

Thanksgiving

Roadmap

Your guide to enjoying Thanksgiving while making memories with a delicious meal!

Ground Rules

1. It is all going to be okay. Thanksgiving meal can be intimidating — I hear you - it's a gathering that centers around the food. Even if some things go out of plan (and they probably will - it happens) know that at the end of the day, it's the memories made and the laughter shared that really matters.
2. Simple is better. Doing a few dishes well will not only help you feel more confident with what you are seeing, but it will also mean that you have less to juggle. Getting all the sides on the table at the same time and warm can be a lot, so make it easier on yourself.
3. Delegate. If you share the load, it is easier for everyone. Ask guests to bring something (remind them it's okay if they buy it!), get your spouse and kids involved, and don't be afraid to buy items yourself! If you get the rolls and pies from a local bakery, you are not only lightening your load, but you are helping to support their business. This is winning!
4. Have fun! With this guide, you will have food prepared ahead of time, a day of game plan, and all your bases covered. You can sit and enjoy a glass of wine with your guests, engage with the kids as they play a game, or listen to the football fans duke it out about who's going all the way this year.

Our goal here is to: have a plan, prepare what we can ahead of time, and to have a schedule for the day of so that you can serve everything to the table, warm, at the same time and with complete calmness! Remember, your guests will feed off the energy of the host, so being calm will enhance their experience and memories (yes, even and especially for the kids!) You want calm, happy memories of this day, right?



Have questions? Contact me at
sweetteaspooncafe@gmail.com for 1-on-1 support!

2 Week Timeline



At least 2 weeks before Thanksgiving:

- Figure out **how many people** you are hosting! An exact number is ideal, but an approximate number will work. Thanksgiving is a forgiving meal and there are many ways you can stretch things to account for additional guests. Leftovers are GREAT! You can eat them as is, repurpose, freeze, or share with your guests, a neighbor or friend.
- Order **the turkey**: You will want to plan for approximately 1.5 pounds of turkey per person. A 14- to 16- pound turkey should be good for about 10 people. If you are ordering a turkey from a local farm or market, they typically begin selling in October, so you can order well in advance. Pick up is often starts the Sunday before Thanksgiving. This will be a FRESH turkey, so you do not need to account for time to defrost.
 - If you are planning to get your turkey at a grocery store, they are often fresh (not frozen) the week of Thanksgiving, but you way want to double check with your store.
 - If you get one that is frozen, plan accordingly. It takes 1 day to defrost for each 4-5 pounds of meat, so a 14- to 16- pound turkey will take 3 to 4 days. It's important to account for the space this will take in your fridge. I recommend adding a roasting pan or cookie sheet underneath in case it leaks. You can also defrost the turkey in a cooler, but will need to monitor the temperature to ensure it stays below 40°F.
 - If you need to FLASH defrost, don't worry, there is a way. You will need to create a cold water ice bath for the turkey — in the kitchen sink, bathtub, cooler, or other large vessel. Place the turkey in the water and change frequently (every 30-60 minutes) — monitor the temperature of the water to ensure it doesn't go above 40°F.
- **Plan your menu**: First, decide what dishes you will be including in your menu. Remember, simple is beautiful! Once you have the menu planned, you can decide if you'll need to multiple your recipes and make a shopping list. Most items you will need for Thanksgiving are stable for a long time, so shop ahead to beat the rush! This is also helpful if your local store is out of an ingredient and you may need to shop around or order online.
 - If this is your first time, my recommended menu is: turkey, gravy, dressing, mashed potatoes, cranberry, (2 of the following: sweet potato casserole, corn casserole, green bean casserole, or mac and cheese), rolls OR cornbread and pumpkin pie.
 - Keep in mind that with so many dishes on Thanksgiving, if an item serves 6-8 and you have 10 guests, you can either do a single batch or 1 and 1/2 times -- you know if your guests are big eaters or not so much.
- It is helpful to think about what you will be serving the food in, with, and on — do you have enough large serving dishes, big spoons or spatulas, and will you use real plates or paper?
- A few items to make sure you have: tin foil, plastic wrap, a meat thermometer, and some take away containers for the leftovers!

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2 Week Timeline

7 to 14 days before Thanksgiving:

- Prepare dishes ahead of time:
- Rolls: Rolls can be made ahead of time and frozen. They can also be made 80% ahead of time and finished day of (look for recipes for “make ahead freezer rolls”)
- Desserts: Depending on what desserts you will be making, many can be prepared ahead of time to completion or components can be made ahead.
 - Pie crust: This can be made ahead and frozen. It will stay frozen for up to two months, so this step can be done well in advance! If you will be making a single crust pie (such as pumpkin), you can roll and place the crust in the pie plate before freezing.
 - Double Crust Fruit Pie (such as apple): This can be made ahead of time, wrapped tightly, and frozen. You can defrost 1 or 2 days before and bake on Thanksgiving.
 - While other desserts will vary a lot, it’s worth checking to see if they can be made ahead of time and frozen. Many can and this can not only take away a lot of “week of” kitchen time, but free up precious oven space!

1 to 7 days before Thanksgiving:

- You can begin to prep various ingredients during this time. I’ve included dish specific recommendations in the Basic Menu. If you take 15-30 minutes each day to do some of the preparation, you will have so much confidence waking up Thanksgiving morning knowing you have most of the work complete! This timeline leaves only 2 sides to make on Thanksgiving day — and includes ALL of the sides listed, which is definitely not necessary! Pick your favorites and remember to delegate!
- 7 days ahead: Finalize your menu — including breakfast, appetizers, and beverages. Make sure these items are complete BEFORE the day of!
- 5 days ahead: Make cranberry sauce if you will be making it.
- 4 days ahead: Start defrosting the turkey, if needed, otherwise ensure you have your turkey.
- 3 days ahead: Make the green bean casserole and mac and cheese; prepare dressing ingredients.
- 2 days ahead: Prepare the potatoes; make sweet potato casserole and corn casserole; make desserts if they have not already been done.
- 1 day ahead: Fill in any gaps if anything was missed above; go over your menu and timeline for the next day (run to the store for any last minute add ons!) Reach out to your guests - let them know how excited you are to see them, confirm meal time and any items they are bringing. Take out any items that are currently frozen.

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Day Of Timeline



5.5 hours before - if your meal time is 3pm, this would be 9:30am, put your time here (_____):

- Get turkey out and prep it (salt and pepper!)
- Preheat oven to 450°F

5 hours before (_____):

- Start baking the turkey
- Start boiling the potatoes for mashed potatoes
 - You can also start the dressing now OR you can do one item at a time (mashed potatoes, then dressing)
- These two items should be started early in the day so that they can be completed, set aside, and any dishes and mess cleaned up as guests and meal time arrive!

4.5 hours before(_____):

- Turn the oven down to 325°F. You will want to check the turkey every 30 minutes for brownness and basting.

2 hours before (_____):

- If you are serving appetizers, this is when I would serve them so everyone is hungry for the meal!

90 minutes before (_____):

- Take out any sides that are in the fridge to allow them to come to room temperature.
- If you have not already done so, set the table.

60 minutes before (_____):

- Turkey is finished cooking
- You can make the gravy while the turkey rests
- Bake any sides that need to be baked such as the sweet potato casserole or green bean casserole. It's okay if the temperatures are not the same -- for these, a 25° shift won't hurt.
 - If needed, add any toppings before or mid baking as indicated in the menu notes.

30 minutes before (_____):

- Set the oven temperature to 350°F to put in sides & rolls that need to be warmed up
- Carve the turkey

Meal is served (_____):

- If desserts need to be baked, start them now.
- What time will be serving the meal? Insert your time here and then all other elements will work backwards from this. If you have free reign over the time, I recommend a midafternoon serving - such as 3pm.

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Basic Thanksgiving Menu

- **Breakfast:** Make sure you eat breakfast — if you have guests and need to do something more formal, I recommend keeping it simple! What are we thinking about right now? A breakfast casserole, breakfast burritos (can be made ahead and heat day of!), breakfast sandwiches, muffin omelets, baked oatmeal (as muffins is so fun!) You get the idea, don't do complicated. Limited dishes, ideally nothing in the oven, but make sure you eat!
- **Appetizers:** Thanksgiving is a big meal — it does not need appetizers. That being said, if you'd like to include them — either you know you'll have guests over socializing before the meal or you have traditions that you want to continue - do it! Having some easy to prepare options — a dip, that can be offered with multiple vehicles for the dip. This helps accommodate different diets, appetites, and provides variety! This is also a great option to have a guest bring if you are delegating (and you should be!)
- **Beverages:** The best advice I have is have plenty. If you have too much seltzer or wine, it won't go bad and you'll be ready for the next get together. You can also request that people bring what they would like — “We will have seltzer, soft drinks, ice tea, and many glassware options for you to enjoy whatever beverage you'd like to bring and sip!”
- **Turkey:** The centerpiece of the day! This can be the most intimidating part, I get it, most of us don't cook a turkey very often. You can do it well and do it well!
 - Go simple. You will find so many ways to prepare a turkey if you start searching the internet. **Don't.** Ensure you get a turkey that isn't too large (14-16 pounds is perfect) because this will make it easier to have it cooked through without drying out.
 - Place the turkey in a greased roasting pan with plenty of salt and pepper on it. That's it! Place it in a preheated 425°F oven for 30 minutes, then turn it down to 325°F and cook for 15 minutes per pound. That 14-16-pound turkey will take about 3.5-4 hours.
 - Check the turkey about every 30 minutes to see if it's getting brown on top. If it seems to be getting too brown, put tin foil over it. You can baste the turkey if you like — use chicken stock for this! You don't need any fancy tools - just pour some over the top.
 - As the turkey gets closer to complete cooking time, start checking the temperature for doneness. You will use a meat thermometer — and check at the thickest part of the thigh. The temperature needs to be 165°F to ensure safe consumption. Once you see that, pull the turkey out of the oven and move it to a cutting board or baking sheet (with sides). Be sure to cover it with tin foil! It can safely be on the counter for up to 2 hours. If needed, you can store it in a cooler to keep it warm!
 - Let the turkey rest for at least 30 minutes before carving. Do not worry about how the turkey looks while carving — it might be messy and that is A-okay. Carving is an art and takes time to master, today is not the day to stress about that.
 - **Other Meats:** Pork Butt, Ham — if you have a large crowd, you may want to have a second meat. If this is the case, I strongly suggest having another guest bring it — and ensure it does not need oven space!

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Basic Thanksgiving Menu



- **Gravy:** Similar to the turkey, you will find many ways to make gravy. Once you have removed the turkey from the roasting pan, you can add some chicken stock to the roasting pan and using a wooden spoon, scrap any of the stuck-on bits off the bottom. These are flavor packed morsels of deliciousness!!! Set up your next step – a sieve over a large bowl or measuring cup (ideally something with clear sides) - and very very carefully pour the liquid through the sieve. You will discard what's left in the sieve because you want smooth gravy!!
 - You can defat the liquid once it has settled. Using a spoon, gently remove the lighter layer that has separated to the top. It's okay to have some still left, but you will want to get most of it off so your gravy isn't greasy.
 - Next, there are many options... I will present two.
 - The first and probably easiest is to use Wondra flour to thicken the gravy. This is a super fine flour that will provide lump-free, thickened gravy. You'll pour your de-fatted liquid into a small sauce pan and add the Wondra, stirring with a whisk, until it reaches your desired thickness. Keep the gravy warm, but do be mindful not to let the bottom burn.
 - The second option is to make a roux. A roux is butter (any fat really) and flour cooked together that you will then add the defatted liquid to. You will need about 3 tablespoons of butter for 3-4 cups of gravy. Let the butter melt in a small sauce pan. Then add 3 tablespoons of flour and whisk until it is smooth, let it gently cook before adding the liquid to it, approximately 3-4 minutes. Whisk until you see no lumps. Keep the gravy warm, but keep an eye out for burning
 - **Note:** If your turkey did not produce a lot of liquid, don't fret!! You can add chicken stock (or turkey stock if you were able to buy that) to bolster your gravy. Gravy is often a fan favorite at the Thanksgiving table, so I recommend having plenty – 1/3 cup per person is a good starting point!
- **Stuffing/Dressing:** I recommend doing dressing for Thanksgiving. This is when the dish is served “dry” outside of the turkey. Stuffing is prepared and stuffed inside the turkey and baked with it. The challenge with stuffing is that you will need to ensure that the stuffing reaches 165°F (just like the turkey) for safe consumption. This makes cooking the turkey more complicated and we have tools to ensure that the dressing isn't dry! :)
 - Pick your recipe – there is everything from a very simple white bread with poultry seasoning style to more complex ones that use the giblets! The fun thing about dressing is that it can be made to fit YOUR favorite flavors. You can buy stuffing mix (the bread and seasoning components) at the store or you can make your own. This is a dish that you will have to decide how much time you'd like to invest.

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Basic Thanksgiving Menu

- My preferred stuffing is a cornbread, sausage, and apple dressing. You can make the cornbread ahead of time (or buy cornbread stuffing mix). If you make it, cut it into small pieces and dry it out on a baking sheet in the oven (350°F for about 15 minutes, check every 5 or so and stir it up). Once it is dried out, put it into an air tight container until Thanksgiving Day. You can do this during the week ahead. You can also chop the onions and celery (about a 1/2 cup of each) a few days in advance, storing them in some oil or water until the day of.
 - On Thanksgiving Day, you will sauté the onions and celery in butter until translucent. For the last minute or two, add in a peeled, diced apple. Remove to a large bowl. If using sausage, you'll want a loose sausage (mild Italian works great) — you can sauté this up in the same pan. Break it up into small pieces and make sure it is cooked through. Remove to the large bowl. You will then add the stuffing mix or cornbread to the bowl, along with some seasonings if not included (poultry seasoning is a great blend!!!), a handful of dried cranberries, and chicken stock. Mix this all together — you want pieces to begin to stick together, but not turn into one big lump. Put it into a greased baking dish — preferably one with a lid. You can warm this up with the other sides just before the meal.
- **Mashed Potatoes:** The key to delicious mashed potatoes is lots of butter, but here are a few other tips to ensure they are perfect! You can prepare the potatoes a day or two (or even three) in advance — peel and chop them - then place in a pot or container covered with water. 5 pounds of potatoes will be plenty for 10 people! **Pro tip:** Add one small sweet potato for extra wow factor! On Thanksgiving Day, you will drain them and boil them. Make sure they are nice and soft before draining them to be mashed. You can use a traditional potato masher, stand or hand mixer to do this! Then add about 6 tablespoons of butter, about 3/4 cup of warmed milk (you can also use half & half), and salt and pepper. Taste them and adjust any of the ingredients as needed. The mashed potatoes can then be moved to a crock pot to keep them warm (on low) until it's time for dinner!
- **Cranberry:** It is very easy to make your own cranberry sauce, so this is one that can be fun to take a shot at. It can also be done ahead of time. If not, canned will certainly work. If making your own, rinse a bag (12 oz) of cranberries (fresh or frozen). Add about half to a medium saucepan with 3/4 cup of water, 1/4 cup of orange juice (optional, you can use all water and it will be fantastic!), and 3/4 cup of sugar (tip: I love to use brown sugar for an added flavor nuance!) Cook this for about 10 minutes on a low-medium heat - the cranberries will burst and the liquid will reduce down. You can then remove from the heat and add the remaining cranberries for texture (alternatively, if you'd prefer to have a smoother version, add them all at the beginning). It will continue to thicken as it cools. Once cool, you can store in the fridge!

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Basic Thanksgiving Menu



- **Sweet Potatoes:** A sweet potato casserole is found on many Thanksgiving tables and while there are a wide variety of options, you can do a very simple version AND make it ahead. On Thanksgiving, you will partially bake it, add the toppings, and then finish baking.
- **Corn Casserole:** This is a delicious recipe to add to the table and very simple to make. It requires no chopping or prep, just open and mix containers! For this reason, it's a great recipe to add to the table if you have a surprise increase in guests. This dish can be prepared ahead of time and you can cook it in a crock pot as well to free up some oven space if needed! This can be full baked ahead of time and then reheated on Thanksgiving.
- **Green Bean Casserole:** This family favorite can be made up to 3 days in advance (just leave off the fried onions and add them on Thanksgiving Day when you bake it.) This is another recipe that you could add last minute if needed.
- **Mac and Cheese:** Most commonly seen on Thanksgiving tables of the south. Mac and Cheese is loved by many (especially if you have a large number of kids at your table). This can be made and cooked ahead of time and reheated on the day of.
- There are MANY other sides people will have – squash, turnips, onions, Brussels sprouts, a winter salad... It is nice to have some color variety, but remember to keep it simple! Invite guests to bring a family favorite or special dish... and be confident with keeping your menu to the basics.
- **Rolls, Cornbread:** No matter what bread item you will be serving, you can make it ahead and freeze it. 2 days before, put it in the fridge to defrost and on Thanksgiving Day, wrap it up in some tin foil for a last-minute warming in the oven. This is also a great item to outsource if you aren't wanting to bake!

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Basic Thanksgiving Menu

- **Desserts:**

- **Apple Pie:** A traditional item that can easily be made ahead. For the best results, I recommend preparing the pie up to the point of baking and then wrapping it up tight and freezing until a day or two before. Take it out to thaw in the fridge and bake it day of — you can even wait to bake it once the meal is served! Pies can be intimidating, especially the crust - I hear that. It takes practice to get the feel and confidence of a good crust. If that makes you nervous, consider buying the crust or outsourcing to a bakery.
- **Pumpkin Pie:** Another very traditional offering — that is much more user friendly for a beginning baker! If that's you, rock the pumpkin pie. Pro tip: Make your own whipped cream to serve with it! You can do this the day before and it is delicious! Using a stand or hand mixer, whip heavy cream (I recommend 1 cup unless you've got some real whipped cream lovers in the family) until it begins to thicken — you'll notice the whisk is leaving some lines in the cream. Add 1 tablespoon of powdered sugar and 1 teaspoon of vanilla. Continue whipping until "stiff peaks" — it should hold its shape when you stop the mixer.
- **Pecan Pie:** Another favorite — especially in the south! This can be made ahead as well — you will bake it and let it cool completely. Wrap it up and store in the refrigerator. Be sure to let it come to room temperature before serving. If you'd like, you can pop it in the oven briefly to warm it up.
- **Pumpkin Roll:** This can be a tricky dessert, but is one that many love! It is fun because you can make it ahead as well. The key is to use parchment paper to prevent sticking and for easy rolling. You can prepare the cake, frost, and store in the fridge for 1-2 days before serving OR you can make it further ahead and freeze for 2-3 months. Thaw overnight in the fridge before serving.

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Checklist



Put this on your fridge so you can see at a glance what you need to do

2 weeks before (11/9 - 11/11):

- ☐ How many people will you be hosting? _____
- ☐ How much turkey do you need? _____ Is it ordered or will you be picking up at the store?
- ☐ Decide what will be on your menu
- ☐ Locate and print or save recipes for each item
- ☐ Delegate out to a guest or plan to buy the other items
- ☐ Make a grocery list

8 to 11 days before (11/12 - 11/15):

- ☐ Grocery shop – Note any items that you will need to get closer to Thanksgiving
- ☐ This is likely going to include the turkey! Note the pick up date if you ordered ahead: _____
- ☐ Make Rolls (or cornbread)
- ☐ Make Desserts

7 days before (11/16):

Finalize your menu and prepare:

- ☐ Breakfast: If you won't be making it today, note on the schedule when you will.
- ☐ Appetizers: If you won't be making it today, note on the schedule when you will.
- ☐ Beverages: What will you be serving and do you need to shop for it? If yes, shop today!

5 days before (11/18):

- ☐ Make Cranberry sauce
- ☐ Pick up turkey

4 days before (11/19):

- ☐ Start defrosting turkey

3 days before (11/20):

- ☐ Make Mac and Cheese
- ☐ Make Green Bean Casserole - likely to be baked on Thanksgiving
- ☐ Prepare Dressing Ingredients

2 days before (11/21):

- ☐ Make Sweet Potato Casserole - likely to be baked on Thanksgiving
- ☐ Make Corn Casserole
- ☐ Prepare Potatoes
- ☐ Make desserts OR pull them out of the freezer

1 day before (11/22):

Fill in the gaps! This day is intentionally left open so you can shift things here if needed.

- ☐ Reach out to guests!
- ☐ Make whipped cream
- ☐ Review your menu and timeline for TOMORROW
- ☐ Grab any last minute beverages or ingredients you may need

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