.

Every year the turkey gets a name. This year, Lizzie has named the turkey Carl. Mama props the turkey against the edge of the sink with one wing so that it looks like it's leaning against a bar, and makes up a sassy voice that is supposed to be the turkey talking to us. Still smiling, Daddy steps outside to fetch more wood, and in that very moment, the special aura that accompanies the holiday season settles over our house.

Noon

Thanksgiving is our family's biggest biggest celebration. I watch as Mama bakes pies — coconut and chocolate, along with a Tunnel of Fudge and pistachio cake. Each one is laid out on a table on the back porch, which is enclosed and cold enough this time of year



Buying a few holiday essentials each week from now until Thanksgiving will help you enjoy the special meal you dream of while keeping your budget in check.



Marti's Fresh Cranberry Relish is crisp and crunchy, making it a perfect counterpoint to the many creamy sides offered on the big day.

to act as a second refrigerator. Piled alongside the baked good are jars of home canned dill and fourteen day pickles.

I am excited and keep checking the front window, waiting for the arrival of my oldest sister, Marti, and her family from Florida. Suzi, finished with her morning bus run, pops through the back door with a Dutch apple pie made with apples picked in the orchard just a couple of weeks ago. Suzi is an excellent baker, but I do not like Dutch apple pie. It has raisins and pecans in it. She puts the pie on the table with the others.

After school, Neanie makes pumpkin pie. As she takes it out of the oven, the tin catches on the oven rack and the filling flops out onto the floor. Laughing hysterically, they scoop up the filling and spread it back into the crust. Lizzie has made a pecan pie. No one knows it yet, but she has used a store bought frozen crust and has left the wax paper liner in the bottom of the pie. Marti will discover it tomorrow after dinner.

Mama lets me crumble bread for the dressing while she chops celery and onions. No cornbread, but lots of sage and pepper. Some of the dressing will go in the bird; the rest will be pressed into a pan and baked until it is brown and crunchy the way Daddy likes it. I like it that way, too. Mama mixes together the dry ingredients and will finish the dressing this evening before



Mama's spicy dressing is a tasty alternative to traditional cornbread dressing.

putting the giant turkey in the oven.

Finally, Marti pulls into the driveway. Her boys, close in age to me, pile out of the car and pandemonium ensues. Dogs barking, everyone laughing, talking, hugging.

Evening

Everyone is here: Mamma, Daddy, we six girls and little Joey, our only brother. So far there are just four grandchildren and two sons-in-law. It seems crowded now, but in the years to come Mama's little house will hold twenty-four grandchildren, six sons-in-law and one daughter-in-law. Then the great grandchildren will start to come along.

Mama has cleaned out the refrigerator and made a big pot of soup for supper; Daddy has thrown a few potatoes onto the coals in the wood stove and, wiping off the ashes, splits one with me. I love the rich, nutty taste of potatoes cooked this way.

After supper, the married sisters and their husbands head home. Daddy is the first

neck and giblets until tender, remove the neck bones and use half of the meat for the dressing and the other half for gravy. She didn't have recipe per say, as the amounts varied depending on the size of the turkey and number of family present, but I have created a close approximation which make. enough dressing to stuff a 15-pound bird plus extra for baking a generous pan separately. This tongue tingling blend is good hot or cold; you may want to adjust the spices to suite your own palate.

4 loaves stale white bread
1 bunch celery, with leaves
2 yellow onions
2 teaspoons poultry seasoning
2 teaspoons black pepper
2 tablespoons rubbed sage
Boiled giblets and neck meat from a turkey
3 cups broth from boiling giblets (or canned broth)
Salt, to taste
Turkey drippings

Tear the bread into small pieces and place in a very large bowl or pan for mixing. Chop the celery and onion and add to the pan. Add the spices and giblets and toss all together to blend. Add a big spoonful of turkey dripping along with the broth the liquid and stir until the bread is evenly moistened. Add water if you feel that the mixture is too dry, but it shouldn't be too wet as it will soak up the turkey juices as it roasts. Taste and add salt if needed.

Spoon dressing into the turkey cavity just before roasting; don't overstuff, as the dressing will expand further as it cooks. Reserve remaining dressing. When the turkey is done, drain a generous amount of the turkey drippings into a separate baking pan. Add a little water, if needed, to the reserved dressing and press it into the pan. The thinner it is pressed, the crunchier it will be. While the turkey rests, bake the reserved dressing at 400 degrees F for 20 minutes or so, or until it is as brown and crispy as you like.

Marti's Fresh Cranberry Relish

This delicious relish requires no cooking, saving you valuable range space. It is crisp and crunchy, making it a perfect counterpoint to the many creamy sides offered on the big day. It is best made at least a day ahead, and two or three days ahead is fine. If you use frozen cranberries, don't thaw them before making this recipe.

1 pound fresh cranberries
2 oranges, with zest
1 McIntosh, Fuji or other sweet/tart apple
1 cup chopped pecans
1 cup sugar

In a food processor or old fashioned hand chopper, grind the cranberries until fine but not pureed. Zest the oranges, remove the remaining peel; section and chop the segments. Core the apple and chop, unpeeled, and chop the nuts, too, if they are not fine enough to your liking. Place the fruits and nuts in a bowl and add the sugar. Stir well and refrigerate at least overnight. Stir again before serving. 10-12 relish sized servings.

The Recipes

Right after Halloween my mother would begin buying items that we didn't grow or make ourselves for holiday dinners. She would buy a few things each week, and by Thanksgiving would have most of what she wanted without breaking her budget. If you have freezer space, now is the time to buy bread for dressing; you can also buy fresh cranberries and freeze them until use.

Mama's Spicy Dressing

Mama would boil the turkey