

Why Do We Eat Turkey on Thanksgiving?

We've got the lowdown from a culinary historian on the specific foods associated with Thanksgiving

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The air is chilled, the leaves have changed, and winter is right around the corner. All of this means it's that time of year to gather around the table and gorge ourselves on ceremonious feasts for one of the most favored holidays, Thanksgiving. But have you ever stopped to question why we eat what we eat?

The beautiful [Michael Jordan's The Steak House](#), located in the upper deck of Grand Central Terminal, recently hosted a special event, featuring a lecture by culinary historian Dr. Beth Forrest, of [The Culinary Institute Of America](#).

After a brief introduction, Dr. Forrest ran through the history of Thanksgiving and how it has changed over time. Although we celebrate on a yearly basis, it was originally only celebrated to commemorate perceived miracles or prosperous harvests. Considering early settlers resided on the East Coast, shellfish such as mussels, oyster, and clams were served. Cranberries, being native to North America, replaced fruit jams that were traditionally served with meats such as mutton. Turkey was considered a symbol of prosperity, as was pumpkin due to its high yield with minimal effort.

Thanksgiving didn't become a national holiday until the end of the Civil War, when President Lincoln declared it as such as a means of uniting the divided North and South. With its declaration as a national holiday, it began to take the form of what we know today.

As decades passed, the holiday meal changed as it was influenced by the food trends of the times. WWII saw a reliance on alternate grains in response to wheat shortages. The advent of canning featured prominently in 1950s celebrations. Current trends have led to the prominence of farm fresh produce and organic meats. Ethnic dishes such as lasagna have also become mainstays, as according to Dr. Forrest, the holiday is more about celebration and doesn't necessarily require any traditional food. Although turkey is usually on everybody's table, it doesn't have to be. So order some pizzas, make some tacos, and really, do whatever you desire. All that matters is you and your company enjoy themselves.

At the conclusion of the lecture, we were treated to Head Chef Cenobio Canalizo's interpretation of a classic Thanksgiving meal, consisting of a mixed greens salad with pumpkin vinaigrette in a Parmesan crisp, butternut squash soup with candied pecans and crème fraîche, roasted organic free-range turkey with cranberry compote, chestnut stuffing, sweet potatoes, green beans, turkey jus, and apple pie and vanilla ice cream. All items are featured on the restaurant's special Thanksgiving prix-fixe menu.

Michael Jordan's Steak House NYC
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