



Photo: Michael Hession

How to Celebrate Thanksgiving During the Pandemic

Michael Sullivan | NOVEMBER 12, 2020 | Wirecutter.com

Thanksgiving is right around the corner, and if you're like me, you may be wondering how on earth you're going to celebrate this year. I've been hosting a friendsgiving for over 15 years—a tradition that started in college with a guest list consisting of any friends who didn't happen to go home for the big day. However, this year many traditions will be put on hold. Many people will be spending the holiday away from family and friends due to COVID-19–related travel restrictions or safety concerns. But that doesn't mean you need to sit at your table sulking with a bag of Brach's Turkey Dinner Candy Corn.

This Thanksgiving is an opportunity to think outside the box. It may inspire you to throw out your traditional playbook and opt for an entirely new menu (maybe that's something you've secretly wanted to do for years anyway). Or you may be seeking just the opposite, longing to replicate some semblance of your family's Thanksgiving traditions because you find them comforting in these uncertain times. Perhaps you're looking for thoughtful ways to show your family, friends, or community that you care even if you can't do it in person. Regardless of which camp you fall into, we've put together a list of low-stress ways to safely celebrate Thanksgiving amid the pandemic.

Dine together virtually

If you live close to family or friends, a fun way to piece together your Thanksgiving dinner is by organizing a meal exchange among a few households. After deciding on a menu together, you can add all of your recipe links to a shared spreadsheet like Google Sheets. Each household signs up for a dish or two to make in bulk, divvies them up into

equal portions (our budget-pick plastic food storage containers are great for this purpose since they're so cheap that you won't mind if you don't get them back), and delivers them to the other households Thanksgiving morning. The spreadsheet helps keep everything organized so no one accidentally makes the same dish twice (though too much stuffing is never a bad thing). You can also add a column for allergies or dietary restrictions, which is helpful when you're juggling multiple dishes and mouths to feed. Once the dropoff is complete, everyone can enjoy their meals together on a video call (we recommend Jitsi Meet for chatting with family and friends because it's free, secure, and easy to use).

Broadcasting your computer display on your TV can make your far-away family feel a little more life-size.

Alternatively, for some people, the best part of Thanksgiving is the joy and frenzy of cooking together with family and friends. If you can't all be in the same kitchen this year, one way to re-create that feeling is for each household to prepare the same batch of recipes independently. That way you can experience the same meal over a long-distance video chat. Again, once you agree on a menu, you can add all of your recipe links to a shared spreadsheet. You can also create columns in the spreadsheet for each household to write comments—whether they're helpful tips, suggested ingredient variations, or cooking woes.

Of course, dining virtually can be a challenge when you're limited to the small screen on your smartphone or laptop. One way to enhance your viewing experience is by taking advantage of other electronics you may already have. Broadcasting your computer display on your TV can make your far-away family feel a little more life-size. Smart display devices, such as the Amazon Echo Show or the Google Nest Hub Max (two of our top-pick smart displays), offer another great way to stay connected. Their voice-activated commands are especially helpful if your hands are messy in the kitchen, for example, or if you want your kids to be able to initiate calls with loved ones easily. You may also consider giving a matching smart display to family members or friends who are looking for an easier way to stay in touch. Senior staff writer Jackie Reeve set up Echo Show devices for both her mom and in-laws, and she loves how it has helped her 8-year-old daughter keep in contact with grandparents during the pandemic.

Order or send food

If you're looking to cut yourself some slack, ordering side dishes is far less stressful than preparing an entire Thanksgiving feast yourself. Even if you want to make some dishes yourself, it can be nice to supplement them with a few ready-made options. You can always order basic precooked sides from the grocery store. But also consider picking up food from a local restaurant, which is a great way to support businesses hit hard by the pandemic. Getting specialty foods online is another option. Goldbelly, for example, lets you order a variety of dishes—from pumpkin pie to pastrami—from popular restaurants across the country. You could even go so far as to get your turkey by mail: We're fond of the Amish-raised apple- and cherry-wood smoked turkeys from Dickson's Farmstand

Meats, which are not only delicious but also much easier to prepare since they require only reheating. (We also like Willie Bird smoked turkeys if Dickson's sells out.)

If you're like me, you've probably done your fair share of stress baking (and eating) during the pandemic. Shipping some of those calories to family and friends is a great way to show them you're thinking of them.

You might also consider sending specialty foods or a bountiful gift basket to your loved ones. We're big fans of surprising family and friends with a box of Jeni's Ice Cream, which we tested for our guide to the best gift baskets. A box of specialty coffee makes another lovely gift.

You could send something you've made yourself instead of ordering food online. If you're like me, you've probably done your fair share of stress baking (and eating) during the pandemic. Shipping some of those calories to family and friends is a great way to show them you're thinking of them, even if you can't celebrate the holiday together. When it comes to cookies, it's best to send bar or drop varieties that aren't too delicate—other kinds will arrive in a pile of crumbs. It's also a good idea to wrap the cookies individually in waxed paper or plastic wrap before putting them in tins or plastic containers (a slice of sandwich bread in the container will help prevent the cookies from drying out). Quickbreads like pumpkin bread or banana bread also ship well. Just be sure to fill the box with plenty of packing material to prevent the containers from shaking around during shipping. The USPS offers a number of other helpful suggestions for shipping food.

Scale it back

Your guest list is likely to be much smaller than usual this year, or you might just be feeling burned out. Either way, it's ok to scale your menu back a bit. If you don't plan to repurpose the turkey carcass for stock or congee after Thanksgiving, cooking drumsticks or a breast instead of a whole bird might make more sense. New York Times columnist Melissa Clark has a great menu of Thanksgiving recipes for two, or you can try mixing things up by cooking cornish game hens or duck instead of turkey. Consider halving recipes and making fewer sides. And again, don't be afraid to order some sides from your local restaurant, bakery, or supermarket.

If this is your first year cooking Thanksgiving, don't sweat it. There couldn't be a better time to give it the old college try than during a pandemic when the stakes are so low. The focus will be on seeing family or friends, not on worrying about a turkey that may taste a little dry. If you need help getting started, check out our list of basic kitchen tools for hosting your first Thanksgiving plus this list of easy recipes from NYT Cooking.

Celebrate al fresco



Photo: Energ+

If you live in a warmer climate, consider taking advantage of the nice weather by throwing an outdoor party. It's easier for multiple families to gather at a safe distance outside, whether it's a park or your own backyard. A potluck with a designated food station allows each household to take turns dishing up their plates. Alternatively, you can portion the food in advance in separate containers and distribute it at the gathering.

We have lots of recommendations for outdoor gatherings in our guide to great gear for picnics and grilling and our list of backyard party essentials. You can grill your turkey (either whole or in pieces) on a gas grill or charcoal grill. Or, if you're willing to splurge a bit, a pellet grill offers a pretty foolproof way to make your own smoked turkey and bake some sides while you're at it. We also have a guide to the best turkey fryer if you think you want to go that route. Depending on where you live, consider getting an outdoor patio heater in case the temperature dips (though be forewarned that as of September, those are already selling out). Or at least make sure you have some throw blankets on hand.

Ditch tradition (or begin new ones)

Perhaps this is the year to break free of familial traditions and choose something nontraditional to cook. If you have a growing stack of recipes you've saved or a new cookbook you've yet to try, now is the perfect time to rummage through them and choose dishes that inspire you. It's much easier to try new recipes when you have fewer people to please, especially if that one grumpy relative won't be joining you this year. Don't feel beholden to the usual suspects like turkey or pumpkin pie.

One way to plan a menu is to highlight seasonal food unique to your area. Wirecutter editor Marilyn Ong said, “When I was living in Berkeley years ago, friends would talk about the Bay Area tradition of having crab for Thanksgiving, since the Dungeness crab season opens up there right before the holiday. The best idea I heard was crab hot pot every year!” (Fair warning: Last year, this Northern California tradition was disrupted by other marine friends. If you’re planning a menu around seasonal hunting, fishery, or harvest schedules, be sure to check your local guides for updates.) Maybe something as simple as following Calvin Trillin’s famous suggestion to replace turkey with carbonara could be just the right level of effort this year. There are also a number of fantastic family dishes featured in this 2016 roundup of Thanksgiving traditions, such as Erika Council’s pork neck and noodles or Martha Beltrán’s pan de jamón, which could be fun to try. Any nice meal paired with a great bottle of wine can be just as meaningful as a traditional Thanksgiving feast with all the fixin’s.

Donate to those in need

This Thanksgiving is especially poignant due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as many people have lost loved ones or are experiencing financial hardships. Consider volunteering your time or donating money to an organization or charity that’s meaningful to you in lieu of having a big feast. The New York Times’s Neediest Cases Fund, which has raised millions of dollars for charitable organizations since it began in 1912, is one great option—this year’s campaign includes several organizations devoted to fighting hunger. You can also donate your time by checking in on elderly neighbors and offering to run their errands. If you need further inspiration, an article we published in March on ways to help your community during the pandemic still has lots of relevant tips.