

ROOKIES

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What you’ve got to your advantage on Thanksgiving, she noted, is that the traditional meal of roast turkey, stuffing and mashed potatoes is not difficult, even for beginners. It’s more an issue of timing and planning than culinary expertise.

“If you’ve only got one oven, you really have to plan well for what you’re going to make,” she said.

Also on the plus side: You probably have at least a little cooking know-how. Nearly 20% of people in a recent Butterball survey said they feel more confident about preparing the holiday dinner this year, thanks to all the meal prep we’ve had to do during the pandemic. You’re also more comfortable than ever about accepting help. Some 55% surveyed said they’re open to having pre-made sides to make Thanksgiving as simple and convenient as possible.

In other words, it’s perfectly OK to serve your homemade turkey with Pepperidge Farm stuffing and instant or frozen mashed potatoes.

For the dishes you insist on making from scratch, Grant suggests making whatever you can a few days in advance. Brussels sprouts and potatoes, for example, can be blanched beforehand and stored in the fridge, so all you have to do is throw them in hot water on that Thursday. Also, if you’re tackling a new recipe, practice it a couples of times beforehand until you’ve got it down pat.

“Do a spreadsheet and get things planned out,” she suggested. Do you have the ability to safely store everything you buy for the meal? Do you have all the pots and pans you need?

If you’re cooking a frozen turkey, give it enough time to properly thaw in the refrigerator, a process that can take days depending on the size.

A whole turkey is probably not a great idea for small crowds unless you have a big oven and want a ton of leftovers. Maybe go with a more manageable whole or split turkey breast. They take up less space, cook in a flash (15 minutes per pound), and are much easier to carve. Plan upon 1-1 1/4 pounds of turkey and



Gretchen McKay/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette-TNS

A full or split turkey breast is a great option for smaller crowds and inexperienced cooks on Thanksgiving.

3/4 cup of stuffing per guest.

Grant’s basic rules for roast turkey are to always preheat the oven, use a rack if you’ve got one, don’t go any higher than 350 degrees and baste the bird (breast side up) with fat or melted butter every 15-20 minutes. Don’t worry about covering it with foil unless it starts to brown too quickly. Then gently lay the foil on top rather than wrapping it tightly to avoid trapping moisture.

While the breast will probably come with a pre-inserted timer, chances are you won’t know when it pops so rely on a meat thermometer instead. You’ll know it’s done when the juices start to run clear and the meat registers 165 degrees.

“Then let it rest before you carve it,” she said.

When it comes to planning the rest of the menu, registered dietitian Caroline West Passerello,

who teaches at the University of Pittsburgh, suggests restricting your options to things that add value and satisfaction if you have limited resources. Do you really need rolls if there’s mashed potatoes and stuffing?

“Don’t make things you can easily have on other days,” she said.

This might be the time to ask Grandma about that recipe you’ve always wanted to learn to make. For moral support, you could even ask her to cook along with you virtually on Thanksgiving day via Zoom or Facebook Live.

Hosts also need to be vigilant about food safety. Wash your hands frequently in hot, soapy water and keep raw and cooked foods separate during preparation. Once dinner is on the table, don’t leave cooked food out any longer than two hours, she said, and refrigerate it in a shallow



Gretchen McKay/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette-TNS

An apple tart made with puff pastry is an easy and elegant Thanksgiving dessert.

dish so it quickly gets to 40 degrees.

“You don’t want to overstuff the fridge,” she said, because it prevents cool air from circulating around food and maintaining its proper temperature. Also, the longer you plan on storing something, the more robust the container should be.

If this is your first time preparing Thanksgiving, keep it simple: a pan-roasted turkey breast slathered in herb butter, Brussels sprouts roasted with craisins and balsamic vinegar and for dessert, a flaky apple tart made with frozen puff pastry.

For sides, go with packaged stuffing and instant mashed potatoes. Or, if you’re feeling a little more confident, here’s how to dish up homemade mashed potatoes: Cook peeled and quartered potatoes in boiling water until tender, drain, place in a bowl with butter, salt and a little warm milk or cream and mash with a potato masher or electric beater until smooth and creamy.

Homemade cranberry sauce is easier still, and can be made a day or two in advance. Simply combine a 12-ounce bag of fresh cranberries with 1 cup of orange juice, 1 cup of sugar and a pinch of cinnamon in a medium saucepan. Cook over medium heat until cranberries start to pop, about 10 minutes, then remove from heat and place sauce in a bowl. It will thicken as it cools.

The goal of this year’s Thanksgiving dinner, said Passerello, should not be perfection. “It’s not going to

be the cover of a magazine.”

Settle for the joy of safely gathering for a meal with people who love you and whatever you serve.

LEMON HERB TURKEY BREAST

With fewer people at your Thanksgiving table, a whole turkey might not be necessary. A whole or split breast offers the same great holiday flavor, but it’s easier (and faster) to cook — no flipping, basting or fuss. Slathering herbed butter under the skin will help keep it moist. Be sure to allow the turkey to rest for 15-20 minutes to give the juices time to redistribute.

- 1 bone-in whole or split turkey breast, rinsed and patted dry
- 3 tablespoons butter, softened
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1 teaspoon dried basil
- 1/2 teaspoon rubbed sage
- 1 teaspoon dried rosemary, crumbled
- 1 lemon, cut in half
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Place turkey breast in a large roasting pan, on a rack if possible, and pat dry with paper towels inside and out. Loosen skin on the breast with your fingers, being careful not to tear or poke through it.

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FOOD BANK

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Smith said the NORFB, which serves Union, Baker, Grant and Wallowa counties, has seen a sustained increase in the number of people enlisting the food bank’s help. She also said that donations have not kept up with the increased demand, she said, despite a brief surge early in the pandemic.

Union County’s overall food insecurity rate grew from 13.5% in 2018 to a projected 17.9% in 2020, according to Feeding America. Based on the latest county population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau, that rate indicates more than 4,800 people went hungry this year in Union County alone, an increase of more than 1,300 people from just two years ago.

Rates of overall food insecurity also rose in Baker County from 14.7% in 2018 to 18.5% in 2020, in Wallowa County from 14.9% to 18.6%, in Grant County from 15.7% to 19.6%, and in Umatilla County from 13.2% to 16.8%.

Food insecurity was even more widespread among children in 2020. According to Feeding America, the rates of children going without enough to eat increased in every county in the state. “I feel that having a lack of access to healthy food or



Sabrina Thompson/The Observer, File Photo

The Northeast Oregon Regional Food Bank, which serves Union, Baker, Wallowa and Grant counties, has seen a sustained spike in the number of people seeking its help.

“We see folks that are food insecure because they are on a fixed income that is at a lower level than is needed to sustain their monthly bills.”

— Audrey Smith, manager, Northeast Oregon Regional Food Bank

experiencing skipped meals, or seeing parents skip meals — which is the most common — is a type of childhood trauma which leads to poorer health outcomes in adulthood,” Smith said.

Rates of food insecurity rose among children in Union County from 19.5% in 2018 to 28.5% in 2020, in Baker County from 23% to 30.4%, in Wallowa County from 24.3% to

31.4%, in Umatilla County from 19.3% to 26.3%, and in Grant County from 23.9% to 31.5%.

Food insecurity also affects seniors living on a fixed income. Smith said seniors at times are forced to choose between necessities.

“We see folks that are food insecure because they are on a fixed income that is at a lower level than is needed to

sustain their monthly bills,” Smith said. “A great example of that is seniors. They might have a retirement payment or a Social Security payment that is below what would allow them to afford healthy food ... some seniors will choose to forego expensive medications in order to purchase food, and some will purchase that medication and get food from the food bank.”

Smith said local seniors are sometimes forced to choose between buying food and keeping the lights and heat in their home from being shut off. She described food insecurity as a result of systemic problems like

high housing costs, insufficient income, high healthcare costs and lack of access to transportation, among others.

Food insecurity can lead to a significant degradation in quality of life, experts say. It can contribute to serious health problems, mental health deterioration and a negative perception of self-worth. It can also lead to developmental problems in children, including difficulty learning and stunted growth.

While need has increased at the regional food bank, donations, after the temporary rise this spring, have returned to near pre-pandemic levels. Between October 2018 and February of this year, the regional food bank rarely issued more than 3,000 pounds of food in a single month. This year, the food bank issued 4,250 pounds of food in March and 5,000 in April, and levels have remained high ever since.

In addition to demand for food exceeding donations, CCNO’s regional food bank is facing the extra cost of purchasing and moving into a new distribution center in the summer of 2021.

The Federal Transit Authority won’t allow the operation to remain in its current bay in a bus barn after June 2021. The food bank will be moving to the former Pendleton Grain Growers building but needs money to renovate the building, which

is larger than the current space.

“On a local level, for us to be able to provide food to the people who need it, we need additional warehouse space and transportation to get food reliably out of our area and into the other three counties we serve,” Smith said.

NORFB is accepting donations of nonperishable food for distribution to those in need as well as monetary donations to help with the move. Food can be dropped off at any local Community Connection office, and money can be donated online at ccno.org.



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