



Misty's View of Christmas Dinner

with two chefs at the helm, we do turkey on Boxing Day when we can putter luxuriously around the house during the day and get all the accoutrements ready over a lazy period of seven to eight hours. We **eat when the food is ready**, not when the guests arrive. Zero stress. Christmas Day can be a nightmare. Once you have opened presents, calmed down over-excited children, attended a

free-range chickens and even duck or goose, which are not actually greasy. With these smaller roasts you will not have to monitor cooking for seven hours! Another Christmas we served a medley of birds: an orange and sage stuffed duck, four or five Cornish game hens packed with shallots and thyme, and a large capon stuffed with traditional bread stuffing.

your basic stuffing recipe a day ahead of time and then transforming it into a variety of stuffing flavours by adding dried cranberries and roasted pecans; preserved oranges and North African spices; even child-friendly cheddar cheese. If you bake these stuffing blends in well-buttered muffin tins for about 15 minutes you can offer your guests an interesting range of stuffing flavours.

As Christmas approaches, many families start to dream about a perfect blanket of white snow; a cozy, fire-lit house; an evergreen decorated with heirlooms and handmade items from their children. This picture of domestic bliss reaches deep into the senses and we long for our Christmas to look beautiful, to smell of spices and roasts, and glow with harmony and contentment.

Then we **remember the turkey and the stress it induces year after year**. In many households, roasting the Christmas turkey is tantamount to war. Grandmother says she raised a generation on her method, Auntie says she knows best, and you, who are stuck with the task, have consulted stacks of magazines, and even called a turkey hotline for advice.

Let's be frank. **Turkeys are tough, both literally and figuratively**. At holiday time, most are purchased as a solid frozen mass that can weigh up to 25 lbs and take three days to defrost in your fridge, a monopoly of space that creates issues before you even begin to tackle its mythical transformation into the Christmas Dinner.

Armed with the haunting advice from generations of family members you pray for a miracle or an intervention. Here is a suggestion to **allay your fears and create a new tradition** in the host home: don't do turkey. Find another wonderful meat to roast or braise the day before and leave the extremely complex timing and *a la minute* cooking that turkey dinners require for a quieter family gathering.

In our household, for example,

A stack of citrus-stuffed Cornish game hens towers over stuffing ideas: cranberry stuffing in a muffin pan and child-inspired cheddar cheese stuffing, right



PHOTOS: MIKE DAVIS

service, and returned home to be a celebrity chef, you are already in big trouble in the kitchen.

If you are thinking "Yes, yes, yes!" my suggestion is to **build Christmas dinner around special dishes you do well**. One Christmas, for example, we had a menu of our favourites: roasted beef tenderloin, 30 minutes in the oven, a big crock of mussels with white wine, garlic, herbs and diced tomatoes, a last-minute affair that takes 15 minutes, a chicken casserole from a relative, stuffed-baked potatoes for the kids, and a medley of vegetables. We had time to talk and appreciate the special dinner without trying to prepare a meal that may no longer be the best choice for Christmas Day owing to its lengthy and sometimes contentious preparation.

Making new traditions for the table can be exciting and ultimately liberating. If you still want to roast on the 25th, consider trying smaller birds: capon, Cornish game hens,

Consult a few good cookbooks to give you the guidelines for roasting times, since they vary from bird to bird. You'll want to know the cooking ratio per pound as well as the suggested oven temperatures. Ducks, for instance, are better when roasted at a high temperature to allow the skin to crisp up and for the fat to be rendered.

You might also consider making

Whatever meal you tackle on Christmas Day, remember that being the host is demanding. The traditional turkey meal may present you with too much trouble and too little time on Christmas Day. If so, save it for later and enjoy the slow roast experience without the stress.

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