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MY TURN

■ Wayne Chan



A season of stuffing, jelly, thanks ... and a can of SPAM

Ahh ... it's that time of year again — family reunions, parades, fall leaves, and ugly sweaters. And let's not forget about the food — pumpkin pie, roast turkey, gravy, SPAM, and ... wait, what?

Oh, that's right ... SPAM. You see, we celebrated Thanksgiving in Hawai'i this year. That means we ate SPAM — and lots of it. It's what you do when you're in Hawai'i. You've got your Mai Tais, helicopter tours, Hawai'ian shirts, and SPAM. You can eat SPAM three meals a day on the islands. If I'm not mistaken, the state flag is a can of SPAM sitting on a surfboard.

For those of you who aren't familiar with SPAM, let me enlighten you. Actually, let me take that back. I have no idea what's in SPAM. It's a heavily salted meat-like substance perfectly molded into the shape of the rectangle-ish metal tin it is contained within. It's ham-like. I like it, mind you, but I like it in the same mysterious way I like watching Celtic dancing — with the feet of the dancer wildly moving about while the rest of their body is perfectly still. I have no idea why I like it — I just do.

Some might say SPAM has no place in the rich American tradition of Thanksgiving, but I'm not one of them. It's not that I like SPAM all that much. It's the fact that everything we traditionally do for Thanksgiving doesn't make much sense to me, either.

Now, I'm sure there's a perfectly logical reason for every aspect of the Thanksgiving tradition. It's just that I don't know what it is and I've never bothered to find out. We just do these things because ... well, that's just what you do for Thanksgiving.

The turkey itself — no problem there. I like turkey. We don't usually eat it any other time than Thanksgiving, or if I'm trying to make a sandwich and have used up all the other cold cuts, but that's fine. We don't eat chicken for Thanksgiving. We eat turkey. No problem there.

But what about the rest of it?

Take cranberry sauce. I don't know why they call

it cranberry sauce. It's not a sauce based on the way it comes out of its tin can. And it stays in the shape of the can. Since when is sauce able to be used to form inanimate objects? It really should be called cranberry clay if we're trying to be precise. But what's the point of it? It's a close cousin to jelly, but in this case, you eat the jelly with the turkey. Since when did it become fashionable to eat poultry with jelly? Why does it make zero sense in every other instance except for the one day of the year when everyone eats it with turkey?

The last time I ate roast chicken, at no time did I think to myself, "You know what? This chicken is amazing, but it seems to be missing something. If only I could smother this chicken leg with some orange marmalade."

Then there's the stuffing. Everything else on the table — the gravy, the mashed potatoes, the pumpkin pie — they're all served alongside the turkey. But the stuffing — a mixture of stale bread, vegetables, and spices — is packed into the cavity of the bird. You must do this. You have no choice. After all, it's called "stuffing." If you don't do it, you have to call it something else, like "stale bread and vegetable mush." When I was a kid, I once asked my mom if the farmers could feed ice cream and hot fudge to the turkeys so the stuffing could be our dessert, too.

Now, before any of you start writing to tell me about the origins of Thanksgiving dinner, you're missing my point. I'm sure every facet of Thanksgiving dinner — the cranberry clay, the stale bread and vegetable mush — all have logical explanations. It's just that I've been following this tradition my entire life without really knowing why. I participate every year because, well, that's just what you do. It's what my parents did every year, and now it's what we do every year for my kids.

Who knows? In a few generations, when my great-great-grandkids ask their parents why every year they eat SPAM with their turkey, they might just say, "I don't know. It's just what we do."

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