Thanksgiving for Non-Traditionalists

Story and photos by Tamara Enz

Cereal and Scotch whisky could seem like an odd choice for Thanksgiving dinner, but I had eaten the leftovers for breakfast; there was no other option. You might think otherwise, but this is not a sad story.

Love them or hate them, holidays come around every year — and I am solidly in the latter camp. For as long as I can remember, I have tried to work holidays so that when everyone else went back to work I could have a quiet day off. Yes, the name "Scrooge" has been bandied about more than a few times in reference to me.

When I was a child, holidays held the promise of being magical, but reality usually came crashing in uninvited, and the days lost their luster somewhere among mid-rare turkey and homemade (but often runny) cranberry sauce. The crush of cleaning and relatives, good china and silverware — and a larger-than-usual mound of dishes — amid unfulfilled expectations and a desire to make these days perfect and memorable somehow made them less so.

In my adult years, I've run the gamut of holiday experiences in random locations. The most memorable one was here in Walla Walla and was tagged as "Thanksgiving for the town orphans who have nowhere else to go." We had jambalaya, martinis and chocolateespresso cheesecake for Thanksgiving brunch. How could you go wrong with that menu? Maybe I need to rethink this holiday-hate thing.

As a recent graduate of the Wine Country Culinary Institute, I now feel somehow compelled to take another look at holidays and, especially, at the food associated with it.

Here is my proposal: Throw out the traditions. No, really. I think 393 years of turkey and stuffing is quite enough. In the age of turkey

— frozen and available at the local supermarket; apples from New Zealand; and pumpkin in a can, we can have traditional Thanksgiving food yearround. Besides, turkeys aren't even native to the Pacific Northwest (says the staunch biologist in me).

We live in a region packed with natural food diversity, rich with produce and fruit beyond many other states' and, for that matter, countries', wildest dreams. It seems time we bow to that and give thanks for the wild Pacific Coast, the grace of the Columbia River, the long growing season and the multitude of local people who bring beautiful, fresh foods to us daily.

Full disclosure: I am 48 years old and, to date, I have cooked one turkey. Ever. When I put that bird in the oven, I was asked, "What's your backup plan?" Humph. Letting

turkey go is not too hard for me.

With that in mind, here are some ideas for marvelous holiday fare that might make you wish you had ditched the turkey and potatoes years ago.

Cutline

To start, pass around a plate full of fried oysters with crème fraîche and herbs, smokedtrout dip with crostini, or mushrooms stuffed with crab. Pumpkin soup, wild mushroom soup or razor clam chowder would be a delicious first course.

For the main event, try salmon, or look to the producers of bison, lamb, pork and beef that surround us in Eastern Washington and Oregon for a choice cut of meat: tenderloin, a rack of ribs, filet mignon, leg of lamb. For the more adventurous, or those with generous and skilled friends, go with elk or deer steaks or tenderloin.

For non-meat eaters, try winter squash gratin, stew or ravioli, or a savory tart (corn and zucchini, maybe). Add baked apples, leafy greens, winter squash or onion casserole, or a salad of wild rice and chanterelles. Throw some sauce made with a local Cabernet or Pinot Noir sounds lovely.

In my opinion, the best breakfast ever is pumpkin pie with whipped cream. Fruit (yes, pumpkin is a fruit), some carbs and dairy — it's the perfect breakfast.

For this non-Thanksgiving meal, let's go for something just as comfortable as pumpkin pie, but less predictable. Chocolate or maple bread pudding, pear-apple or apricot-ginger crisp, a cheese and fruit tart, or just a plate of local

> cheeses and late-season apples and pears would finish the meal nicely.

> Pass around some coffee or tea, a glass of cordial or brandy, and put your feet up with satisfaction and gratitude.

> Breaking tradition, in this case, is about working with what is available and desirable. Cereal and Scotch whisky were available — and at least the whiskey was desirable. Thanksgiving was my first and only day off while working through long days of dawn-todark cold on the Colorado-Wyoming border.

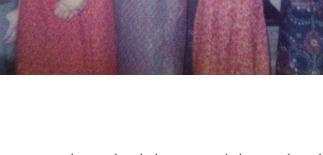
> In my world, that means one thing: road trip! An early-morning start (the before-mentioned leftovers for breakfast; alas, no pumpkin pie); a clear, blue, frosted day; endless miles of open road; and no one stirring.

> I spent the day wandering through Brown's Park (hangout of many

legendary outlaws) and Dinosaur National Monument.

About the time everyone else was tucking into football and mashed potatoes, I stopped high up on a canyon wall, tucked myself into the shelter of a gnarly, old juniper, and enjoyed a bowl of cereal with a Scotch whisky toast, grateful for the amazing view, the unimaginable blue of the sky, and the intense late-autumn sun.

It was a good day, a day for which to give thanks.





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goat cheese and candied pecans in with almost any of these items for extra flavor and crunch.

If you must do stuffing, try something savory and sweet with apples or pears and root vegetables.

The one thing I do love about holiday food is the cranberry sauce. With no resemblance to any natural food substance, even the stuff out of a can has a little bit of a hold on me. Perhaps as a result of the often-fruitless effort my mom made to get cranberry sauce to set properly, I prefer cranberry chutney or relish to the traditional sauce — though a cranberry





Above: Cutline. Left: Cutline

An early-morning start; a clear, blue, frosted day; endless miles of open road; and no one stirring.