

Turkey on the Menu for Thanksgiving Dinner?

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The first Thanksgiving dinner in North America is frequently cited as one by British explorer Martin Frobisher on Baffin Island in 1578 at the end of his difficult crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. While this may have been a giving of thanks for a safe arrival at his destination, a proclamation in Ontario in 1799 gave the reason for observing Thanksgiving as “in signal victory over our enemy and for the manifold and inestimable blessings which our Kingdoms and Provinces have received and daily continue to receive” (Thomson, 1879, n.p.). According to historian Peter Stevens (1999), Canada’s Thanksgiving tradition was shaped by Ontario’s protestant clergy, and later refined by commercial and state interests. All three wrestled for control of the holiday but by the 1870s American holiday traditions, such as family gatherings for turkey dinner and stories of the pilgrims, took hold in Canada. The holiday created commercial opportunities for businesses and Thanksgiving in Canada became strongly associated with a harvest celebration and sharing in the bounty of the land.

Thanksgiving began to be observed in some areas of Canada during the mid to late 1800s. In 1879 the Canadian Parliament declared November 6 to be a national holiday and this became a time to observe Thanksgiving. It didn’t gain wide acceptance and after World War I, the holiday began to be observed in conjunction with Armistice (Remembrance) Day. In 1931, the two holidays were separated but it was not until 1957 that the Canadian Parliament declared Thanksgiving as the second Monday in October.

Early in the 20th Century cookbooks began to include menus for Thanksgiving.

For example:

MENU FOR THANKSGIVING DINNER

Oyster Soup	Crackers
Celery	Salted Almonds
Roast Goose	Apple Sauce
Potatoes	Cream of Lima Beans
Turnips	Pumpkin Pie
Apple Pie	Fancy Cakes
Ice Cream	Coffee
Crackers and Cheese	

(Moffat Stove Company, 1915, p. 125)

THANKSGIVING DINNER

Oysters on Half Shell	
Strained Okra Soup	Toast Melba
Olives	Celery
Wild Duck	Baked Orange
Mushrooms and Lima Beans	
Green Beans	

Pumpkin Pie
Grapefruit Sections Ginger in Syrup
Coffee

(Wimodausis Club, 1934, p. 437)

THANKSGIVING DAY DINNER

Avocado and Orange Cocktail
Celery Pickled Onions Olives
Roast Turkey Pecan Dressing Giblet Gravy
Riced Potatoes Cauliflower with Cream Sauce
Cranberry Ice
Finger Rolls
Apple and Raw Carrot Salad
Cheese Straws
Sugared Nuts Pumpkin Pie Raisins
Coffee Cider Tea Milk

(Blake, 1935, p. 79)

THANKSGIVING DINNER

Shrimp Cocktail Roast Turkey
Mashed Potatoes Chestnut Stuffing
Carrots in Butter Cranberry Jelly Tomato Jelly Salad
Saltines Mince Tarts with Vanilla Ice Cream
Nuts Fruit Mints
Coffee

(Canadian General Electric, 1937, p. 26)

THANKSGIVING DINNER

Melon Balls in Ginger Ale
Roast Turkey with Savory and Sausage Stuffings
Turnip Vegetable Marrow
Potatoes
Crabapple Jelly Applesauce
Celery Hearts and Olives
Pumpkin Pie
Cheese and Fruit Tray

(Elwood, 1967, p. 33)

Smith and Boyd (2009) claim that in Canada, “the traditional menu evolved more slowly than in the United States” (pp. 131-132). In a 1928 *Maclean's* article, the author encourages baked ham as suitable for Thanksgiving dinner. An article in *Chatelaine* in 1934 notes that ham or beef would be suitable for the meal. Smith and Boyd note that before World War II, turkeys grown on the Canadian prairies would not be sufficiently plump by Thanksgiving time to provide a decent meal, which may explain why turkey was more likely to be served at Christmas. They do note, “since the latter half of the twentieth century turkey has dominated Canadian

Thanksgiving” (p. 134). Prior to that it was more likely that other fowl or birds were served. The real moment of adoption was more likely from the 1950s onward with the advent of increased and diverse breeds of turkey production, availability of electric and gas stoves and home freezers, and frozen turkeys in the stores. Turkey as part of the menu was promoted in turkey marketing literature, popular magazines and cook books, and was served in restaurants and institutions.

Turkey has made quite a journey to get to our tables. According to Crawford (1992) domestic turkeys were wide spread in Mexico and Central America in pre-Columbian times and they were taken back to Spain in the early 1500’s where the diffusion to other European countries was rapid. They were brought to Eastern North America in the 17th century by French, English and Dutch colonists. Its unclear when turkeys arrived in British Columbia but currently the province has around 60 turkey producers.

Wild turkey, considered an excellent and challenging game bird, has been introduced and re-introduced to many areas across North America for hunters. In 1910, wild turkeys were raised and released by the BC Game Commission onto James Island off Victoria and Vancouver Island. According to the Royal BC Museum wild turkeys are found on Vancouver Island, the southern Gulf Islands, in the Okanagan and most commonly, in the Kootenays where the East Kootenay Wild Turkey Association, is working towards the integration of wild turkeys into wildlife management of the area. If wild turkey is on the menu for Thanksgiving it will come from the freezer because the hunting season for wild turkey is in the spring.

It is unclear exactly how many families in British Columbia may sit down to a turkey dinner this Thanksgiving. In *Memorable Meals in British Columbia* (1971), contributors do not describe any Thanksgiving dinners, and in the memorable meals they do describe, baked salmon or roast beef is served more often than turkey. Statistics from the Turkey Farmers of Canada website indicate that turkey is more common at a Christmas meal than Thanksgiving. The website reports that in 2011, 38% of all Canadian households purchased turkey and turkey products for Thanksgiving while 42.4% of Canadian households did so at Christmas. At Thanksgiving 2011, 3 million whole turkeys were purchased while at Christmas, 4.4 million whole turkeys were purchased.

One of the most enduring desserts for Thanksgiving dinner is pumpkin pie. It is probably the most genuine way to end a Thanksgiving meal because vegetables of the squash family are unique to the Americas. You can use fresh squash or sweet pie pumpkins; jack-o-lantern type pumpkins won’t do. If necessary buy canned pie filling, and if making a pie isn’t an option, then buy whatever type of pumpkin pie you can afford.

A recipe we found in our cookbook collection is from the 1930 *Foods, Nutrition and Home Management Manual* (known as the Red Book) published by the B.C. Department of Education under the supervision of Jessie McLenaghan, first director

of Home Economics in the province. It required scalded milk, “stewed and sifted” pumpkin, only one egg and half the amount of sugar of modern recipes. It assumed that the reader knew how to make pastry. Today’s equivalents are in brackets. To prepare fresh pumpkin without peeling, cut it in half, remove seeds and place cut-side down in a baking pan with 1 cm. of water. Bake at 350°F for 30 minutes or until soft. Then scoop out insides.

Pumpkin Pie

1 ½ c. stewed and sifted pumpkin (375 mL)

1 c. scalded milk (250 mL – not scalded)

½ c. sugar (125 mL)

½ tsp. salt (2 mL)

½ tsp. ginger (2 mL)

1 tsp. cinnamon (5 mL)

1 egg

1. Beat egg slightly.
2. Mix ingredients in the order given.
3. Line a pie-plate with pastry, put on a rim, and pour in the mixture.
4. Bake in a hot oven to start cooking of the pastry, 450°F; then reduce the heat to 325° to cook the custard.
5. When a knife comes out clean the custard is cooked.

NOTE: Shell may be baked a little first to prevent filling from making it soggy.

Whether you choose for Thanksgiving a turkey dinner with all the trimmings followed by pumpkin pie, or a vegetarian meal from your garden, “giving thanks” for nature’s bounty, you will be marking a long standing tradition in Canadian culture. What we eat on this occasion varies widely and the tradition is open to new and local innovations.

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