

A Feast for the Eyes—The Thanksgiving Table

More than any other holiday, Thanksgiving is celebrated with a bountiful table. By assembling the right balance of elements, any table can be made festive and beautiful. Start with something you know you want to use, such as the family silver or a mix of transferware, and let that be your guide as you consider the basic categories: dinnerware, glassware, flatware and linens.

Setting the Thanksgiving Table

Measure your table to determine whether it will work for the number of diners, and add or remove leaves or extensions as needed. A comfortable table setting, especially a formal one with a variety of glassware and flatware, should allow about two feet of space between the center of one plate and the center of the next. A week or so before the holiday, set out all of the dishes, glassware and silver you will be using, so you can take stock and replace any missing pieces. You can also try out a complete place setting on a corner of the tablecloth to get a sense of the total effect.

The Formal Table: A formal table setting does not require a formal dining room or showy chandelier. In this case, formality means gracious yet comfortable elegance, rather than ostentation or stiffness. If you own crystal and china, good silver, and a linen tablecloth and napkins, this is the perfect opportunity to use them.

At a formal table, guests always have a plate in front of them, a linen napkin, necessary glassware, a bread plate and the needed flatware. A charger, or large plate, is set at each place, and the first course is served on a small plate set atop the charger. The charger is replaced with a dinner plate when the main course is served.

Setting the Scene

Whether your celebration will be formal or casual, you need to plan in advance how to set up and decorate your space. Begin by choosing a color palette that looks good with your tableware and the room. This palette will help you create a centerpiece, place settings and room decorations that will work together to set a festive mood. Stick with two or three colors and a few complementary textures, such as wood, pewter and foliage. The keys are restraint and simplicity.

Formal Entertaining: A formal Thanksgiving dinner can be a truly memorable occasion, as long as you don't confuse formal with stiff. Comfort is still important. Dress the table with your best linens, flatware and china, and have a seating plan and decorative place cards. The menu can follow suit, with sophisticated food and drinks.

Set something fun, such as a little gift or a whimsical decoration, at kids' places to help them feel included. Or, you can set up a separate table for the children and serve them first so they can start eating right away, while the adults enjoy a more leisurely meal.

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Setting the Thanksgiving Table

The Informal Table: For a casual Thanksgiving dinner or a meal served over the holiday weekend, consider setting the table without a cloth, especially if the table has an attractive wood or glass surface. Or, select a simple cotton tablecloth or place mats in a neutral color and complementary napkins with a similar look and feel. A long runner, laid over the bare tabletop or the tablecloth, in a similar or complementary fabric, is an easy way to dress up a casual dining surface.

You can use everyday plates, flatware and glassware, adding a few special pieces, such as an heirloom gravy boat, a modern vase or a fanciful platter, to enhance the holiday mood. Set a simply folded or rolled napkin on each plate, or to the left of the plate, with the folded side facing inward. Set a water glass above the knife and a wineglass to its right.

For an informal Thanksgiving, there is no need to clutter the table with butter plates and knives or dessertspoons or forks. Guests can put bread directly on their dinner plates, and spoons and forks can be brought out along with the dessert.

The Buffet: Choose a table or sideboard to use for the buffet, and arrange your serving platters on it ahead of time to make sure everything fits. You may wish to opt for a smaller buffet table, which gives a look of abundance, over a large one, which can appear sparse. If space allows, move the table away from the wall so guests have access to both sides.

Set the dinner plates at the end where the guests will start, and the napkins and silverware (if they are not set on the dining table) at the other end, so guests will not have to juggle too many items while serving themselves. Provide a serving utensil for each dish. In the remaining space, add a few decorative elements, such as candles or an arrangement that ties in with the table centerpiece.

Pecan Pumpkin Frangipane Tart

A delicious change from the classic pumpkin pie, this tart marries the flavors of nuts and pumpkin to create a sophisticated finish for your holiday meal.

To make the pastry, in the bowl of a food processor, combine the all-purpose flour, confectioners' sugar and salt and pulse to mix. Add the butter and process in short pulses until pea-size crumbs form, 20 to 25 seconds. While pulsing, add the egg yolk mixture and process to form large, moist crumbs, 10 to 15 seconds more.

Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface and shape the dough into a disk. Wrap with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 2 hours.

Roll out the dough ¼ inch thick, dusting it with confectioners' sugar if it begins to stick. Transfer the dough round into a 10-inch tart pan and, using your fingers, press the dough into the pan. Refrigerate for at least 30 minutes.

Preheat an oven to 350°F.

To make the frangipane, in the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with the flat beater, beat the butter on medium speed until light and creamy. Add the almond paste and granulated sugar and beat until smooth and creamy. While beating, add the eggs a little at a time, beating well after each addition. Reduce the speed to low and fold in the cake flour until just blended and no lumps of flour remain.

Spread the pecan pumpkin butter into the chilled tart shell, forming a layer about ¼ inch thick. Spoon the frangipane on top in an even layer. Bake until the tart is golden and set, 25 to 30 minutes. Transfer the pan to a wire rack and let the tart cool to room temperature, then remove it from the pan. Dust the tart with confectioners' sugar just before serving. Makes one 10-inch tart.

Adapted from a Recipe by Williams-Sonoma Culinary Expert.

Ingredients for Pecan Pumpkin Frangipane Tart

For the pastry:

1¼ cups all-purpose flour

½ cup confectioners' sugar

½ tsp. salt

10 Tbs. (1¼ sticks) chilled unsalted butter, cut into pieces

2 egg yolks, lightly beaten with 1 Tbs. water

For the frangipane:

8 Tbs. (1 stick) unsalted butter

½ cup firmly packed almond paste

½ cup granulated sugar

3 eggs, lightly beaten with 1 egg white

½ cup plus 1 Tbs. cake flour

¾ cup (½ jar) Muirhead Pecan Pumpkin Butter*

Confectioners' sugar for dusting

*Available in Williams-Sonoma stores.

Ingredients for Michael Voltaggio's Sous Vide Turkey

2½ gallons water

¼ cup whole cloves

¼ cup peppercorns

¼ cup coriander seeds

¼ cup allspice berries

¼ cup yellow mustard seeds

2½ cups kosher salt

2½ cups firmly packed light brown sugar

2 each grapefruits, oranges, lemons and limes, halved and juiced, rinds reserved

1 turkey, 10 to 12 lb., cut into bone-in pieces (half breasts, thighs and drumsticks)

Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

4 fresh sage sprigs

1 fresh thyme sprig

2 garlic cloves, crushed

About 1½ cups duck fat

Canola oil for deep-frying, plus 1 Tbs.

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WILLIAMS-SONOMA

Technique Class: A Contemporary Thanksgiving

With its comfortable mix of informality and elegance, our contemporary menu offers a great way to give a refreshing update to the Thanksgiving feast. This menu uses innovative food technology and fresh seasonal ingredients prepared with modern touches to bring out the bright flavors and colors of the season. Carry that creative spirit through to the table setting and your centerpiece, and delight your guests with a modern holiday celebration.

Michael Voltaggio's Sous Vide Turkey

Winner of Bravo's "Top Chef" television show, Michael Voltaggio has become famous for combining new food technology and innovative ideas with great flavors to create delicious dishes. His contemporary spin on turkey yields a juicy bird using a nontraditional cooking method—sous vide.

In a large stockpot over high heat, combine the water, spices, salt and brown sugar. Bring to a boil and simmer for 5 minutes. Add the citrus juices and rinds. Refrigerate the brine until thoroughly chilled. Place the breasts and drumsticks into the cold brine and refrigerate for 24 hours. (Refrigerate the thighs separately; do not brine.)

Prepare a sous vide immersion circulator for use according to the manufacturer's instructions. Preheat the water to 150°F, 30 minutes to 1 hour.

Cut the bone out from the thighs, keeping the skin intact. Season the inside of the thighs with salt and pepper. Place the thighs, skin side down, into a vacuum-sealable bag, making sure they lie flat. Add the sage, thyme and garlic to the bag. Using a large tablespoon, place ¼ cup duck fat around the thighs. Using a vacuum sealer, vacuum and seal the bag tight according to the manufacturer's instructions; be sure you have a smooth, airtight seal. Carefully place the bag into the circulating water and cook for 2½ hours.

During the first 30 minutes of cooking the thighs, remove the breasts and drumsticks from the brine. Rinse the pieces and pat dry. Place each half breast and drumstick into separate vacuum-sealable bags; add ¼ cup duck fat to each bag. Using a vacuum sealer, vacuum and seal the bags as instructed above. Place the bags into the circulating water and cook for 2 hours. (The thighs, breasts and drumsticks should be done at the same time.) Have ready a large bowl of ice water. Remove all the bags from the circulating water and place into the ice water for 20 minutes.

Just before serving, preheat oil in a deep fryer to 375°F. Remove all of the turkey pieces from the bags and pat dry. Working in batches, fry the breasts and drumsticks until golden and crispy, about 5 minutes per piece. Transfer to a carving board.

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In a large sauté pan over medium heat, warm the 1 Tbs. oil. Place the thighs, skin side down, in the pan and cook until golden and crispy, about 12 minutes. Turn the thighs over and cook until warmed through, 2 to 3 minutes more. Slice the breasts and thighs and arrange on a platter with the drumsticks. Serves 6 to 8.

Recipe from Chef Michael Voltaggio.

Mashed Potatoes & Celery Root

Also known as celeriac, celery root is a knobby, round winter vegetable that contributes a subtle celery flavor to purees when cooked and a crisp crunch to salads when used raw. In this recipe, celery root is mashed with potatoes, giving the dish a lighter texture than if potatoes alone were used, and an interesting, fresh taste that matches well with full-flavored foods such as turkey. Both peeled celery root and potatoes discolor quickly when exposed to air and should be immersed in water if not cooked at once to prevent discoloring.

Put the celery roots and potatoes in separate large saucepans. Add water to cover and a large pinch of salt to each pan. Bring both to a boil over high heat, reduce the heat to low, cover and simmer until the vegetables are tender, about 20 minutes. Just before they are done, place an ovenproof serving bowl in a 200°F oven. (There is no need to preheat the oven.)

In a small saucepan over low heat, combine the half-and-half and 2 Tbs. of the butter and heat until the butter melts. Turn off the heat and cover to keep warm. Drain the potatoes and celery roots, then return them to one of the large saucepans and set over medium-low heat; shake the pan until the vegetables begin to stick to the bottom. Remove from the heat.

Pass the vegetables through a ricer into the warmed serving bowl. Alternatively, pass the vegetables through a food mill, or mash them in the pan with a potato masher. Stir in the warm half-and-half mixture. Season with salt and white pepper. Using a rubber spatula, scrape down the sides of the bowl and swirl the top of the puree. Top with the remaining 1 Tbs. butter and serve immediately. If necessary, keep warm in a 200°F oven for 15 to 20 minutes, or cover the bowl and set it in a pan of hot water. Serves 8 to 10.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma Collection Series, *Christmas*, by Carolyn Miller (Simon & Schuster, 2003).

Brussels Sprouts with Radicchio & Pancetta

At their peak of freshness in autumn, brussels sprouts are a traditional vegetable for the Thanksgiving feast. They were first introduced to American cooks by Thomas Jefferson, who is reputed to have grown them in his garden at Monticello. Our recipe balances the vegetable’s natural sweetness with radicchio, a type of chicory that adds vibrant color and a hint of bitterness. We also add diced pancetta, which provides just the right amount of saltiness and savor.

Cut or pull off any dry outer leaves from the brussels sprouts. Trim away any brown spots and slice off the dry stem end. Using a food processor fitted with the slicing blade, shred the brussels sprouts. Set aside.

On the stovetop, heat a small roasting pan or a large ovenproof sauté pan over medium-high heat. Cook the pancetta until crispy and golden brown, about 7 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the pancetta to a small bowl. Pour off the fat from the pan and discard, then wipe out the pan with paper towels.

Set the pan over medium heat and warm the olive oil. Add the brussels sprouts and stir to coat with the oil. Cook until the brussels sprouts begin to wilt, 2 to 3 minutes. Stir again, then add the radicchio, marjoram and salt and cook for 2 minutes. Stir in the ¼ cup broth. Continue cooking, stirring occasionally and adding more broth as needed, until the brussels sprouts are soft, about 5 minutes. Add the pancetta and stir to incorporate. Adjust the seasonings with salt and pepper.

Transfer the brussels sprouts to a warmed serving bowl and serve immediately. Serves 6 to 8.

Make-Ahead Tip: Trim and slice the brussels sprouts and radicchio and dice the pancetta up to 1 day in advance. Store in airtight containers in the refrigerator.

Williams-Sonoma Kitchen.

Ingredients for Brussels Sprouts with Radicchio & Pancetta

1½ lb. brussels sprouts

6 oz. pancetta, diced

3 Tbs. olive oil

1 head radicchio, about 8 oz., trimmed and cut into ¼-inch-thick slices

1½ Tbs. finely chopped fresh marjoram

Salt, to taste

¼ cup low-sodium chicken broth, plus more as needed

Freshly ground pepper, to taste

Setting the Thanksgiving Table (cont.)

For a large group, display the turkey or ham whole on the buffet as the guests gather. Then carve the meat in the kitchen and return the carved slices to the buffet on a platter. For smaller gatherings, you can stand at the buffet and carve slices to serve to each guest.

Setting the Scene

Centerpiece: When planning your Thanksgiving decorating, consider starting with the centerpiece, which establishes the look and feel for the entire table and provides a strong focal point for the setting. The centerpiece can be anything from a floral arrangement with autumnal blooms, to an heirloom bowl filled with seasonal fruits and vegetables, to a slender vase full of olive branches or fall berries on the stem. Pumpkins are lovely and colorful displayed on the Thanksgiving table.

Keep the centerpiece natural and uncomplicated, and avoid too many tall elements that could block sight lines. Use what is left over, such as branches and leaves, to make smaller arrangements for the buffet, coffee table or mantel, or individual bouquets for each place setting.

Lighting: Dimming overhead lights and using candles or table lamps for illumination bring focus and sparkle to the table. For an elegant setting, use tall tapers (dripless and scent free) set in candlesticks or candelabras. Silver, pewter or crystal candleholders add a formal touch to the setting. Classic ivory-colored candles go with virtually any setting and color palette. For a more casual gathering, line up votives in pretty glass containers or squat pillar candles along the center of the table or around the centerpiece for a glowing effect. Add matching candles to the buffet to help tie the room together.

Casual Entertaining: A casual Thanksgiving, served buffet or family style, is especially practical when you are hosting a lot of children. It is also ideal for lunches and brunches during the holiday weekend. A casual style makes it easy for kids to come and go, eat and play, without disrupting the flow of the meal.

Although casual means a comfortable and relaxing meal with simple, satisfying food, a few elegant touches, such as cloth napkins, seasonal table decorations and special garnishes, help to create a celebratory spirit.

Serving Styles: Assess your menu, guest list and level of formality to determine whether to serve the meal buffet, family or restaurant style. Whichever you choose, offering drinks and appetizers before the meal is a warm, welcoming way to start the Thanksgiving feast.

Buffet service is the tried-and-true approach for Thanksgiving because it works equally well for formal and casual entertaining, and makes it easy to organize and serve large quantities of food. Guests make their way through the buffet line, helping themselves to as much of each dish as they want. Once you set out the food, all you have to do is replenish the platters as needed. For large groups, set up a separate buffet station for self-serve beverages, like wine and sparkling water.

Family-style service is well suited to less formal Thanksgiving meals and smaller groups. Choose platters that are small enough to be passed comfortably. Consider serving the turkey on two platters, with light and dark meat on each, instead of on a single large platter, which can be cumbersome. It is helpful to have a sideboard or extra serving table for setting the platters when they are not being passed; this also makes it easier for you to refill platters and bowls. Put bottles of wine and water directly on the table.

Restaurant-style service, in which dishes are individually plated in the kitchen or served by the host from the head of the table, is elegant but involves last-minute work. It is a good option for intimate groups, for simpler meals such as Thanksgiving weekend breakfasts, and for more refined sit-down celebrations.

Decorative Elements: Here is a basic rule for decorating the Thanksgiving table: Repeating patterns create a pleasing effect. This can be achieved by limiting decorations to a few beautiful elements in a few colors. They can be elegant, earthy, antique, modern, refined or whimsical. You can use virtually anything, from a splendid crystal bowl to a humble terra-cotta flowerpot, as long as the total look remains focused and harmonious.

Choose articles that have a special significance for you and your family, such as an heirloom candelabra or platter. Or, select items that fit the season, such as fresh or dried flowers, pomegranates, apples, pumpkins and squashes, nuts, autumn leaves and branches, and sheaves of wheat. Use a few of these to create a centerpiece, to adorn a central table runner, to add an accent to each place setting, and to decorate the buffet, entryway and mantel.

Select candles that complement these elements. They should be either short, such as votives or pillars, or tall enough so that the flame remains above eye level when guests are seated.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *Thanksgiving Entertaining*, by Lou Seibert Pappas (Simon & Schuster, 2005).