



A Healthy and Delicious Thanksgiving Menu

By Pamela M. Smith, R.D.



Thanksgiving Greetings!

The Thanksgiving table offers many foods we should be thankful for - and not just because they taste great. Many of the traditional holiday foods are also packed with nutrients that can promote good health. Turkey, Sweet Potatoes, Cranberries, Corn, Green Beans, Pumpkin - there are so many traditional Thanksgiving Foods I'm thankful for as I prepare a holiday feast for my family.

There's no need to avoid these food treasures -- instead, learn how to prepare old unhealthy classics in new healthy (and tasty!) ways. And, add some guaranteed-to-please new favorites.

Here is this year's Thanksgiving Menu for my Family Celebration -

Maple Spice Brined Roast Turkey with Healthy Gravy
Grilled Salmon with Citrus Chile Rub
Cornbread Dressing
Fragrant Pilaf
Cranberry Chutney
Fresh Green Beans and Mushrooms
Nicole's "Creamed" Corn
Danielle's Favorite Cucumber Jalapeno Slaw
Oven Roasted Beets
Sweet Potato, Orange and Spinach Salad
Pumpkin Bread Pudding

TURKEY

There's a reason Thanksgiving is called "Turkey Day." Ninety-five percent of us will eat turkey on Thanksgiving, and I often wonder why I don't cook a whole turkey more often than once a year! Most of the turkeys sold in the United States are of a variety that has been bred to produce about 70 percent white meat, with 30 percent dark meat. White meat has less fat and fewer calories (4 ounces has 175 calories and about 4 grams fat) than the same portion of dark meat (which has 210 calories and 8 grams fat). The dark meat may have more calories, but it also contains twice the iron and zinc as white meat - and it's certainly tasty!

Both nutrients tend to be low in our diets, so this year, eat a slice of each. If you like gnawing on the turkey leg, skin and all, 4 ounces will give you 250 calories and 11 grams fat. Regardless of whether you are a white meat or dark meat fan, choose a fresh turkey. Not only will it contain less sodium, but you don't have to hassle with defrosting it.

TASTY TURKEY TIPS:

* **It all starts with selection.** As stated above, I recommend fresh unbasted turkey for superior flavor and texture. A prebasted bird is usually injected with a mixture of broth, vegetable oil, and seasonings. Reading the label will help you tell if the turkey has been prebasted.

* **If you do use frozen turkey, be sure you leave enough time and room to thaw it in the refrigerator.** It takes about 24 hours for every 5 pound -- that's at least 2 1/2 days for a 12-pounder. If you start to cut it close on time, submerge the frozen turkey in cold water in the sink, and change the water frequently. It will take about 30 minutes per pound.

* **While shopping for your holiday meal grocery list**, be sure to include extra items to use for garnishing the turkey platter. A few of my favorites:

Fresh herbs

Curly endive

Orange slices

Baby carrots with tops

Flowering kale

Cherry tomatoes

Fresh cranberries

Celery leaves

Small bunches of grapes Baked acorn squash rings

* **To prepare the turkey for roasting, take it out of the plastic bag.** Remove the neck and giblets (the heart, liver, and gizzard) from the neck and body cavities. Use the neck, heart, and gizzard for Homemade Turkey Stock (recipe follows). If you are planning on brining the turkey - follow the directions below. Brining is a time tested method that helps to ensure a moist and flavorful turkey!

* **Once brined, or if you're taking it straight from the packaging, rinse the turkey thoroughly with cold water; pat dry with paper towels.** If a metal clip secures the drumsticks, you won't have to tie them with cotton kitchen twine.

* **A roasting rack is essential to keep the turkey from sticking to the bottom of the pan.** A relatively deep (2 to 3 inches) roasting pan is also important so you can make gravy without splashing over the edge. Disposable aluminum pans make terrible gravy and are so high-sided they inhibit browning of the skin. Plus, they're flimsy and can be dangerous if overloaded with a heavy, hot turkey.

* **Before roasting, place a thin layer of celery leaves and thin slices of onion between skin and breast meat of turkey.** They add a rich flavor to the meat, and absorb much of the fat from the skin.

* **Cover the breast with foil during most of the roasting to protect lean meat from drying out.** The aluminum foil should be wrapped-not tented-around the entire breast. This traps steam that rises during cooking and forces it back into the breast meat. Remove the foil for the last hour or so of cooking to allow the skin to brown.

* **Many thermometers can check for doneness.** The disposable pop-up thermometer that comes in most packaged turkeys works, but basting can prevent it from popping up. Perhaps the best option is a remote display thermometer with a probe to insert in the turkey. It can alert you when the bird is done. Because the monitor display sits on the counter, you don't have to open the door to check the turkey's progress.

* **Tasty Tip:** Use your leftover turkey to make turkey vegetable soup or turkey chili instead of turkey sandwiches. You'll save calories and will squeeze in extra servings of healthy veggies.

Healthful Turkey Gravy

2 tablespoons canola oil

2 cloves garlic, minced

1/2 cup white wine (may omit)

1 tablespoon cornstarch

3 cups de-fatted turkey stock*, heated (may also use purchased chicken stock)

1/4 cup white wine or additional chicken stock

1 bay leaf

1 tsp. Creole seasoning

Kosher Salt and Pepper, to taste

Heat canola oil in a saucepan. Add garlic and cook for 30 seconds. Stir in cornstarch until smooth. Add stock, bay leaf, wine and seasonings. Cook over low heat, stirring, until gravy thickens, about 5 minutes. Remove bay leaves. Serve with turkey.

Make 15 servings, 1/4 cup each.

***Turkey Stock**

Turkey giblets

1 quart water

1 onion, cut into chunks

1 stalk celery with leaves, sliced

6 black peppercorns

2 cloves garlic, smashed

1-2 tsp. salt

Remove the giblets from the bird and wash well. Boil giblets together with the neck in 1 quart of water with other ingredients. Strain off broth and refrigerate to allow fat to rise to top and skim off. Reserve giblets for gravy. Try to make the day before to allow time to cool and de-fat.

BRINING YOUR TURKEY

Brining is the technique of accentuating the taste, texture and moisture level of leaner cuts of meat such as turkey, chicken and pork through prolonged immersion in salted liquid. It doesn't take much effort, and you've probably already got everything you need on hand.

For the most basic brining, you'll need: A plastic, glass, ceramic or stainless steel (no aluminum) vessel large enough to your meat, and enough brine to cover it. (I use a cooler for a big turkey), Kosher Salt, Apple Cider, Honey, Maple Syrup or Sugar in the Raw and Water.

To figure out how much brine you'll need, place the meat in the container, and pour in plain water. Measure the water. For every quart, you'll need to add 1/4 cup kosher salt (or 1/8 cup table salt) and 2 Tbs. turbinado sugar (sugar in the raw) or brown sugar. Once you've mastered the technique, you can start experimenting with sweeteners (like molasses, honey and maple syrup), spices, herbs, peppers, garlic, onions, etc. -- wherever your culinary creativity takes you. I've included two flavorful recipes below.

Pour the brine over the meat, place a heavy plate or bowl atop the meat to keep it submerged, and place in the refrigerator or a cooler below 40°F. Different types and sizes of meat will take more or less time. Start at the lower end of the scale, and turn the meat halfway through. You can always brine more, but you can't unbrine. You will want to brine a whole turkey overnight, for 6-24 hours. Be sure to pat it dry before roasting or grilling to avoid just steaming the meat.

Here are recipes for two of my favorite brines:

Maple Spice Brine

2 cups kosher salt
1 1/2 cups sugar in the raw
2 cups Grade B pure maple syrup
1/3 cup Dijon mustard
1 Tbs. hot red pepper flakes
1/4 cup juniper berries
1 Tbs. whole cloves
1/2 cup fresh rosemary, chopped
1/4 cup chopped fresh thyme
24 garlic cloves, smashed
1/4 cup chopped fresh ginger
1 gallon water

Mix all of the brine ingredients together in a nonreactive pot and bring to a boil. Turn off the heat and stir the brine to ensure that the salt, sugar, and maple syrup have dissolved. Let the brine cool, then put it in a large nonreactive container and add the turkey. Chill for 8-24 hours.

Apple Cider Brine

2 cups kosher salt
12 sprigs fresh rosemary
12 cloves garlic, crushed
2 Tbs. whole dried cloves
2 Tbs. whole black peppercorns
1 1/2 gallons boiling water
1 1/2 gallons ice water
1 quart frozen apple juice concentrate, preferably organic
1 pint natural apple cider vinegar

Make the brine. Stir the kosher salt, the rosemary sprigs, the crushed garlic, the whole cloves and the peppercorns into the boiling water and let the mixture steep for 20 minutes. Stir in the ice water and the frozen juice concentrate and cider, and continue stirring until the ice has melted.

Pour the cold brine over the turkey and cover the container or the cooler. Allow the turkey to soak in the cold brine for 6 to 24 hours. Make sure the turkey stays cold during the entire brining time.

CRANBERRIES

Skip the canned jellied, high-sugar cranberry sauce and opt for cranberry chutney with dried cranberries and apples. This turkey topper is full of heart-healthy nutrition. Cranberries are a good source of vitamin C and are rich in anti-oxidant compounds called flavonoids, including anthocyanins, flavonols, and proanthocyanins. The antioxidant-like properties of these flavonoids may keep strokes and heart attacks away by helping to prevent fatty plaques from clogging your arteries.

Cranberry Chutney

Try this flavorful accompaniment to all kinds of meat.

2 cups chopped, fresh cranberries
1 cup peeled, chopped Granny smith apples
3 tbsp. brown sugar
2 tbsp. chopped prunes
2 tbsp. chopped onions
1/2 tsp. ground cinnamon
1/4 tsp. Five spice powder
1/3 cup apple-cranberry juice
3 tbsp. red wine vinegar
2 tsp. lemon juice

Combine all ingredients in a medium saucepan. Bring mixture to a boil. Cover, reduce heat and simmer for 30 minutes, stirring frequently. Uncover and cook, stirring for 5 minutes or until mixture is thickened.

Makes 8 servings

Cornbread Dressing

You'll love this great tasting, yet lower-fat dressing. The traditional recipe had 225 calories and 13 grams of fat (50% of its calories). This version has only 135 calories and 1 gram of fat (only 6% of its calories). Calories and fat are reduced by using defatted turkey or chicken broth, cornbread dressing cubes instead of traditional higher fat cornbread, egg substitute in place of whole eggs and cooking spray instead of butter or oil.

1 tsp. olive oil
1 cup finely chopped celery
1/2 cup chopped onions
2 Tbs. chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley (or 2 tsp. dried)
1 tsp. ground sage
1 1/2 tsp. poultry seasoning
1/2 tsp. cracked black pepper
1/2 tsp. salt
2 packages (12 ounces each) unseasoned cornbread stuffing cubes
3 cups homemade turkey stock or purchased fat free/low salt chicken stock
1/2 cup egg substitute or 4 egg whites

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Lightly spray a medium nonstick skillet with nonstick cooking spray, and heat with olive oil. Add the celery and onions. Cook over medium heat until tender. Stir in herbs seasoning and spices.

Lightly spray a large casserole dish with nonstick cooking spray. Place the cornbread cubes in casserole. Add the onion and celery mixture, and 2 cups of the broth and egg substitute, gently toss. Taste and adjust seasoning with additional salt and pepper as needed. Drizzle with remaining broth to moisten bread thoroughly; gently toss again to mix well.

Bake uncovered for 30 to 40 minutes or until heated through. Makes 10 servings

Fragrant Pilaf

This pilaf is a great way to enjoy whole grains. It's a wonderful side dish recipe for holiday gatherings and a refreshing alternative to the classic dressing. It's also a smart way to incorporate all of those turkey leftovers. For a complete meal after the celebration, just slice or cube the turkey, heat and add to the cooked rice.

1 Tbs. extra virgin olive oil
4 garlic cloves, minced
1/2 cup finely chopped yellow onion
1/4 cup pine nuts
2 cups brown and wild rice blend
1 quart chicken broth
2 tsp. red pepper flakes
2 tsp. cardamom, ground
2/3 cup dried cherries, cranberries or golden raisins
1 Tbs. lime zest, finely minced
1 tsp. ground cinnamon
1 tsp. Tony's Creole seasoning (or kosher Salt or cracked black pepper, to taste)
1/2 cup blanched, slivered almonds

Heat oil in large nonstick skillet over high heat until hot but not smoking. Add garlic, onion and pine nuts; sauté until onions and garlic are lightly golden and pine nuts begin to brown, about 3 minutes.

Add rice and cook, stirring, until the rice is well coated. Add the remaining ingredients, except the almonds, and stir well. Cover pan, and turn the heat to low, simmering until the liquid has been absorbed, about 40 to 45 minutes. Remove from heat, fluff with a fork and stir in the almonds. Adjust seasonings with kosher salt and cracked black pepper. Makes 6-8 servings.

Green Beans with Mushrooms

Retire the Green Bean Casserole for good – it may be more dangerous than you think. It's usually packed with calories and fat, from all that creamy soup and those insane fried onions. Swap out for fresh green beans and mushrooms. Your dish will be much lower in fat and calories, and it'll taste delicious!

2 pounds fresh green beans
2 cloves garlic, minced
2 Tbs. shallots, finely chopped
1/2 pound fresh mushrooms, washed and sliced
2 teaspoons olive oil
1/2 teaspoon dried rosemary
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon black pepper

Trim ends from green beans; break into smaller pieces if desired. Steam or lightly boil in chicken stock until crisp tender.

While beans are cooking, spray nonstick skillet with cooking spray; add olive oil and heat over medium-high heat. Add garlic and shallots; cook about 1 minute. Add mushrooms, rosemary and seasonings and cook another 3-4 minutes in oil for 5 minutes. Add fresh herbs and cooked green beans. Toss together and serve. Makes 6 servings

SWEET POTATOES

Long on my Nutrition Top Ten, sweet potatoes are to be celebrated at this holiday time. Not even carrots have as much beta-carotene, an antioxidant that may help prevent strokes and certain kinds of cancer. The news gets better: After evaluating 50 vegetables for overall healthfulness, the Center for Science in the Public Interest ranked sweet potatoes near the top. In addition to beta-carotene, they're loaded with fiber and vitamin C and are virtually fat-free. Plus, a six-ounce serving delivers nearly 10 times the U.S. recommended daily allowance of vitamin A. Sweet potatoes make white potatoes look like nutritional weaklings. Just half a cup of sweet potatoes provides more than 400 percent of your daily need for vitamin A and half of your need for vitamin C. Sweet potatoes also provide fiber, calcium and iron and several B-vitamins. But even such a nutrition powerhouse can wreck a diet when they're smothered in butter, cream and sugar, then suffocated by marshmallows! A typical serving of the too-sweet side dish contains about 300 calories.

Instead, bake up small sweet potatoes and enjoy! Unlike a baked white potato, a baked sweet potato can be served with just a dash of cinnamon and nutmeg for a fat-free companion to turkey. Or try them whipped as in the recipe below- they are glorious!

Sweet Potatoes Glorious

This dish will bring about many smiles!

4 pounds sweet potatoes
2 tablespoons cornstarch
1/2 teaspoon salt or 1 tsp. Creole seasoning
1 1/3 cups unsweetened pineapple juice
1 teaspoons ground nutmeg
2 tablespoons nonfat dry milk powder
3 eggs, lightly beaten
2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
1 tablespoon canola oil
1 small can (8 ounces) unsweetened crushed pineapple
unsweetened flaked coconut and/or chopped walnuts, optional

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Bake sweet potatoes until easily pierced with fork, about 45 minutes. Let cool, and slip off skins using paper towel. Place sweet potatoes in mixing bowl and mash. Add cornstarch, salt, pineapple juice, nutmeg, milk powder, eggs, cinnamon, and oil; beat. Stir in pineapple and pour into a casserole dish coated with nonstick cooking spray. May sprinkle with a small amount of coconut and walnuts to garnish, if desired.

Bake for 30 minutes. Makes 12 Servings

Roasted Sweet Potato and Orange Salad

This is another delicious and unique way to include sweet potatoes in your Thanksgiving Meal - as your salad! Roast the sweet potatoes, make the dressing, section the oranges, and slice the onion ahead. Keep them all refrigerated separately until you're ready to toss the salad.

1 tablespoon chopped fresh rosemary
2 teaspoons olive oil
3 garlic cloves, unpeeled and crushed
1 1/2 pounds peeled sweet potato, cut into 3/4-inch pieces
3 cups orange sections (about 6 oranges)
1/2 cup thinly sliced red onion
3 tablespoons pine nuts, toasted
1 (6-ounce) bag prewashed baby spinach
Garnish with Pomegranate Seeds, if desired

DRESSING:

3 tablespoons fresh orange juice
2 tablespoons olive oil
1 tablespoon stone-ground mustard
1 tablespoon rice vinegar
1 tablespoon honey
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
1 garlic clove, minced

Preheat oven to 400°. To prepare salad, combine first 4 ingredients, tossing well. Place potato mixture on a sheet pan lined with parchment paper. Bake at 400° for 40 minutes, stirring occasionally. Remove from oven; cool. Discard garlic. Combine potato mixture, orange sections, onion, pine nuts, and spinach in a large bowl.

To prepare dressing, combine orange juice and remaining ingredients in a small bowl, stirring well with a whisk. Drizzle dressing over salad; toss gently to coat. Sprinkle with pomegranate seeds, if desired. Yield: 10 1 cup servings

"Creamed" Corn with Basil

8 large ears corn, husked
2 to 4 tablespoons 1% milk
1 large shallot, finely chopped (1/4 cup)
1 tsp. olive oil
1 cup water
1 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon black pepper
2 to 3 tablespoons thinly sliced fresh basil

Working in a large bowl, cut kernels from cobs with a sharp knife and set aside. Scrape back of knife several times against cobs to extract remaining corn pulp, scraping into a large glass measure. (You should have at least 3/4 cup of corn pulp. If not, add 2 tablespoons milk.) Transfer pulp to a blender and purée with 2 tablespoons milk until smooth.

Cook shallot in olive oil in a 12-inch heavy skillet over moderate heat, stirring occasionally, until softened, 3 to 4 minutes. Stir in corn, then add corn purée, water, salt, and pepper and simmer, uncovered, stirring occasionally, until kernels are just tender, 3 to 4 minutes. Stir in basil to taste.

Citrus Chile Rubbed Salmon

I "feed a crowd" at our Thanksgiving Gatherings - 30 or more family and friends is the norm. So, I often prepare another protein "star" to go along with the turkey. This salmon is not only delicious (and a big hit with my non-turkey fans!), but when served with "creamed" corn, it's quite reminiscent of the First Thanksgiving! If weather allows, grilling the salmon frees up precious oven space.

- 1/4 cup turbinado sugar (sugar in the raw)**
- 2 1/2 Tbs. chili powder**
- 1 1/2 Tbs. freshly grated lemon rind**
- 1 1/2 teaspoons freshly ground toasted cumin seeds**
- 1/2 tsp. ground cinnamon**
- 1 side of salmon, wild when possible, or 8 filets**

Mix together turbinado sugar, chili powder, freshly grated lemon rind, cumin and cinnamon.

Rub Salmon with Chili Rub. Grill till medium, taking care not to burn rub. Alternately, you may pan sear: Heat a large flat nonstick pan to very high heat, add 1 tsp. olive oil and add salmon to pan. Sear on both sides, and finish cooking in a 375 degree oven till done.

Cucumber Jalapeno Slaw

- 1 lb. salad cucumbers, peeled, seeded and sliced**
- 1 Red Pepper, sliced**
- 1 Yellow Pepper, sliced**
- 2 Jalapeno Peppers, seeded and cored, cut into 1/8 " rings**
- 1 small Red Onion, sliced and separated into rings**
- 1/2 cup Rice Vinegar**
- 1 Tbs. Extra virgin olive oil**
- 1/4 tsp. Kosher salt**
- 1/2 tsp. Creole Seasoning (such as Tony Chachere's)**
- 1/4 tsp. Cumin, fresh ground**
- 1/2 oz. Fresh Cilantro, chopped**
- 1/2 tsp. Habanero or favorite Hot Sauce**

Place the sliced cucumbers, red and yellow bell peppers, jalapeno and red onions in a stainless mixing bowl.

Combine the remaining ingredients in a small mixing bowl and mix with a wire whip until evenly blended. Pour the vinaigrette over the vegetables and toss until evenly blended. Adjust seasoning with additional kosher salt, if desired.

Chill for at least 4 hours before using.

PUMPKIN

You didn't think I would tell you not to eat pumpkin pie on Thanksgiving, did you? Pumpkin, like sweet potatoes, is loaded with vitamin A and also provides about a quarter of your need for vitamin K, a nutrient important for bone health.

An easy way to lighten your pumpkin pie is to use evaporated skim milk and egg substitute in place of condensed milk and whole eggs. I've been doing that for years, and everyone loves it!

Another tasty treat: Slip some pumpkin pie spice into some apple cider for a yummy holiday treat. Sip on this festive delight while everyone else is having that second helping of dessert!

Pumpkin Bread Pudding

For a change of pace, try this yummy bread pudding -it's a favorite of mine.

2 cups skim milk
1 cup honey
1 can (16 oz.) unsweetened pumpkin
1/2 tsp. ground ginger
1 1/2 tsp. cinnamon
2 egg whites, slightly beaten
2 tsp. vanilla
1/3 cup dates, soaked in water and coarsely chopped
1 large carrot, grated
1/2 loaf whole grain bread, cubed

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Mix together milk, honey, pumpkin, spices, egg whites, vanilla, dates and grated carrot.

Place bread cubes in a 9-x13 inch pan sprayed with cooking spray. Pour liquid mixture over bread cubes, and push down on bread to allow it to begin to soak up the liquid.

Cover pan with foil and bake for 35 minutes. Remove foil and bake an additional 10 minutes or until browned on top. Cut into 15 squares. To serve, place a square on a plate or in a sundae glass. Serves 15

Bon Appetit!