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Thanksgiving perfection

You don't have to channel Martha Stewart

By Meredith Resnick
November 22, 2011

For three decades, my big sister's Thanksgiving feasts included not one but two main dishes, a roaring fire in the hearth, and no less than three homemade pies, each one a different flavor.



In 2005, my sister announced that she wasn't hosting the annual dinner because her grown daughter was relocating to Seattle from southern California and she wanted to help her move. I should have been fine with this, but I wasn't. I may have been 45 years old and married, with two daughters of my own, but I'd never orchestrated a Thanksgiving feast — especially not the kind steeped in tradition with matching china and crystal goblets.

We're both big girls now, but my sister, 21 years my senior, was always the more grown-up one. She'd assumed the role of kitchen matriarch and seemed to relish the attention, though she never expected it.

She didn't inherit her culinary talents from our parents. Our mother, when she was alive, cooked on occasion, and when she did, it was heaven. But she was not much of a chef for the work it took, and, well, I kind of took after her. And our father, too.



Nervous about Thanksgiving cooking? Make easy apple crisp instead of trickier apple pie.

Our mother ate dinners slouched on the sofa, sandwich plate in her lap (a trait I gleaned from her). Before my father died, he folded kosher baloney between pieces of white bread and, so as not to dirty a knife, plunged them straight into the French's mustard jar (I got that from him).

Neither my mother nor I, however, agreed that his one-time Fish-Stick Stunt — eating prepackaged frozen fish sticks straight from the freezer — was worth imitating.

So from this legacy, my sister's transformation in the kitchen was most striking. Where she took charge of all things domestic, I happily called for take-out Chinese. While the Limoges dishes and Rosenthal stemware I received as wedding gifts remained packed away in foam peanuts, my sister managed to accumulate multiple sets of china and crystal collectibles from around the world — and used all of them.

Still, all her prepping and cooking was hard work. Setting the table took days of planning and hours to complete. Muted food shows played in the background as she stirred, whisked, and chopped. And sometimes, when she talked about Thanksgiving, I sensed the tension that came with turning on its head our family's legacy of never sitting down at a table to eat.

Once, I suggested we attempt a potluck version of the meal at my home. It was a lopsided expression of gratitude to her, because I was the first to admit that I would never, could never, create the **Martha Stewart Thanksgiving** that she did.

"No," she said. "I've always done it, and I'm not ready not to."

We never spoke of it again.

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When my sister told me about Seattle, she said, "You could always fly up there."

Memories of her extravagant meals flooded my mind. But I didn't have to think long. "Nope," I said, shaking my head into the telephone.

I needed to take wobbly baby steps to creep out of my sister's shadow. I'd grown into womanhood believing Thanksgiving belonged to her and, scared or not, this was my chance to claim it as my own.

"We'll miss you guys," I said.

"We'll miss you, too," she said.

I looked at my tiny kitchen. We didn't have a grand dining room or a chef's oven, but we did have a stove with four burners and a brand-new microwave. Suddenly it seemed like more than enough.

I sat down to make a list, and it quickly became clear that I would require outside help, and not a maid or wait staff. I took it one step at a time, my first being to order a precooked little Tom from **Vons** along with the potatoes, corn, stuffing, and gravy. Whole Foods would be my supplier for glazed carrots.

Would I cook anything? Yes. I steamed **green beans with garlic**, and decided to make an easy, last-minute apple dessert.

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When the big day arrived, we ate buffet-style on our everyday dishes. For dessert, we moved the feast to the family room and ate "couch-style," as my parents had liked to do, with a football game humming in the background. I followed a **Betty Crocker recipe** for **apple crisp**, served with whipped cream made right on the spot. The comforting aroma of cinnamon filled my kitchen as my daughters and I crowded around the oven to see if the apples were ready.

So what if the stuffing took an extra hour to heat after defrosting, or if I overcooked the green beans a tad? I'd been worried that I couldn't pull off a holiday meal like my sister. All it took was altering my definition of perfection.

Domestically, my sister and I are very different; she prefers formalities and I lean toward ease. Yet, as the Thanksgiving host for the first time, I began to understand her pride of ownership about the day. It happened as my own gratitude swelled with every hug my husband gave me, and every time he told me how glad he was to be having Thanksgiving at our home. The kids helped clear the table, and I resisted the urge to explain again that I didn't exactly cook. I accepted their compliments as graciously as my sister would have.

No, it wasn't the same as dining at my sister's, but that didn't matter: I'd finally grown up. I'd realized that what I fed my family never had to be perfect, and neither did I.

***Meredith Resnick's** essays have appeared in such publications as Newsweek, the Los Angeles Times, and JAMA. She is the creator of **The Writer's [Inner] Journey**.*

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1. by Sandra Levy on Nov 22, 2011 at 2:53 PM PST

Dear Meredith,

If you cook with love. That's as fancy as you need to get. Happy Thanksgiving.



2. by Mike Gerke on Nov 23, 2011 at 1:57 AM PST

Lovely article Meredith. It's all about having some good food, and sharing it with the ones you love.

I've been cooking the meal for the family the last few years and gotten pretty good at it. I usually make a 20 pound turkey with stuffing, mashed potatoes, gravy, green bean casserole, sweet potatoes, cranberry sauce along with some deviled eggs and veggie tray. Oh, and for dessert an apple and pumpkin pie with whipped topping (though I'm going with frozen Sara Lee pies and cool whip this year). It's a lot of work but I've gotten pretty good at it.

This year there's only 3 or 4 of us so I got a 13 pound turkey, although I have a 20 pounder in the freezer for later on. Did I say it's a lot of work. I think next year maybe I'll order a pre-cooked dinner as I think you've got something there.

A few years back when I made my first big meal for about 9 people, by the time I was done I had no appetite. Just sat back with a beer and enjoyed watching everyone else enjoy the meal. I guess that's its own reward.

Anyway, I always enjoy reading your articles. Have a very happy thanksgiving this year.

Mike



3. by Barbara Bietz on Nov 23, 2011 at 10:22 PM PST

What a lovely family celebration and the creation of a new tradition!

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