

#7- Native Cooking

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Native Americans, food and the land have always been one. We move to the rhythm of the seasons. Here in the Woodlands, people built the longhouses to fill with dried and smoked treasures from summer. All things involved with growing, hunting or foraging to obtain food took up most of the day in times past. Not just here, but all across Indian country the people built storage places for food they had grown, hunted or gathered in various ways. Now, as in times of old, one precious thread of honor has not been forgotten. Nothing is taken for granted or eaten without thanks.

"Thanksgiving" is ongoing, every day, a part of our collective spirit. Yes, I suppose we are all in some way drawn into the national holiday called by that name, however, we have the option of our private thoughts about it.

No matter where you live, certain seasonal vegetables and meats are now available in relative abundance and priced accordingly. The first thing that comes to mind is turkey. Prices are at their lowest right now so stock the freezer if you can. If your family is fond of turkey breast, buy two or three. Turkey is a meat that you can get tired of quickly, but it does adapt itself well to leftover-type recipes like pot-pie, for example, or club sandwiches on toast with bacon and tomato. In the middle of February you might want to have a lovely winter dinner of turkey, stuffing and gravy. It's warming and filling on a very cold night. As always, there are traditional ways of preparing many recipes and these are best to use when possible.

If you are having a lot of family and friends for dinner at the end of November, don't be a slave. Instead of a formal sit-down dinner, think about serving everything buffet style. Remember to keep hot food hot (above 140 degrees) and cold foods cold (below 40 degrees).

Sweet Potatoes with a Kick and a Sauce

6 sweet potatoes, scrubbed or peeled

3 tablespoons olive oil

3 teaspoons ground cumin

2 teaspoons ground ginger

1 teaspoon hot paprika (or 1/2 teaspoon cayenne)

Coarse salt

Fresh ground pepper

Wedges of lime

Dipping Sauce

1 cup plain yogurt

4 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro
2 tablespoons pine nuts or pecans chopped
1/2 teaspoon ground cumin
1/2 teaspoon coarse salt
1-1/2 teaspoons fresh squeezed lime juice

Combine all Dipping Sauce ingredients in a small bowl and refrigerate until ready to serve. Preheat your oven to 400 degrees. Spray a baking sheet with light oil and put into oven for about 15 minutes.

Cut the sweet potatoes in half lengthwise, then into three wedges. Put them into a bowl and toss with the oil, paprika or cayenne, cumin, ginger and a bit of salt and pepper. Remove hot baking sheet and place sweet potatoes on it in a single layer. Bake them for about 15 minutes, then turn them over and cook for another 10 to 15 minutes. Remove from oven and serve with lime wedges and dipping sauce.

Red Rice Delight

1 stick of butter or substitute
3 cups long grained white rice
1/2 cup minced onion
2 cups tomato juice
1 can diced tomatoes
1/2 teaspoon cumin
2 cans beef broth (10-1/2oz.)
1/2 cup dry sherry or vermouth
Salt and pepper to taste

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Saut? the rice and onion in butter on low heat until lightly browned. Combine with rest of ingredients and pour into a 2-quart baking dish. Bake covered for 30 minutes, stir and then bake for 30 minutes more.

Super Cheatin' Stuffin'

1 package herbed stuffing mix

1/2 cup sautéed chopped onion

1/2 cup melted butter or substitute

1/2 cup raisins

1 teaspoon Bell's seasoning or ground sage

1/2 cup chopped apple

1/2 cup chopped celery

Follow directions for package, then add other ingredients. Makes a richer stuffing with more homemade taste.

We always seem to gravitate to the same menu for the roast turkey dinner. It seems to be the roast turkey of course, mashed potatoes, butternut and turnip mashed together, stuffing, gravy, small peas or green beans, cranberry sauce, apple and pumpkin pies. The only variety is usually in a new appetizer or type of bread. Guests are the most important ingredient. The worst thing you can do to a guest is not be there. Once, we traveled some hours to a friend's house for this dinner only to be told the hostess was in the bathtub. We have never felt the same about these people since, it was a subtle slight that diminished our value as friends. It never healed.

Notes & Tips:

* When a roast turkey is done in the oven, it really needs to "rest" for at least 15 to 30 minutes. This will make it easier to carve.

* Make your gravy as early in the day as you can, then, while the bird is "resting" you can pour some of the pan juices into it to make it richer.

* I always make extra stuffing and bake it separately. It is very popular and can be used the next day in sandwiches cold with a thin slab of cranberry sauce.

* To stretch leftover gravy, add a little chicken bouillon packet, some water and cornstarch or flour.

* With the harsher weather approaching, please remember folks who may be alone. Elders are especially needy when their families are either gone or in distant places.

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