

taste buds

chef Larry
JanesNever try
to change
tradition

If there is one thing I have learned, never tamper with tradition.

I once met a fellow food writer who always cut her turkey in half before roasting it. Finally, one holiday her husband said, "Why do you do this?" and she replied, "Because that's the way my mother did it." The husband then went to the grandmother and said, "Why do you do this?" and she said, "Because my oven was too small."

Hardly a column goes by without some mention of Wyandotte where I grew up, or my momma, and, believe me, when it comes to tradition, you never argue with a woman wearing a babushka and wielding a rolling pin.

Take last Thanksgiving, for instance. Families have been known to revolt at the sight of a strange dish. Marriages have become unglued because one partner preferred oysters in the stuffing.

Last year, I tried to bring some homemade cranberry relish to dinner. Now you have to realize that this batch of cranberry relish was made with two pounds of fresh-picked cranberries culled from a recent trip to Maryland and hand carried on the airplane to avoid smashing. The bowl was leaded Austrian crystal, hand wiped with a special \$5 towel purchased just for crystal from some trendy mail-order shop on the West Coast. The recipe was made without the use of my Cuisinart and the berries were hand mashed. Even the orange peel was fresh dried from a dehydrator pulled from the bowels of the fruit cellar.

WHEN MOMMA hosts Thanksgiving, as she has done for the last 39 years of my life, you learn never to ask, "What can I bring?" You just make something and bring it. Last year I said to myself, "She always serves Ocean Spray Cranberry Jelly, so I'll surprise her with a homemade cranberry jelly that will blow the Ocean Spray away."

When I entered, carrying the sparkling bowl and its ruby red contents, Momma smiled and said, "Oh, that's nice." After the obligatory round of pre-dinner aperitifs, it was time to bring forth the bounty. As usual, all the women scurried into the kitchen. Not wanting to feel un-macho, I kind of slithered off the couch, mumbling something about the fact that I had to use the facilities. Then I turned left instead of right and headed into the kitchen. It was there I found my older sister, Rosie, preparing to open the Ocean Spray can on the old hand-cranked wall-mounted swing-away can opener. "Dear sister," I interrupted, "This year I made homemade cranberry relish so there will be no need to open a can."

I should have known better. Momma shrieked and almost dropped the Cornish casserole of canned yams baked with marshmallows.

"Mind your own business, Lee," (Momma has always called me Lee when she is angry about something) was her retort. "Every Thanksgiving we served Ocean Spray and we will continue to do so as long as God grants me the ability to be here." At that moment she set down the bubbly casserole and whisked the can from Rosie's hand, only to open it herself.

THIS WAS ONE dish that had come straight from the can. While watching her position it on the Currier and Ives side dish, it almost looked like she was checking for the faint indentations on the cranberry jelly made from the side of the can.

I was going to attempt suggesting that this year's Thanksgiving dinner be at my house. This column just changed my mind.

Pie
PUMPKINS

Growers recommend
sugar baby pumpkins
as best for cooking

By Larry Janes
special writer

Three little pumpkins lying very still
in a pumpkin patch on a great big hill.
The first one said: I'm very very green
but I'll be orange for Halloween
The second one said: I'm on my way
to be a jack-o-lantern guy
The third one said: Oh me oh my
today I'll be a pumpkin pie!

— a seasonal kindergarten rhyme

WHEN GROWING UP, my exposure to pumpkins was either culled from a pumpkin-patch selection that later would turn into a monstrous jack-o-lantern or something from a can that ended up in a pie gracing our Thanksgiving Day table.

Little did I know (or care) that statistics claim there are four different species of pumpkins and that each species contains more than 25 various strains. The pumpkin belongs to the gourd or melon family. Their cousins include the proliferous squash and those monstrous hill-climbers, the cucumbers.

The pumpkin is one of those lowly fruits (caught you — it's not a vegetable) that subscribes to Andy Warhol's theory that everyone is famous for 15 minutes of his or her lifetime. Seems that the pumpkin's popularity peaks during the last two weeks of October and then is rarely seen or heard from until next year.

The pumpkin has even been mocked during the Thanksgiving holidays. When you see pumpkin in a can, it better say 100 percent pumpkin because some crafty old geosier of a food processor seems to think it doesn't taste very good alone and therefore must be mixed with butternut and acorn squash.

THEN AGAIN, you probably never knew there are two basic kinds of pumpkins. The first and most widely known is, of course, the jack-o-lantern pumpkin, grown exclusively for table decoration. The flesh of the jack is very stringy and has about as much flavor as a ball of kite string.

The jack's counterpart is known as the "sugar brown baby" because instead of being grown for its girth, it is harvested small. The edible meat is only stringy from whence the seeds are attached. Once the seeds and seed strings are removed, the meat can be cooked into a very tasty dish.

It's anyone's guess as to why pumpkins are so popular around the end of October, but rumor has it from a few local pumpkin growers polled about their stock that the harvest moon makes cooking pumpkins so flavorful. Apparently the "light" frosts make the fruit of the pumpkin sweeter. As the vines begin to wither, all of a sudden the pumpkin gets these shots of adrenaline, causing all the natural sugars to give it one last shot. But the sugar pumpkin grower has to work fast.

Perhaps sugar pumpkin growers meet and secretly sit around their television sets, watching the weathercast. When the almanac and weather reporters beckon a "hard" frost, growers click into a frenzy trying to get as many pumpkins out of their fields as possible before the frost begins to destroy what's left of the crop. Many pumpkins are left in the field to help seed next year's crop.

IF YOU THINK pumpkins ultimately end up gracing the front porch or in a pumpkin pie, try again. Trendy gourmards who enjoy eating turtle eggs and eel liver prize the pumpkin blossom as a true delicacy. These trendoids look for fully opened blossoms to make sure no bees are trapped inside. They then dip the blossoms into a batter and deep fry for one minute.

Next to the meat of the pumpkin itself inevitably ending up in pies, soups, breads and muffins, the next important by-product is the seeds. Some purists like to boil them first while some claim the only way to make good pumpkin seeds is to dry them for three days before roasting.

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T. GRAVES '91

Proud as Peacocks of Amish turkeys

By Joan Boram
special writer

It's always a pleasant feeling to anticipate a trend, especially when you're 20 years ahead of the rest of the world.

Marilyn and Jerry Peacock are much too nice to act smug, but Peacock's Poultry Farm has been selling Amish poultry and beef, supplied by the same 12 Amish farmers, since 1970.

"It was before Amish was 'in,'" says Jerry Peacock, "and before people were concerned about chemicals and additives. My father, Thomas Peacock, was looking for a reliable source of farm-raised poultry and beef, and someone put him in touch with the Amish in Indiana."

The chickens, turkeys, ducks and beef we sell are raised and sold without any chemicals or preservatives. It takes a full 12 weeks to raise a chicken without chemical help, as opposed to eight weeks with injections.

Jerry and wife Marilyn are the third Peacock generation to run the business. Located next to the Peacock home, which was formerly the Peacock farmhouse, the store also sells Amish jellies, jams and relishes, as well as Amish potato chips, butter, cheese

and brown eggs. There's even Amish popcorn in small burlap bags. All are produced without chemicals or preservatives.

"WE HAVE a family policy," says Jerry. "We don't sell anything that we don't like, so we can give an honest opinion. If one likes something and one doesn't, we'll carry the item."

"There's just one exception to the rule," adds Marilyn. "The candy. It was so good, we ate it all. The Amish women make it by hand, and the chocolate was so creamy and the mint so fresh that we just couldn't keep away. Finally, we just quit carrying it."

"People have to be careful about poultry that's called Amish," she cautions. "Federal Compliance Law states only that a bird has to be killed in Amish country. It can be raised anywhere, under any circumstances."

"One of our longtime customers, who is allergic to chemicals, bought some Amish chicken at a large grocery chain and reacted to the chemicals in it. Consumers should ask for some proof that the poultry was actually raised by the Amish."

The Peacock family — including Lora and Cynidi (fourth generation) and Cynidi's kids (fifth-gen-

eration Shawna, 27 months, and Nicholas, 16 weeks) — is gearing up for the holidays. Nicholas is a mile young to get into the spirit of the season, but Shawna is already adept at helping her mother put the eggs on the shelf.

HOLIDAYS MEAN "turkey" at Peacock's, which sells at least 30,000 of them, wholesale and retail, in a seven-week period. This year, for the first time, the Peacock turkeys, raised especially for them, are wrapped in a cryovac vacuum bag. Each bag carries the Peacock name and specifies "Amish raised."

"It's important that the turkey be sealed in an air-tight bag because they're not frozen and there are no preservatives," says Cynidi, as she feeds Shawna slivers of creamy Baby Swiss cheese.

Every Peacock turkey has an oven timer that pops up when done. Amish turkeys cook faster than ordinary turkeys — about 12 minutes per pound, and they're much juicier than others, as well.

"You want to see a madhouse? Come out here the week before Thanksgiving. Cars are lined up on Rochester Road with their parking lights on, waiting for someone to pull out of the park-

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Amish turkeys from Indiana are packaged for Peacock's Poultry Farm in Troy. Amish popcorn and Yoder's jams are other offerings at the retail store.

Photo by
Jim Rider