

A THANKSGIVING COUNTDOWN

Holiday planning made easier with pre-game plan

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Associated Press

Thanksgiving is just around the bend, and if you are hosting you might already be thinking about how you might plan things better this year, how to make it all a bit less stressful.

While the truly prepared are already polishing their napkin rings, the rest of us are just starting to wonder, “How can I not want to throw a gravy boat out the window?”

Let me start by saying, striving for perfection is overrated. The messiness and imperfectness of the holidays is part of what makes each one memorable and particular to your family or the band of friends you share the occasion with.

Still, there are strategies and tricks to making sure Thanksgiving runs smoothly. Here’s a game plan for getting things done ahead of time so you can truly enjoy the turkey and pie along with your gang.

The weekend before

1. Lists, lists, lists: Plan your menu, and make shopping lists, guest lists, lists of who is bringing what, lists of who needs to be picked up when.

2. Create a timeline leading all the way up to the “Dinner is Served” moment. Determine when you are going to get things done (for example, two days before, make Brussels sprouts; one day before, arrange the flowers, etc.). Write down all of the little things, like putting the mashed potatoes into the oven to reheat, filling the ice bucket, setting out the appetizers.

3. Do the Turkey Math: Calculate how long the turkey needs to be in the oven,



Sarah Crowder/Katie Workman via AP

When you are making a big Thanksgiving dinner getting as much done ahead of time - and enlisting as much help from family and friends as possible — makes these epic meals much more enjoyable.

and remember that it might take up the whole oven for that length of time. Plan accordingly.

4. Write down who is responsible for what: Giving people a written list

of tasks with a time frame makes things clear for them, and lets you hand off things neatly.

5. Buy all non-perishables, including drinks (alcoholic and non), canned and

boxed items (broth, cranberries), baking staples (flour, butter, refrigerated pie crusts — what? They are terrific!), and also sturdier produce like potatoes, apples, squash and carrots. Make sure someone

is home to help you unload.

6. Give any silver a quick polish (though I firmly believe the slightly tarnished look is in), iron any tablecloths and cloth napkins (though I firmly believe the slightly wrinkled look is in), find those candlesticks and candles.

7. Locate roasting pans, food processor blades, potato ricers, whatever equipment you’ll need. Wash whatever hasn’t been touched since last year.

go into the oven. We start every Thanksgiving with my mother yelling, “Oh my god, I forgot to put the turkey in! We’re going to eat at midnight!”

2. Let people bring things. When Aunt Bunny asks what she can bring, don’t say “just bring yourself” — say “cheese.” And you can even tell her to bring three different kinds, about ½ pound of each, so that you get what you need. And remind her to bring crackers.

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One or two days before

1. Back to the market for the turkey, the greens, herbs, flowers and so on. And also all the other stuff you forgot the first time (bay leaves, extra onions, chicken broth).

2. Make as many sides and desserts as possible ahead of time. Brussels sprouts, string bean casseroles, mashed potatoes, roasted or pureed squash dishes, salad dressing, cranberry sauce, pies — all of these can be made a day or more ahead of time. Thanksgiving menus are usually full of sturdy dishes that can be reheated on the stovetop, in the microwave or in the oven. Plot out which dish you will reheat in which way.

3. Set the table, and/or lay out the buffet. Put out all serving platters and serving utensils, and put Post-Its on them so you know what will go in each plate and bowl.

4. Clean, prep and chop any ingredients for the day of.

5. Set up the bar.

The day of

1. Above all, pay attention to when that turkey needs to

3. Think of tasks to delegate and let people help (otherwise known as, don’t be a martyr). So when Uncle Ivan comes into the kitchen looking for a job, you will be able to point him toward the salad for dressing and tossing.

4. Don’t be afraid of room temperature food. Hey, by the time everyone serves themselves and finds a seat, the food isn’t going to be super-hot anyway! Give yourself permission to not stress about getting all the food to the table piping hot at the same time. When you go back for seconds, it’s always room temperature anyway, right? And has that ever slowed anyone down? Certainly not Cousin Kevin.

The day after

The next day, when you sit down with a bowl of turkey noodle soup and some leftover pinot noir, you can tuck those notes from your super-organized, stress-free Thanksgiving away in a folder marked “I Kicked Thanksgiving’s Butt,” and be that far ahead of the game this time next year.

AMERICA'S TEST KITCHEN

Make this green bean casserole ahead of the party and relax

Green bean casserole is a holiday staple, so we set out to develop a version that could be assembled in advance to make our holiday cooking easier.

To ensure that the flavor of the casserole didn’t become dull in the freezer, we boosted flavor by using plenty of garlic, white wine and fragrant thyme. After testing a number of ways to par-cook the beans, we discovered that the easiest solution was also the best: simply add them raw.

Tossing the beans with a bit of cornstarch before putting them in the baking dish helped to thicken any liquid they exuded during cooking. We stuck with a classic crunchy topping of canned fried onions and bread crumbs.

Green Bean Casserole

Servings: 10-12
Start to finish: 3 hours, 20 minutes (Active time: 45 minutes)

Topping:
2 slices hearty white sandwich bread, torn into pieces
2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
1/4 teaspoon salt
2 cups canned fried onions
Casserole:
3 tablespoons unsalted butter
10 ounces white mushrooms, trimmed and sliced thin
1 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon pepper
6 garlic cloves, minced
1/2 teaspoon dried thyme
1/4 cup all-purpose flour
1 1/2 cups chicken broth
1 1/2 cups heavy cream
1/2 cup dry white wine
2 pounds green beans, trimmed and cut into 1-inch pieces
1/4 cup cornstarch

For the topping: Pulse bread, melted butter, and salt in food processor to coarse crumbs, about 6 pulses. Combine bread crumbs and fried onions in bowl. Set aside.

For the casserole: Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 400 F. Melt butter



Daniel J. van Ackere/America's Test Kitchen via AP

A make-ahead green bean casserole that appears in the cookbook “Complete Make-Ahead.”

in 12-inch skillet over medium heat. Add mushrooms, salt, and pepper and cook until mushrooms release their liquid, about 5 minutes. Increase heat to medium-high and cook until liquid has evaporated, about 5 minutes. Add garlic and thyme and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Stir in flour and cook until golden, about 1 minute. Slowly whisk in broth, cream, and wine and bring to boil. Reduce heat to medium and simmer, stirring occasionally, until sauce is thickened, about 10 minutes.

Toss green beans with cornstarch in large bowl and transfer to 13 by 9-inch baking dish. Pour warm mushroom mixture evenly over green beans. Let cool completely.

Cover with aluminum foil and bake until sauce is bubbling and green beans are tender, 40 to 50 minutes, stirring green beans halfway through baking. Remove foil and spread topping over green beans. Bake until golden brown, about 8 minutes. Serve.

Invite your kids to help make this chocolate sheet cake

This chocolate sheet cake requires that you use Dutch-processed cocoa powder. What exactly is that? A process called Dutching, which was invented in the 19th century by a Dutch chemist and chocolatier named Coenraad Van Houten, raises cocoa powder’s pH level, which gives the cocoa a fuller flavor and deeper color. Dutch-processed cocoa (sometimes called “alkalized” or “European-style” cocoa) is the best choice for most baked goods. Using a natural (or “unalkalized”) cocoa powder results in a drier cake. Follow this recipe with your kids.

Chocolate sheet cake

Servings: 15
Start to finish: 1 hour, 15 minutes (Inactive time: 1 hour, plus cooling time)

Ingredients Needed:
Vegetable oil spray
1 1/2 cups sugar
1 1/4 cups all-purpose flour
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 1/3 cups bittersweet or semisweet chocolate chips
1 cup whole milk
3/4 cup Dutch-processed cocoa powder
2/3 cup vegetable oil
4 large eggs
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
Milk Chocolate Frosting (recipe follows)
Gather Cooking Equipment:
13-by-9-inch metal baking pan

Medium bowl
Whisk
Large saucepan
Rubber spatula
Toothpick
Oven mitts
Cooling rack
Icing spatula
Chef’s knife
Start Cooking!
Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 325 F. Spray bottom and sides of



Carl Tremblay/America's Test Kitchen via AP

A chocolate sheet cake as it appears in the “Complete Cookbook for Young Chefs.”

13-by-9- inch metal baking pan with vegetable oil spray.

In medium bowl, whisk together sugar, flour, baking soda, and salt.

In large saucepan, combine chocolate chips, milk, and cocoa. Place saucepan over low heat and cook, whisking often, until chocolate chips are melted and mixture is smooth, about 5 minutes.

Turn off heat. Slide saucepan to cool burner and let mixture cool slightly, about 5 minutes.

Add oil, eggs, and vanilla to saucepan with chocolate mixture and whisk until smooth, about 30 seconds.

Add flour mixture and whisk until smooth, making sure to scrape corners of saucepan.

Use rubber spatula to scrape batter into greased baking pan and smooth top (ask an adult for help because saucepan will be heavy).

Place baking pan in oven. Bake until toothpick inserted in center comes out with few crumbs attached, 30 to 35 minutes.

Use oven mitts to remove baking pan from oven (ask an

adult for help). Place baking pan on cooling rack and let cake cool completely in pan, about 2 hours.

Use icing spatula to spread frosting evenly over cooled cake (see photo, right). Cut cake into pieces and serve.

Milk Chocolate Frosting:
Makes about 2 Cups
Prep Time: 5 Minutes
Cook time: 10 minutes, plus 1 hour chilling time

This recipe calls for just three ingredients but they are transformed by the microwave and refrigerator. Don’t use salted butter in this recipe. This recipe makes enough to frost 12 cupcakes or one sheet cake.

Prepare ingredients:

11/3 cups milk chocolate chips
1/3 cup heavy cream
8 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 8 pieces and softened

Gather cooking equipment:
Large microwave-safe bowl
Rubber spatula
Whisk
Electric mixer

Start cooking:
In large microwave-safe bowl, combine chocolate and cream. Heat microwave at 50 percent power for 1 minute. Stop microwave and stir with rubber spatula. Heat in microwave at 50 percent power until melted, 1 to 2 minutes. Remove bowl from microwave.

Add softened butter to chocolate mixture and use whisk to stir and break up butter pieces. Let sit until butter is fully melted, about 5 minutes. Whisk until completely smooth. Refrigerate frosting until cooled and thickened, about 1 hour.

Use electric mixer to beat frosting on medium-high speed until frosting is light and fluffy, 30 seconds.