



Thanksgiving

A Cornucopia of Culinary Traditions



Sharing a meal with family and friends is a major part of American Thanksgiving. © Fotolia

In the autumn of 1621, almost one year after the English Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in what is now Massachusetts, they gathered with the Wampanoag Indians for a feast celebrating the colonists' first successful harvest. A blend of Native American and English Puritan customs, the three-day celebration combined eating with expressions of gratitude and friendship.

Historians believe the two groups dined on foods native to North America such as turkey, duck,

venison, lobster, crab, berries, pumpkin and squash. Although the modern American Thanksgiving menu differs slightly from the original fare, the holiday's essence remains the same: giving thanks for what you have and sharing with others.

Modern Interpretation

The modern Thanksgiving meal still revolves around foods native to North America. Turkey — whether brined overnight, basted with butter in the oven or deep

fried outdoors — takes center stage. In fact, so many Americans eat turkey on Thanksgiving that the holiday is often referred to as “Turkey Day.” Side dishes typically include bread stuffing, cranberry sauce and mashed potatoes, with slices of pumpkin pie for dessert.

Regional Variations

While the typical Thanksgiving meal consists of staple foods such as turkey and cranberry sauce, how those staples are interpreted

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depends largely on who is doing the cooking. Different family traditions, ethnic backgrounds and regional flavors make each Thanksgiving meal unique.

In the U.S. Northeast, for example, a Thanksgiving meal might feature a turkey glazed in Vermont maple syrup and bread dressing spruced up with chestnuts, rosemary and thyme. And no Baltimore Thanksgiving would be complete without a side dish of sauerkraut — a testament to the city's German heritage.

Chefs in the U.S. Southeast are responsible for variations that have become popular outside their region. Southeastern concoctions such as cornbread dressing with oysters and candied sweet potatoes with roasted marshmallows are showing up on tables across America. How to finish the meal is an area for greater variation, with Floridians choosing Key lime pie,

Most Americans would consider a Thanksgiving meal incomplete without turkey. According to the National Turkey Federation, one-fifth of all turkeys consumed in the United States are eaten on Thanksgiving. ©AP Photo



A volunteer delivers a tray of Thanksgiving dinners to guests at a California rescue mission. Each plate contains modern staples such as turkey, dressing, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes and gravy, green bean casserole and bread rolls. ©AP Photo

Georgians preferring pecan pie and North Carolinians opting for sweet potato pie.

The bill of fare in the U.S. Midwest honors the region's status as America's heartland. Diners might gobble up wild rice dressing in Minnesota, green bean casserole in Illinois and cranberry sauce with cherries in Michigan. Folks in Indiana might finish their meal with persimmon pudding, a steamed pudding similar to England's plum pudding that features the local persimmon fruit.

Inspired by Native American, Mexican and Spanish culinary traditions, a Thanksgiving menu in the U.S. Southwest may feature plenty of spice. Southwestern chefs might serve turkey rubbed in ancho chile paste and cumin alongside cornbread dressing dotted with green chiles and whipped

sweet potatoes infused with chipotle peppers. Pumpkin flan might take pumpkin pie's place as the preferred Thanksgiving dessert.

A region renowned for its plentiful produce, the U.S. West boasts a fresh Thanksgiving flavor. Cooks in California might season their turkeys with garlic, sage and thyme and incorporate wild mushrooms into their sourdough dressing. Their counterparts in Washington might substitute mashed yams for potatoes and sprinkle local hazelnuts into their dressing.

From maple syrup and chestnuts to garlic and hazelnuts, the regional variations of the modern Thanksgiving meal reflect not only the unique history of each cook, but also the rich diversity of America. How to repurpose the holiday's leftover food is yet another area of great debate — and variation.

