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Catering to Everyone

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By STEVEN V. CRONIN Staff Writer 11/24/02
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The holidays are supposed to be a time to sit back, enjoy the family and count your blessings.

That's the theory.

But when it comes to preparing a meal with a menu as large - and as fraught with tradition - as a Thanksgiving dinner, problems can sometimes arise.

Every holiday cook knows them - the brother-in-law who insists on the oyster stuffing that no one else will eat, the fussy child who won't eat anything served, the snide sister who always brings up the unfortunate incident 10 years back that involved a questionable turnip casserole and many hours spent in the emergency room.

With these kinds of squabbles looming, it's no surprise many approach the holiday with a stomach-churning mixture of stress and dread. But it doesn't have to be that way, say experts and people who have faced similar problems and can still smile when contemplating the last Thursday in November.

The secret recipe is to concentrate on the stuff that makes the holidays the holidays and try to take all the accompanying baggage in stride.

That can mean trying to accommodate everybody else's Thanksgiving expectations as much as possible or finding clever ways to defuse looming holiday conflicts. It might mean a little extra work, but it will save hours of aggravation in the long run.

Take Trina Scipione, owner of Trina's restaurant in Hammonton. If anyone can lay claim to a true holiday horror story, Scipione can.

Scipione spends all year cooking for customers, yet she doesn't get out from behind the stove for Thanksgiving. In addition to cooking the traditional Thanksgiving turkey for her oldest four children, she has to prepare what amounts to a second holiday menu for her youngest son, who won't eat the traditional turkey or the sweet potatoes the rest of her family enjoys.

So why is she so happy about the approaching festivities?

Instead of brooding about the extra work, Scipione goes with the flow and makes a meal that she knows will make a loved one happy. That includes all the

traditional fixings for a Thanksgiving feast, as well as a ham, mashed potatoes and spinach for her youngest.

"Who is to say what is traditional? Everybody's family is different and likes different things. But everybody wants to have a nice holiday. It takes a little work, but you don't mind it," she said.

Scipione makes so much food to meet her family's special requests that she puts out a holiday buffet instead of serving everybody at the table.

A waste, some people would say. She's spoiling her children, others would claim.

Not true, Scipione replies.

"Everybody knows people love Thanksgiving leftovers, so there's no waste if I make lots of food, and if I make a little of something special for my son, he's not going to be the only one to eat it. All my other children like the sweet potatoes, but after they eat those they come back and try the white potatoes," she said.

As for spoiling her children, well, who doesn't go out of their way during the holidays to show a loved one how much we think of them?

But what if you don't have the kitchen, or the personality, to face the thought of producing a variety of offerings to meet everyone's varied demands? What are you running, you ask yourself, a restaurant?

Well, no, you're not, but there are lots of people who do. And many of them wouldn't mind entertaining your family this holiday.

Take family out to eat

"It's always nice to go out and have a pleasant dinner, and on Thanksgiving, if there's someone in your family who doesn't want turkey, well, there are always other options," said Andrew Latz, owner of the Knife & Fork Inn in Atlantic City. One of the benefits of dining at a restaurant, Latz noted, is that everyone gets to choose their own dinner - which eliminates squabbles over the type of dressing and the vegetable selection. Another benefit is an increase in politeness.

"People tend to have their company manners on when they are out. You go to the restaurant and nobody fights. It keeps everything a lot more amicable," said Latz, whose restaurant this year is offering a special holiday menu and wine selection for the holiday.

This is all well and good if you are hosting the holiday meal and can make decisions about where and what your family will eat. But what if you're a guest? What do you do if your mother still insists on cooking the holiday meal, even though she burned more meals than a turkey has feathers?

That's where good manners and a little planning come in, according to etiquette expert Corinne Gregory.

Gregory has a wealth of advice for helping children get through the holidays without melting down. But many of her suggestions can apply to adults, too.

She said the best way to assure a happy holiday is to do all you can to make sure that you, your family and those around you enjoy themselves.

"I will only get more frustrated if I expect people to change for me. I can't control other people. I can only control me," said Gregory, who operates the Web site www.politechild.com

Let's say, for example, that you are heading to a Thanksgiving feast where you know you'll enjoy little on the menu. No need to complain or make rude remarks at the dinner table. Instead, Gregory advises, stop for a burger and some fries on your way to the gathering. Eat it in the car and then you can sit down to the dinner and sample only what you enjoy without stewing about going hungry.

There are, of course, some people who cannot go with the flow, who find that any surrendering of their personal vision of the holiday takes all the fun out of the celebration for them.

That's OK, according to motivational speaker and author Linda Talley.

Make, enforce rules

"In order to keep the peace, you must do what people have been doing through the ages - set and maintain boundaries," Talley says.

That means letting people in on the ground rules before they show up at the house for dinner. If they ignore the ground rules (let's say your sister insists on discussing that aforementioned ugly turnip incident), don't be shy about restating the ground rules mid-dinner, Talley recommends.

"The holidays are a time of peace and goodwill. However, in order to have this, you must have respect. Boundaries demand respect," she said.

Well, maybe.

Gregory favors a more laid-back approach.

Memories, she said, are made during the holidays. You have to choose what you want to remember - a fun meal with family that involved some concessions on your part or a dinnertime discussion of boundaries.

"We should be giving over the holidays. We should be giving each other a little more caring, a little more time and a little more tolerance," she said. "Very often, the one and only time we get together with our families is during the holidays. You don't know when you might see each other again. Good behavior always comes from putting other people first. If we don't put other people first, how can we expect them to put us first?"

It's a sentiment Scipione is familiar with.

"The holidays are about making people happy. When you're doing that, there's an excitement that fills you up. It takes a little longer, but you feel good when you are doing it," she said.

About The PoliteChild. The PoliteChild is a unique program offering a series of classes that provide children of all ages – from toddlers to teens – with a solid foundation for learning and using Good Manners and proper basic etiquette. The PoliteChild focuses on the underlying principles and reasons behind the etiquette rules, not just the skills themselves, to give students the basis from which to make good, consistent independent decisions about their conduct. For more about The PoliteChild, visit the website at www.politechild.com or write to

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