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**How to Host Thanksgiving Dinner and Enjoy it Anyway**

**By Skip Lombardi**

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You've been nominated; or perhaps your family has issued a decree; or perhaps it's simply your turn. No matter what the reason, you're hosting Thanksgiving dinner this year. This need not be a burden. In fact it can be a pleasure, given the right planning and organization.

I've found that the key to an almost effortless-looking dinner is thinking backward. Start your Thanksgiving planning by visualizing yourself, surrounded by family and friends at the dinner table, then work backward to determine how you got there. Ask yourself which foods took the least amount of preparation, which took the most. Write these things down in a list.

Now refine the list—but only slightly. Which dishes can be prepared the day (or evening) before? Which dishes need to be prepared that day? Which dishes need to be prepared within an hour of dinner?

At this point, you should have at least a vague idea of your plan of attack. So now it's time to refine the list further. In fact, it's time to begin to create a schedule. If you expect to serve dinner at 2:00 p.m., for example, and the turkey will take three hours to roast, then half hour to rest before carving, it needs to be in the oven at 10:15 a.m.

Why 10:15, and not 10:30? My start time factors in the three and one half hours, plus approximately fifteen minutes to get the bird carved and arranged on a serving platter after it has rested. And don't forget that it will take approximately fifteen minutes to pre-heat your oven too. Your schedule should reflect all of those variables.

By now, your list—or maybe lists—has grown substantially, as you refine the necessary tasks to get to that wonderful image of yourself sitting among family and friends at the dinner table. The next step in the process is to begin to identify the tasks involved in preparing the ingredients for the dishes that will make up your Thanksgiving menu; the prep work.

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It's lovely to watch the chefs on Food TV blithely talking about adding a cup of chopped onions to a sauté pan—as they grab a cup of chopped onions that's been placed within easy reach on their counter. Of course, they have the benefit of having four sous chefs backstage who keep them supplied with the chopped, minced, pureed, or marinated ingredients they'll need to create a smooth-running half hour television show. You can do the same. (although you can't count on having the four sous chefs backstage).

As part of your master schedule, allow plenty of time for prep work. This will guarantee smooth cooking when the time comes. You do not want to be hunting for a clove of garlic in a refrigerator stuffed with food for twenty, while you have a pan of hot oil on the stove waiting for you.

This is also the time to think about how many of the recipes on your menu will require the same ingredients. If, for example, you have two dishes on your menu that each require a cup of onions, be sure to chop two cups of onions, and have them on hand, pre-measured and ready to go when the

time comes to cook.

Think about which ingredients could be prepped, perhaps the night before too. Carrots, celery, and onion, for example, can be chopped within twenty four hours of the meal, and stored, pre-measured, in zip-lock plastic bags in the refrigerator. This step alone could save up to a half hour on Thanksgiving Day. Try to think of other ingredients that could be prepped early as well.

Another activity that should be part of your to-do list before Thanksgiving is checking to see that your oven is properly calibrated. If you don't already own one, get an inexpensive oven thermometer and test to see that the temperature that you set on your thermostat is indeed the same one recorded on your thermometer.

In addition, it would be wise—again, if you don't already have one—to get an instant read meat thermometer. Knowing that you've cooked your turkey to an internal temperature of 165 F. will give you a great deal of confidence, and allow you to focus on the myriad last-minute details of getting the meal on the dining room table.

One last thought about prep work that will help the entire Thanksgiving experience flow more smoothly: give yourself a break when you've finished chopping vegetables, measuring ingredients, and generally assuring yourself that you have the situation in hand. Relax; perhaps have a cup of coffee before you begin the actual cooking. This break serves two purposes: it gives you a chance to reflect on your work so far, and to reassure yourself that you are indeed prepared for the next step. And it helps you to mentally shift gears and move from the role of prep cook to the role of chef.

Of course, at some time before Thanksgiving, you'll need to shop for ingredients. I've not spoken about shopping, because I feel that there are too many variables to be able to talk about it in full generality. Issues like your menu, proximity to a mega store or a specialized deli perhaps, your work schedule, etc. make it difficult to talk about in universal terms. Suffice it to say that if you've set a menu and created a schedule, they will tell you what you need, and when.

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So now that you have your menu, done your shopping and prep work, what to do on Thanksgiving morning? First: trust no one. People are rarely more giving of themselves than at Thanksgiving, so offers of assistance in the kitchen may be profuse and generous. Be wary. You may delegate a close friend or relative to keep an eye on the creamed spinach, but don't be surprised if the Macy's parade, or the NFL game draws your well-meaning helper away from the stove before the spinach is done.

It's okay. You've factored that into your schedule, and you can pick up the slack. When I say that you shouldn't trust anyone, I mean that—as I've written elsewhere—90% of cooking is being there. And Thanksgiving is a tough time to be standing at the stove for anyone, not least of all, one of your guests.

Finally, at times like Thanksgiving, I'm reminded of a piece of advice I once got from a doctor friend: In case of an emergency, the first thing to do is take your own pulse. This is to say that things may not go entirely as planned. But don't panic. Trustworthy or not, you will have help available. An emergency in the kitchen is guaranteed to draw the most hardened NFL fan away from the game to lend a hand. Just stick to your schedule, as best you can, and everything will be fine.

Take the time to plan your Thanksgiving meal thoroughly, and well ahead of time, and you'll reap huge rewards at the dinner table in the form of compliments, possibly applause, and happy, thankful diners.

And as you dry the last of the pots and pans that served so well in preparing your feast, you can enjoy the satisfaction that comes from a job well done, and the knowledge that next year, it will be someone else's turn.

Skip Lombardi is the author of two cookbooks: "La Cucina dei Poveri: Recipes from my Sicilian Grandparents," and "Almost Italian: Recipes from America's Little Italys." He has been a Broadway musician, high-school math teacher, software engineer, and a fledgeling blogger. But he has never let any of those pursuits get in the way of his passion for cooking and eating. Visit his Web site to learn more about his cookbooks.

For comments or questions, e-mail at

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### **Thanksgiving Traditions of Gratitude**

**By Teresa Hansen**

#### **Thanksgiving Traditions of Gratitude by Teresa Hansen**

Several years ago, I was on a talk show, sharing some of these ideas to show our thankfulness.

During the break, one of the hosts shared with me their family Thanksgiving tradition.

With tears in her eyes she said, "My mother taught us that many of the early settlers of our country

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starved to death because there was not enough food. Sometimes all they got to eat each day was five kernels of corn. When we start our Thanksgiving dinner, each person is served five kernels of corn on their plate. Then we each share five blessings we are grateful for as we move those five kernels of corn across our plate."

This story touched me. It is such an effective and dramatic way to actually visualize how much we have as we first witness the scarceness of food so many people have to endure before we eat our feast and enjoy our bounty.

### Ways to Count Your Blessings & Show Your Gratitude

- After prayer on the food, hold hands and take turns telling what you're thankful for.
- Make a Thanksgiving Box—Have your family write notes about what they are thankful for and stick them in a box beginning a week before Thanksgiving. At Thanksgiving dinner open the box and read the notes.
- On small cards or paper, write down the following categories on each paper:  
person, day, place, experience, food, item  
Go around the table and have each person draw out a card. Then that person tells of something they are grateful for from that category and why they are grateful for it.
- On Thanksgiving Day hang a piece of posterboard where it will be accessible to everyone. Have everyone in your family write things on it that they are thankful for. See how many you can come up with by the end of the day. (Or write these on a roll of cash register receipt paper and tape it up around the room.)
- Have thank-you notes and stationary readily available to everyone in your home on Thanksgiving day. Encourage your family to write a letter or thank-you note to someone they are thankful for: a teacher, a grandparent, a friend.
- Invite a new family in your neighborhood or a lonely person to dinner
- Go to a homeless shelter to help cook and serve Thanksgiving dinner
- Gather food to take to a local food bank

About the Author Teresa Hansen is the creator of [www.momsmakingit.com](http://www.momsmakingit.com) sharing creative ideas to save time, save money, and enrich your life! Visit <http://savemoney.momsmakingit.com> for your free e-guide "Moms Making It! 111 Great Money Saving Ideas!" She is a wife and mother of five children.

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