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A Moving Experience: Why is Thanksgiving better abroad?



by C.Flisi

Peeling the spuds for Thursday's
mashed potatoes, I had the feeling
that something was off. I was about to
celebrate the most important
American holiday in its country of
origin, the weather was appropriately
brisk, my tablet was pouring out

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seasonal music, and a turkey dinner at a relative's house was on the calendar.

But it didn't feel the same as my holiday preparation in Europe (Italy and France), which I'd been doing for more than three decades. It didn't feel as *meaningful*. The question was "Why not?"

The answer is multi-layered.

When we moved to Italy, my kids were young and absorbed local culture easily. Thanksgiving had been a way to preserve some American identity, so I was conscientious about preparing a traditional holiday meal on that day.

Advance planning was needed: I had to remember to pick up cranberry sauce and stuffing while visiting the US during the summer. Finding a proper-sized turkey involved trial and error. The menu had to be re-jiggered.

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When I was a child, we always started Thanksgiving meal with soup. In Italy, I tried pasta. But once the pasta dish was done, nobody wanted turkey, much less potatoes or stuffing. I soon abandoned that for antipasto. I realized that people didn't eat salad alongside the main course, so I stopped serving that. People didn't know what cranberry sauce was, so I had to explain it. People didn't seem to know that you put potatoes and stuffing alongside the turkey, and then put gravy on top of everything, so I had to explain that too.

As for the guests, the first year or two in Italy, I invited Italian family members. That's why everything had to be explained. To keep things interesting for my sons, I started inviting one or two of their Italian friends and their parents. Our table capacity was about 10 people so that focused the guest list considerably.

When we moved to southern France, we had more space so a lot more

flexibility. Now we could have a table exclusively for our sons and their friends and another for us and the parents of those friends. But I was meeting all kinds of people through my work, and they were all curious about Thanksgiving. New people meant fresh perspectives, and an opportunity to introduce non-Americans to our most beloved holiday. We had the space, we had extra tables and chairs, one thing led to another, and we wound up with three tables and up to 24 people.

The meals were sit-down with china and linens and crystal wine glasses, but the service was buffet. That gave me the opportunity to explain about cranberry sauce and how to approach the meal.

What made it interesting was the linguistic challenge. English, French, and Italian were a given, but not everyone spoke every language. And then there were the outliers: Swedish, Spanish, Hungarian, Farsi, Arabic.

The years we lived in France, we averaged six to eight languages spoken at Thanksgiving. It took time to map out the seating arrangements to make sure that each person at a table could speak to at least one other person.

I started developing informal guidelines. Almost no one was invited two years in a row, to keep the guest list fresh. I tried to invite guests who ran in separate circles so that no one knew anyone else. Spouses or partners were seated at separate tables, to keep things lively. I varied each table by ages and occupations. The banker by the dog trainer, the professor by the child psychologist, the doctor by the artist.

I took care of the basics — turkey, gravy, stuffing, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce. Those didn't change from year to year. But the rest of the menu did. Everyone was asked to bring something to eat or drink and because the guest list changed every

year, so did the contributions.



by C.Flisi

What people brought wasn't entirely open-ended. One year we wound up with three quiches and no vegetables, so people had to choose within categories. However, certain categories had to be specific to the guest's social behavior. I learned *that* lesson the year a woman from Parma promised to bring prosciutto. She did, and it was delicious, but she was habitually late and arrived after we had passed from antipasto to the main course.

I learned that I needed to prepare a redundancy for every course —

always an appetizer or two, a side dish, and a dessert, just in case people who promised to bring those items didn't show up. Sadly, there were no-shows almost every year. So I had to overbook, like an airline, to ensure that my tables remained full and vibrant.

I learned that one's turkey supplier is fundamental. No supermarket butterballs in Europe. All the years we lived in France, the turkey varied in quality. The one year I ordered in advance from a fournisseur was the year of a nationwide trucking strike. No turkey anywhere. I made a mad dash across the border to Italy the day before Thanksgiving to pick up as many turkey breasts as I could find. Another year the guests arrived and the turkey was still in the oven because it was an odd size and consistency. That was the year I learned the wisdom of cooking the bird the day before.

By the time we moved back to Italy,

our children were grown and gone. But the idea of sharing Thanksgiving traditions with non-American friends and acquaintances had taken hold, and I decided to continue.

I found an excellent turkey supplier, and always ordered a female, because they are more tender. The butcher didn't label them as free-range turkeys but that's what they were. Obscenely expensive but consistently fantastic. I would stuff the bird on Tuesday, roast it on Wednesday, savouring the aroma as it permeated every square meter of our apartment, and bring it to the butcher that evening so he could slice it professionally. Then I would arrange the white meat on one platter, the dark meat on another, and have everything ready to re-heat on Thursday.

Since just about all our guests in Italy spoke Italian, I printed up menus and explanations of the Thanksgiving holiday for everyone. Instead of

relying on volunteers for various bottles of wine, I found a source and bought Amarone in bulk for everyone. A local bakery prepared a cornucopia of breads, most of which weren't consumed during the evening but they made a lovely centerpiece for the buffet table. Tables, actually: one for the appetizers, one for the mains, and one for dessert. Just before the main course buffet was ready, I would ring a dinner bell and say a prayer . . . well, more like a mini-speech than a religious exhortation, describing the holiday and thanking our guests for joining us.

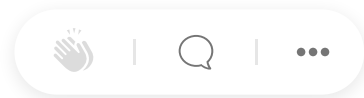
What I remember most about these Thanksgivings (aside the exorbitant amount of work, mostly in logistics) was the vibrant buzz at mealtime. Some years the tables almost seemed to levitate from the joy of strangers coming together for a uniquely American yet universal celebration of camaraderie. It's different from the vibe of a family gathering because families are defined by blood and

tradition, while my European gatherings were assembled by choice and volition.

Isn't the latter almost closer to the core idea of Thanksgiving? Gratitude for friendship and new opportunities? Hope for a future of undiscovered promise?

Maybe that is why I miss my Italian and French Thanksgivings so much, in spite of my gratitude at being with my family this year.

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